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point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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# The Book Worm

## Mixed Race Literature

By Michele Rabkin

*The Book Worm is an occasional column exploring themes of adoption and race in contemporary literature. This first installment explores multiracial identity, particularly in the black/white context.*

I read fiction and creative non-fiction not only for pleasure, but as a way of learning about the world, a way to gain perspective on my own experiences and to better understand the people around me. So when I, a white woman, married an African American man and prepared to start a family, I sought out novels and memoirs about the experience of growing up biracial. I found a number of writers who helped me think about the possibilities and the pain that a "hybrid" identity might bring my future child.

In 2005 Michael and I formed our family through adoption, joyfully welcoming a daughter whose heritage is African American on her birth father's side and East Indian and white on her birth mother's. There are few (if any!) novels or memoirs about interracial couples adopting a multiracial child. Given the lack of representations of families like mine, I continue to learn from accounts of mixed-race families that were not formed by adoption. These books are instructive for anyone raising a multiracial child—and have much to offer any transracial adoptive parent. Like transracially adopted children, multiracial children have families that don't easily fit within societal expectations. By birth or by adoption, these children have complicated relationships with racial identity. All of the coming-of-age stories described below explore the difficulty of forming a fluid identity in a society built around fixed, rigid categories. The central characters in each struggle to seem authentic—to their parents, to their peers, and to themselves.

*The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010), the first novel of Heidi W. Durrow, draws on the author's own experience of growing up biracial. The main character is Rachel, who like Durrow is the daughter of an African American man and a Danish woman. Raised on a series of overseas Army bases, Rachel suddenly finds herself transplanted to a working-class neighborhood in Portland, OR. Her crash course in racial politics begins at school, where she learns within days:

I am light-skinned-ed....And I talk white....There are a lot of important things I didn't know about. I think [my mother] didn't know either....I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes.

Rachel's struggles with racial identity continue at home, where she is living with her paternal grandmother Doris and her Aunt Loretta. The grandmother is torn between pushing her children to take up "white" activities like tennis and classical music in order to "better" themselves, and her sense that Rachel's love of reading or Loretta's interest in world affairs make them less authentic black people. Herself allowed only a limited education, Doris is suspicious of "book sense" even though she understands its value. Rachel's clear-eyed observations of the inter-generational dynamics are almost anthropological:

Aunt Loretta is different from Grandma. She's interested in things, new things—not just gardening, good deals, looking respectable, and being clean in pressed clothes. Aunt Loretta doesn't talk the way Grandma does either. She makes her t and ing sounds sharp. There is no Texas in the way Aunt Loretta talks. Aunt Loretta has something that maybe you could call class....Aunt Loretta understands better than Grandma that reading a big book is more classy than wearing fake pearls watching TV.

By introducing the character of Loretta, Durrow reminds us that race exists in a complicated relationship with education and class. Unlike her African American classmates, Rachel has traveled the world, speaks two languages, and has always enjoyed school. Her classmates are hostile towards her because she doesn't understand what it means to be black in America: she is ignorant not only of traditional African American culture, but of racism and colorism. As Rachel herself observes, "Black girls don't seem to like me. Maybe there is something dangerous about me." And some of the hostility is returned. When Rachel is introduced to a girl named LaKeisha ("one of those La names that never sound as fancy or flowing as they should"), she quickly surmises, "I can tell LaKeisha is none of the things that I think are important. She's not a good student, and she's too loud."

All of this gives me plenty of food for thought as my daughter gets ready to enter kindergarten at a public school in Oakland, CA. Michael has already speculated aloud about when or whether she will be told she "talks white." Both of us come

from families in which education is a top priority. Michael knows from personal experience that pursuing academic success is labeled by some as “acting white.” We want our daughter to know there is nothing “authentically black” about failing school—though there is something authentically racist about schools failing to educate children of color. We want her to be able to “code-switch,” to feel comfortable in a variety of cultural contexts—and to hold on to the values we hope to instill in her.

As I write this, my little girl is dancing around the living room like a demented Deadhead, singing along to the alt-rock band Weezer, “I ain’t got nothing to prove to you!” I love her freedom of movement, her proud spirit. At the same time I worry that she will eventually be told she “dances white” too. Ironically, this seems to be less of a concern to her father, who introduced her to Weezer in the first place.

