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point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Book Review

The English American

By Alison Larkin

Simon & Schuster, New York 2008

\$24.00

Reviewed by Sofia Arroyo

Sofia Arroyo is an adoptee and second-year college student majoring in International Relations in Los Angeles.



As a teenage adoptee, there are many times I have felt misunderstood or couldn't explain why I did the things I did: feeling scared to make myself completely vulnerable to anyone, having a hard time fully trusting people, being deathly afraid of rejection, and these things impacting so many aspects of my life. Despite the open conversations with my family about the way I was feeling, I still never felt as though I was completely understood. After reading the first twenty pages of Alison Larkin's new novel, *The English American*, that feeling changed. Suddenly, I was completely understood, and by a stranger! Larkin writes, "For me, any kind of rejection hurts terribly. It always has done. I'm sensitive to little rejections—like the butcher giving the last chicken to the lady in the gray coat, even though she was behind me in the queue" (16). Reading segments like this made me feel as if she was writing down my own thoughts.

What I found especially powerful is that while Larkin is British and I consider myself American, she is Caucasian and I am Latina, this novel was extremely relevant to my life and my experience as an adoptee. Never overly negative or treating adoption as if it is a disease, Larkin shares great insights into some of the ways adoption impacts adoptees' experience in the world and the way we look at things. I found this incredibly helpful and totally empowering because sometimes it is easy to minimize the impact of adoption in an attempt to feel better about myself. I don't have to feel like there is something wrong with me; now I can just say, "Oh, I am having an adoption reaction right now," and move on without guilt or insecurity.

The English American is perfect for anybody wanting to explore the journey of an adoptee because of the honest feelings Larkin expresses. When the main character, Pippa, learns at age twenty-eight that her birth parents are from the American South, she feels that lifelong questions have been answered. She meets her birthmother, an untidy, free-spirited redhead, and her birthfather, a charismatic and politically involved businessman living in Washington, D.C.; and she moves to America to be near them. At the same time, she relies on the guidance of a young man with whom she feels a mysterious connection; a man who discovered his own estranged father and who, unlike her birth parents, seemed to understand her in a way that no one in her life had before. Caught between two opposing cultures, two sets of parents, and a romantic twist (a surprise I will not give away here), Pippa is plunged into hilarious, heart-wrenching chaos. With an adoptee as the heroine, Larkin's novel is warm and full of heart as well as an incredibly good read.

As an adoptee who has not yet met my own birthparents, this novel helped me explore myself in ways I never thought of before. Throughout the entire book I found myself laughing out loud, crying, talking, and underlining things that were meaningful to me; the latter something that I have never even thought to do before in a book I read for pleasure. Larkin's use of short chapters make it an easy read and her talent for making the reader want to laugh and cry at the same time make *The English American* impossible to put down. I recommend it highly.