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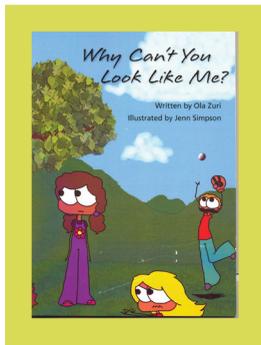
# point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## Book Review

**Why Can't You Look Like Me?**  
By Ola Zuri, Illustrated by Jenn Simpson  
Publisher: Black Oasis Enterprise, 2009



"Have you ever felt like you didn't belong? How did you deal with it? This is the story of a young girl who has been adopted transracially and feels like she doesn't fit in anywhere, even within her own family." So reads the back cover of *Why Can't You Look Like Me*, a book written in verse for children four to eight years old. Because there are kids who are still having the experience of being the only person of color in their environment, and because there are still parents who don't discuss race or racial identity, *Why Can't You Look Like Me* addresses an important subject. A book that describes these situations can be comforting and validating for children. It can also be meaningful for other transracially-adopted kids who want to know why they don't "match" their parents or who sometimes feel isolated.

Simple language accompanied by brightly-colored drawings of children with huge eyes make this book compelling and kind at the same time. The main character, the only brown girl in her school, is targeted and teased before she finally finds a friend who looks like her. Together they validate one another's experiences and find the strength to reject the messages of isolation and pain that surround them.

A genuine first-person voice comes through, as Zuri is clearly describing experiences that she herself has lived through. It is sad to see that the adults in the book never ally with the little brown girl who is

## Author's Notes

**Answering the Why Questions**  
By Ola Zuri  
[www.blackoasisent.blogspot.com](http://www.blackoasisent.blogspot.com)

The children's books I write deal with questions relating to transracial adoption, racism, fitting in, family, identity, and most of all, self-esteem and self-confidence. These stories are inspired by my own personal experiences as a transracial adoptee.

I have had a lot of different people ask me "why" questions. "Why is your skin so dirty?" "Why don't you look like your mom and dad?" "Why is your hair so weird?" "Why aren't you white like us?" "Why don't you go back to where you come from?" "Why were you adopted?" "Why didn't your mom want you?" Why, why, why?

When I was younger, I wanted to look like everyone around me just so that I wouldn't get asked so many "why" questions. I wanted to know the answers to some of those same questions but I didn't know the answers, which made it particularly painful to try to respond. I had a closed adoption and I still don't know the answers to some of those questions. Imagine trying to figure yourself out when you know so little about your early life and where you came from.

I didn't learn the details of my birth until I was an adult. My twin sister was born prematurely, one hour and fifteen minutes before me. She was whisked away into the neonatal care unit of the hospital and then—surprise, I was born! I was placed into the foster care system when I was just days old and was separated from my sister until weeks later, when she too was placed into the system. There we stayed for two years until we were adopted by a white couple.

My sister and I were never sent to preschool at the same time, nor were we sent to the same school when it came time to attend. So even though we had each other to be with when we were at home, at school we were on our own to deal with whatever issues came up. Being alone at school was very hard for me and very sad. I was picked on, teased, and told that I couldn't play with the other kids. I was pushed around and hurt by other children and I remember being singled out by teachers as well—because I was always the only brown child in a sea of white. I was very lonely.

In second grade, a boy in my class kept teasing me and calling me names. I ignored him for a long time but I finally got really upset. I was mad and crying and I hit him. The teacher grabbed me, took

singled out because of the different color of her skin. Nevertheless, the text provides good language for young children to reject self-shame or blame for their experience as a target.

“My friend and I, we have no shame,  
no matter what, we are the same.  
I see now how life is a test,  
I know that I really am the best.  
What matters now is to move ahead,  
By believing in myself and not what is said.”

There are really two separate issues that the little girl is dealing with—lack of adult support and a lack of peers—and in the book these two things get intertwined. The adults in her life seem totally unaware of her sadness and isolation. When she asks, “Why don’t my parents look like me? Why doesn’t anyone look like me?,” no one answers. And that never really changes. The end of the book is very happy and affirming: the girl’s sadness and feelings of isolation are gone because she has found a same-race peer. While very important and validating for a child seeking other children who look like them, the story seems to imply that the lack of support from the adults isn’t very important after all—that a friend is enough if your parents won’t help. It is troubling not just that the parents don’t help her, but that they seem to be removed from the picture entirely. There is only one image of a sad-eyed parent sitting at the child’s bedside as she cries, but the adult here appears helpless and passive.

We know that the author’s purpose is to offer a hopeful and affirming message to kids in a difficult situation. While a little over-simplified, the esteem-affirming message could be validating and encouraging to children. However, it could be even more crucial and eye-opening for parents who might not realize the extent or impact of their child’s isolation, loneliness or experience of being targeted for being “different.”

This book is the first in a series that the author is writing for children and parents who share her experience. The author has assured us that some of the future books in the series will focus more clearly on the role that parents can play in helping their children cope with the isolation and targeting they may be experiencing. We are always grateful when adoptees use their own experience to help children who are coming up behind them.

me to the office, told me that I had no right to pick on other children and that I was going to get the strap from the principal for my bad behavior. I told her what had happened and she didn’t believe me. In the end, I was the one who got the strap and detention.

My dad’s reaction was one of anger at me and I can’t even remember my mom’s reaction. I just remember feeling really bad for getting in trouble at school and then for getting in trouble at home. After that incident, I never shared another story about my experiences of mistreatment at school with my family again.

When I was in sixth grade, another brown girl arrived at my school. I felt a gravitational pull towards her. I didn’t know what it was but knew there was something about her that I needed, that I longed for. It was so exciting for me to see that there were other people who looked like me besides the ones I saw in the movies or on TV. Because we were always separated, I didn’t recognize that my sister was a resource for me. We were never together to share experiences at school, and when I got home I rarely spoke about anything that happened to me at school or anywhere else, as I was afraid of what repercussions might come from my parents. My sister never wanted to talk about any of her experiences either.

I spent so many years feeling isolated and inadequate. I tended to be nervous, quiet, shy, and even ashamed of being adopted, and that made me feel uncomfortable around other people. I supported everyone except myself, never stopping to listen to my own feelings. I didn’t see until years later that I had to listen to myself to find my own answers. Now in writing these books, I hope to make a difference for the children of today, who may be experiencing similar situations and emotions.

When adopting children of another race than themselves, parents need to listen to the concerns their children come home with, the stories from school, the events or activities that they have been involved in. The issues that they are trying to deal with can be very difficult to handle, even with the support and care from parents who listen to them and believe them. Without parental validation of children’s experiences, there will come a time when the stories will not be brought home and eventually the child will disconnect from the parents altogether and too often turn their feelings of pain and inadequacy inward.

Often feelings about race can be so uncomfortable for white parents that they will defend themselves, and their decision to adopt transracially, by denying that racial differences matter at all. You hear expressions like “Oh, you shouldn’t make such a big deal about race...We’re all just people...I’m color-blind.” As adopted children of color grow into their teens and young adulthood, they begin to realize that being color-blind isn’t always the right answer.

When parents minimize differences, children end up feeling like they have to find solutions for their problems alone, which is the type of attitude that I grew up with. Parents can’t (and shouldn’t) fix everything for their children, but they can do their children a great service by listening to them and validating their experiences. This will help their children develop into young adults with self-confidence and a strong sense of their own identity.