This is the kind of loaded pop cultural moment that Danzy Senna expertly inhabits in her debut novel *Caucasia* (Riverhead Books, 1998). Also working in a semi-autobiographical mode, Senna creates a protagonist, Birdie Lee, who like herself has an African American father and a white mother who can trace her ancestors back to the Mayflower. Birdie, like Senna, can “pass” for white. Birdie spends the early part of the book trying to fit in at an all-black school in Boston, and the latter part trying to blend in to an all-white community in rural New Hampshire. Years after I first read this book, the scene that stayed with me was one in which Birdie attempts to dance to Pat Benatar as the New Hampshire kids “laugh nervously, saying, ‘she must think this is a disco.’” Music is used throughout the novel—black R&B versus white rock and folk—to illustrate the two worlds that Birdie is attempting to navigate. In this scene, Birdie’s rhythmic response to the music is portrayed as her “blackness” showing through her assumed identity of “whiteness.”

Birdie just wants to belong—whether at the Black Power school with its “black is beautiful” mantra, or among the “townie” New Hampshire girls. In both environments, she is thrilled to be invited home by another girl—whether to an apartment “decorated with a velvet painting of two naked and afroed silhouettes” or a trailer home where racist slurs fly freely.

*Caucasia* powerfully illustrates the tension between Birdie’s lived experience and her parents’ somewhat self-centered idealism. Her father is an academic who fills her head with a combination of sophisticated race theory and street-smart sayings, then vanishes from her life. Her mother Sandy—a radical anti-racist activist fleeing the FBI, with Birdie as her sole companion—suggests that Birdie masquerade as white while they are on the lam. She clings to a romanticized notion of her New Hampshire neighbors as “salt of the earth,” oblivious to the cultural whiplash she is imposing on her daughter. Meanwhile Birdie dreams of writing reports titled, “What White People Say When They Think They’re Alone.”

This kind of parental disconnect is central to Rebecca Walker’s memoir *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of A Shifting Self* (Riverhead Books, 2001). Her father is a Jewish civil rights lawyer; her mother is the African American author Alice Walker. Their daughter, born in 1969, was the product of their “intensely focused righteousness,” their hopes for a new, better world. But their union doesn’t last, and soon their daughter is shuttling back and forth between her father’s new home in an all-white New York suburb and her mother’s apartment in inner-city San Francisco. Sadly, Alice Walker comes across as a self-absorbed and neglectful mother, only seeming to notice what Rebecca

is up to when she announces she needs an abortion—at age fourteen. Rebecca’s father is hardly more attentive: when she rebels against her isolation in an all-white community where she is often mistaken for a nanny, he dismisses her claims of misery—“It can’t be that bad.” In fact, Rebecca paints her parents as so hopelessly out of touch that it is tempting to smugly assume one will never screw things up as badly as they did.

But even if her parents had focused more on her needs or listened more carefully to her experiences, Rebecca—like Rachel, like Birdie—would still have had to find her own way amongst her peers. Rebecca takes up with a dizzying array of friends and lovers—African Americans, “Jewish American Princesses,” Latinas, Nuyoricans, other “mixed blood” folks. She learns to observe, imitate and absorb the language and gestures, the costumes and attitudes that will earn her acceptance and safety. Her strategy: “I heighten the characteristics I share with the people around me and minimize, as best I can, the ones that don’t belong.” But still, white people find her “intimidating” and black people call her “snobby.” A feeling of true belonging remains elusive.

She is candid about absorbing from her parents a sense of entitlement (“I act like I am entitled to bliss, like I am not afraid of what the world has to offer....it does not occur to me that...I am doing something to the [other, darker-skinned girls] that feels like betrayal”). From her friends she learns how to project a tough façade. But despite her success in life, “behind the cool, unperturbed exterior there is rage”—and a sense of floating rootlessness, an inability to settle into her life, into herself. Similarly, behind the poetic veneer of this memoir there lies an angry tirade at clueless parents and an anguished examination of conflicted identity.

I have focused here on female coming-of-age stories, but there are many others out there, including James McBride’s memoir *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (Riverhead Books, 1996) and Richard Powers’ novel *The Time of Our Singing* (Picador, 2003), about a German Jewish man and an African American woman who meet at the 1939 Marian Anderson concert on the Washington Mall and attempt to raise their two sons as if “there is no such thing as race.” Each of these authors help me imagine the challenges my daughter will face, the challenges I will face as a parent, and confront me with this hard truth: I cannot always protect my child from pain.

The characters in these books came of age in the sixties, the seventies, the eighties. The United States becomes increasingly “mixed” with every generation. A biracial man has been elected President. Choosing more than one racial identity is now an option on the Census. There are a growing number of publications and organizations for people with “mixed” identities. But only last year, a Louisiana justice of the peace refused to marry an interracial couple, “to protect the children.” Institutional as well as individual racism is alive and well throughout the country. It is in this complex environment that our children will come of age. I doubt that their experience of race will be exactly the same as those who came before them, but it will build on the same history.

Rebecca Walker writes, “In the race-obsessed United States, my color defines me, tells a story I have not written.” I would like to believe that my daughter’s story is just beginning, but I have to remember that she is also joining a narrative already in progress.

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