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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

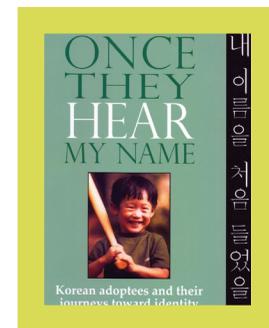
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Book Review

Once They Hear My Name

Korean Adoptees and Their Journey
By Marilyn Lammert, Ellen Lee and Mary Anne Hess

Reviewed by Lynne Connor



As an adult Korean adoptee, I approached the book *Once They Hear My Name* with great trepidation, as I often do when I sit down to read books that so closely relate to my own experience. Here was another book trying to make sense of the social experiment called transracial adoption. Nine adult Korean adoptees ranging in age from twenty-five to fifty-three speak in interviews about their struggles growing up and how they've chosen to navigate the complex journey towards identity acceptance.

I started slowly, dipping my toe into rough waters. After reading the introduction that explained the inspiration behind the book, I paused. Okay, I did more than that. I put the book down, feeling an irrational swell of anger. Marilyn Lammert, a social worker and adoptive mother, brought her eleven-year-old Korean adopted son to Korea so he could see his homeland. There they met Ellen Lee, a Korean American social worker who became involved in their birthmother search. A mere two years later, Marilyn and Ellen traveled to Korea to meet Marilyn's son's birthmother. Seems innocent enough. So what's my problem? I found myself extremely bothered by the way the adoptee seemed to be pushed out of the picture. Wasn't he way too young to travel back to Korea for the first time? And I was angry with his mother for "opening Pandora's box" by pushing what I believe is in fact her son's search and reunion. In fairness, I know she was motivated by "the best interest of her son." I'm still not sure if it's clear where my anger comes from. I am struggling with the idea of misappropriation of our experience as adoptees by adoptive parents and social workers, but I wonder if I've gone too far by pointing out Marilyn's choices as an example.

As part of unraveling the intricate understanding of identity, the adoptee must walk that journey him or herself. It is the adoptee's battle to fight—not the parents. As someone who is fairly tapped into the transracial adoption community, I know the large divide in perspective between adoptive parents and adult adoptees. Although bound and connected in the name of family, parents who intend to do the best for their children and adoptees who need to be taken seriously as adults who can make their own decisions can suffer from mile-wide gaps of understanding.

As I read on, the way the editors chose to structure *Once They Hear My Name* seemed in fact to embody just such a disconnect. In my opinion, the altruistic desire to allow adoptees to speak in their own voices ultimately crippled the book, preventing it from achieving its great potential. I am all for authentic voices, but in this book each adoptee's story appears to be transcribed verbatim from oral interviews. Phrases spoken out loud such as "I don't think...I forget exactly...kind of..." are fine in conversation, but translated to paper they weaken and minimize a story's impact. It felt like the editors were trying so hard to let the adoptees (literally) speak their stories that as a result, only guilt and overcompensation came through clearly.

With that said, I am grateful that the adoptees' stories are full of honesty and in no way try to sugar-coat their pain and hardships. If anger or bitterness shine through the pages, there is never finger-pointing or blame. The interviewees are matter-of-fact about the complicated, "no-one-solution" approach to being lost and then found, which I appreciate.

Each interview appears to have covered the same topics in the same order (adoption story, family dynamics, introduction to racism, dating, and birth family searches), creating a series of narratives that become predictable and dulling. Although I understand the need to lay the groundwork of each adoptee's unique story in order to find commonality, reading them back-to-back creates a cookie-cutter effect. Redundancy, especially on the topics of pain and abandonment, can easily begin to sound like whining. Maybe since I know too well what kind of pain these adoptees grapple with and have heard these stories told over and over again, I'm just frustrated that we can't seem to move past the basics and into richer discussions. I also felt that each story swept along too quickly, in a summary format, rather than taking a breath and giving the reader one complete, drawn-out scene. Perhaps spotlighting a particular struggle for each person that built towards a climax and that showed some type of story arc would have produced more complex and compelling results.

For a person who is new to the experiences of transracial adoption, this book is certainly worthy to sit on the shelf next to *Voices From Another Place*, *Seeds from a Silent Tree* and *After the Morning Calm* (all books highlighting the Korean adoptee experience in compilation format). If you're looking for real depth and to hear about ethnic identity development on a new level, this book falls short.

Lynne Connor, a Korean adoptee transplant from New Jersey, is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at Mills College in Oakland, where transracial adoption issues can't help but seep into her writing.