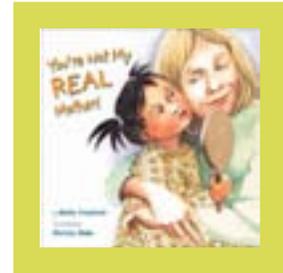


Book Review

You're Not My REAL Mother!

By Molly Friedrich



Molly Friedrich's book *You're Not My REAL Mother!* is an attempt to help adoptive parents respond to the declaration when it comes from their own child. In a story about a white mother talking to her Asian child, the book describes the things "real mothers" do every day in a warm, affectionate tone. The illustrations are colorful and full of fun.

But this book is likely to be much more comforting to the adoptive parent than the adopted child. When a child says, "You're not my real mother!" to her adoptive mom, she could be saying many different things. She could be saying, "I know I have another mother far away. Who is she? What is she like? Is it OK that I wonder?" She could be saying, "I don't look like you. All the other kids in my class look like their mothers. Why am I different?" She could be saying, "The other kids ask me if you're my real mother. What does that mean? How do I answer them?" She could be saying, "I'm really angry at you right now, and I want you to know it!"

The author's approach is to offer adoptive parents the "right answer" to their child's declaration: "Of course I'm your real mother, and here is why." That answer can settle the matter for a parent, but for a child it sidesteps all of the possible emotional undercurrents of the declaration. In the story, her mother's "What do you mean, darling? Of course I'm your real mother" sweeps away the little girl's dilemma with a factual explanation of what makes a mother a "real" mother. And, what may be more troubling to this little girl and to any adopted child in the long run, the explanation makes an adoptive mother "real" and a birth mother something other than "real".

Pre-adoptive parents worry about whether they'll hear their future child say, "You're not my real mother (or father)", and if they do, how they will handle it. Parents of newly arrived infants and toddlers often go through some anxiety about whether or not they really are "real" parents. And throughout the lifespan of an adoptive family, questions from others explicitly or implicitly challenge how "real" the parent/child relationship is. So, the first time an adoptive parent hears "you're not my real (fill in the blank)!" it can be difficult to set aside all of the parental emotions it evokes and be open to the feelings and questions a child is trying to express.

Nonetheless, as difficult as it may be, opening ourselves up to understanding our children's dilemma and helping them face the hard parts of being adopted is a crucial task for adoptive parents.

The experience of being adopted is a complicated one, especially for the young child who is just realizing that there are things she doesn't yet understand. An adopted child, of course, needs to feel that she belongs in her family. This book addresses that need and we certainly applaud that.

But the book fails to address any of the following, equally important needs:

- An adopted child needs to sort out exactly what her relationship is to this person called a "birth mother" – or "real mother" by some – and what it means when she and others around her keep wondering or asking about her. She needs to hear that she is not being disloyal or ungrateful to her adoptive mother if she is curious.
- She needs to figure out how to handle the fact that her family is different from those of most of her friends. Not only does she need to figure out her own feelings about difference, but she also needs to know how to handle other kids' questions.
- When she is a different race than her parents, she needs to figure out how that happened and what it means. Does she really belong? How can she be her mother's daughter, yet look so completely different? How can she be a member of her own ethnic group and still be part of her forever family?

Imagine yourself at six – about the age of the little girl in this book – having all of those questions swirling around inside. Imagine yourself (with your just-beginning-to-form ability to think about complicated things) trying to say something about this to your mother. *You're not my REAL mother!* is probably about as sophisticated as it's going to get. Finding out what exactly your child is asking when she makes that declaration is the first step in helping her think things through. It can be an enormous relief to a young child trying to make sense of her family to hear, "You have more than one real mother, darling. That's what it means to be adopted. Would you like to hear about your birth mother?" Or, "Well you know, we don't look alike do we? Are you wondering why?" Or simply "What do you mean, darling?" Of course, all children – adopted children included – love to hear and need to hear about how much their parents love and value them. The book's litany of all the little things that this mother does every day to care for her daughter is a very warm and appropriate way to explain to a child that she is deeply loved. But the adopted child needs more. She needs to know that her mother's love includes a willingness to hear about, talk about, and accept all of who her, including her other "real mother."