

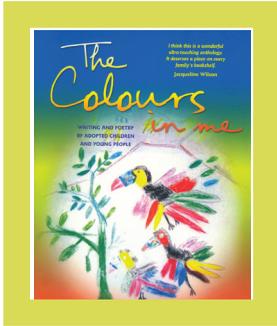


pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Book Review

The Colours in Me Writing & Poetry by Adopted Children & Youth By Perlita Harris, British Association for Adoption & Fostering, 2008

Reviewed by Shannon Riehle

The Colours in Me provides something unique and wonderful that has been missing from the other books I've read about adoption: it gives voice to the thoughts, feelings and experiences of adopted children. Skillfully organized by Perlita Harris (who also edited *In Search of Belonging: Reflections by Transracially Adopted People*), this book is a beautiful collection of poetry, personal stories, interviews and artwork by children and young adults ages five to twenty. It is clear that Harris gave these young writers a great deal of freedom to choose how they wanted to contribute. The pieces range from long, detailed narratives to just a few words or a picture. Eighteen-year-old Kevin Toni Mitchell's contribution "Excerpts," for example, is an eloquent piece of autobiography, painful in its intensity and anger. He opens with, "Family is about belonging to something greater than yourself. I was given away by the only person I ever truly belonged to." Whereas twelve-year-old Kyle is very brief: "I was in a terrible place," he writes. "This is the door to a happy place." His text is accompanied by a simple watercolor painting of a brown door labeled "Door to Freedom." Eight-year-old Heather's piece is a crayon drawing of a crying heart titled "Children's Grief."

The entire collection is edited in a way that gives respectful attention to each contribution. At the end of the book, Harris has included a brief biography of each child, often accompanied by a picture. Many of the children have contributed several pieces of poetry, personal stories, thoughts and advice—sometimes written at different ages. As I read, the personalities and voices of some of the children became especially vivid—I found myself flipping to the biography section to remind myself of their individual stories.

The Colours in Me was published by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering and all of the writers live in the U.K. The majority of the children were adopted from foster care, often well past their infancy. There is a lot of writing about the experience of being moved between "foster carers," memories of being removed from biological family, and the feelings they had upon meeting their new parents for the first time. Many other children in the book were international adoptees; there is a section about the experience of visiting their birth countries. Many of the transracially adopted children write about that experience as well. "I wish I was the same colour as my family," writes seven-year-

old Phan. "It would not matter if my family had any colour skin, it would just be nice to be the same colour."

The book is organized into sections: Adoption Stories, On Being Adopted, On Being Apart, Staying in Touch, and Messages, in which the children offer advice to adoptive parents, social workers and one another. Reading the section of advice to other adoptees feels a little like eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. These young adoptees have a lot to say, although they don't always agree with one another. Seven-year-old Anna Maria writes, "It's excellent being adopted because you get to know a different country. It is also sad because you miss the rest of your family. It's OK to be sad and talk about it a lot." But eleven-year-old Heather has different advice. "Talk with your mum and dad about birth parents sometimes, but don't dwell on it. They aren't here and you have a whole life to live, so get on with it." They also have a lot to say to adoptive parents and social workers, often about the importance of giving children information about their birth families and helping them stay in touch with siblings from whom they have been separated. Twelve-year-old Sola also cautions adoptive parents, "You would make your new child feel more happy and secure if you let them settle at their own pace... Don't expect to be called Mummy straight away."

Whatever thoughts or opinions readers may bring to this book, they will likely find them both validated and challenged by these children. There are common themes that run throughout their writing: feelings of loss, painful separations from birthparents and siblings, and for many older children adopted from foster care, the relief and security of having a new family and feeling loved. But the children write about these experiences from their own personal perspectives, often layered with many differing emotions: from joyful to angry, troubled to secure. If there is any overall message from the book, it is that one must be cautious about generalizing about the experience of being adopted. Children will have their own feelings about their adoption that are quite separate from those of their parents.

As an adoptive parent, I found this book a wonderful gift. Reading what these children have to say is moving, challenging and thought-provoking. I highly recommend it.