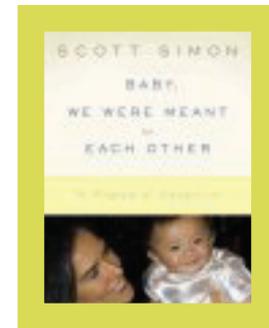


Book Review

Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other: In Praise of Adoption

by Scott Simon

(Random House, 2010, \$22)



Reviewed by Aaryn Belfer

On the back cover of Scott Simon's 2010 book, *Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other: In Praise of Adoption*, actor John Lithgow gives a glowing endorsement. "This is a surprising, powerful, and important book," he says. I had no idea John Lithgow was a member of the adoption triad, someone with the kind of credibility I count on when seeking "powerful and important" books on the topic. But a quick Google search led me to his status: Lithgow is an honorary adoptive parent of a manatee named Rosie as anointed by the Save the Manatee Club.

That right there should give any member of the adoption triad pause.

In his blockbuster book, the host of the National Public Radio's Weekend Edition with Scott Simon tells how he and his wife adopted their daughters from China, interspersing their story with those of other adoptive parents and adult adoptees. He also gives a five-page primer on adoption history (titled "A Short and Superficial History of Adoption"), and ventures like a water skelter over the surface of race, culture, and the development of adopted children.

With respect to the latter, the author rejects the idea of a "primal wound" incurred by adoptees at the loss of a birth mother, yet acknowledges that a child will ask "increasingly pointed" questions about her origins as she grows. "That's not trauma," he says. "That's maturity." He neglects to discuss whether the answers to her questions might be traumatic, but that is how it goes with the entire book: Simon superficially addresses issues that deserve far more contemplation than he seems prepared to give.

His shallow discussion of race is disorganized, and not particularly coherent. He scolds the National Black Social Workers Association for their stance, circa 1972, against transracial adoption, without delving into current research about the best interests of Black children. He claims that it's tough to say "with a straight face, 'Our society is distinctly black or white and characterized by white racism at every level,'" completely ignoring that yes, actually, our society does suffer from racism at every level. He says children know there are differences between people "and they show them off like their wiggly teeth." (What does that even mean?) Kids, he says, think "[p]eople come in different colors and it's no big deal." This gem almost saw me throw the book across the room.

Even with further explanations and caveats, Simon's comments on race and prejudice were startling. Certainly he didn't indicate any consideration that his children benefit largely from positive stereotypes, a lapse especially disappointing given his credential as a journalist.

Simon vacillates between respectful and negative adoption language throughout the text. He generally settles for the cringe-inducing "give up" when talking about birth mothers who chose not to parent their children. (He argues that his daughters' birth mothers did not "make adoption plans" for them and that therefore such language is ridiculous.) He attempts to absolve such transgressions early on by asking readers to understand that these mistakes are "committed with a decent heart."

Speaking of birth mothers, his treatment of them—and of birth fathers—is inconsistent, and not always respectful. That is,

until he recounts the story of an adult adoptee who learns that his birth father is a famous celebrity, who happens to be a friend of the author's (all the people in the book are friends of the author's). At this point, Simon becomes markedly gentle with his verbiage.

One of the most unnerving parts of this most unnerving book is the author's infatuation with wealth and status, and his complete disregard of who benefits the most from the commodification of children. Nearly every family he cites in his book is a moneyed family of notoriety. In fact, so many names and titles were dropped, I expected Simon to feature Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Thankfully, he did not.

He did highlight the sportswriter Frank Deford, who adopted a daughter from Guatemala in 1981. Simon dedicated a long, detailed paragraph to enumerating the many opportunities available to Scarlett, "who nowadays might be classified and defined by experts as the daughter in a transracial adoption." At the end of the covetous itemization,

the author added this: "Indeed, as I read over the previous paragraph, I find myself fantasizing about being Carol and Frank Deford's child." He's effectively saying, Look at how lucky this kid is to have been rescued!, a theme that permeates the entire book, and one true adoption advocates wholly reject.

Whatever his "decent-hearted" intentions, Simon offers an awestruck endorsement of adoption while failing to address some extremely important and complex realities. His Pollyanna-ish perspective leans too heavily on the idea that love is enough, and perpetuates the dangerous notion of adoption as a Great White Hope.

Lithgow called this book surprising, powerful, important. And perhaps it is for a manatee. But for adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptees—especially transracial adoptees—for anyone with a vested interest in adoption, really, this book is best avoided.

Aaryn Belfer is a freelance writer and transracial adoptive parent who lives in San Diego with her husband and daughter.