

Far Away From the Tigers: A Year in the Classroom with Internationally Adopted Children

by Jane Katch, Reviewed by Alison Seevak

Veteran educator Jane Katch found the homogeneity of her "white, middle class kindergarten" changed by an influx of internationally adopted children in the late 1990s. While she welcomed the diversity they brought to her classroom, she questioned how best to reach these new students and how to work with their parents.

Far Away from the Tigers is an account of the months Katch spent looking for answers. Not satisfied with information she found in books and research journals, Katch decided to listen to those she considered the true experts: the children themselves and their adoptive parents. She focuses on three children: Caleb, adopted at two and a half from a Romanian orphanage, Katya, who left her Russian orphanage at 22 months, and Jasper, who was in foster care in Cambodia until he was adopted at six months old.

Katch, who has written two previous books based on her classroom experiences, is clearly a sensitive listener and observer, carefully recording vignettes of Caleb, Katya and Jasper in the classroom, along with the stories they tell her. She also lets their adoptive parents speak for themselves through a series of conversations she holds with them about their child's early institutional lives before adoption, the trip home, eating and sleeping patterns, learning issues, and strategies for talking about adoption at home and in the classroom.

Each of the children enter kindergarten with major behavioral or academic challenges. Two appear to be dealing with the lingering impact of early deprivation in Eastern European orphanages. At six, Caleb is unable to speak coherently and is eventually diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. Katya, disruptive and needy in the classroom, has food and sleep-related issues. Jasper, who spent his first months in "model" Cambodian foster care with one loving nanny, is thought to have had the best start in life. But while academics come easily to him, he spends most of his time practicing the alphabet, unable to connect with his classmates playing nearby.

Katch is at her best when she describes how she uses strategies honed from her years in the classroom to problem-solve. She quickly determines that Caleb needs to be able to tell stories before he'll read or write. She sets him on a course of learning nursery rhymes and songs, while working with a tutor trained in reading recovery. Katya, who endured force-feeding as a toddler in Russia, has repeated tantrums during mealtime. Katch proposes giving her two lunchboxes each day so she will always have a choice of what to eat.

I appreciate Katch's ability to question her assumptions about her students and their parents, and adjust accordingly. One wonderful example takes place when a troupe of African drummers comes to school to perform for Martin Luther King Day, and Caleb is pulled onstage to accompany the performers. Katch worries that the boy who has trouble following directions or paying attention in class will not be able to hold his own. But Caleb proves to be a natural musician, more than able to keep up with the drummers. Katch is embarrassed about her worrying. "Why should I assume that he would not be able to watch for the signal to stop drumming just because he doesn't hear my directions for finding numbers that add up to 10?" She adds, "I don't want to get caught in focusing on disabilities only to forget strengths."

Katch's conversations with her student's parents may not translate into the most useful lessons for teachers or other adoptive parents. For example, when Katch invites each kindergarten parent to come in and tell the class a story about their child, she seems as ambivalent as I am when Jasper's father decides to tell his son's adoption story. Jasper requests that his father tell a story about how he learned to ride his bicycle. But concerned that his son doesn't like to talk about being born in Cambodia, he decides to "model" behavior that celebrates Jasper's heritage and adoption. Another parent might have decided to let the child take control of telling his own story when ready and in the meantime

find other ways of teaching cultural appreciation. Ever the respectful observer, Katch listens, but doesn't judge, just noting that Jasper sits with his head down as his father speaks, "a bit hunched over."

As sensitive and astute as Katch's observations and interventions are, I am troubled by her exclusive focus on children with emotional and learning challenges. Readers who have not been personally touched by adoption might conclude that all children who've been internationally adopted are "damaged." As the mother of an eight-year-old adopted from China, and as a teaching artist working in public schools over the past ten years, I've spent enough time on playground benches and in classrooms to know that some children who've been adopted internationally do face serious challenges that are different than those of their non-adopted counterparts. The length of time children spend in orphanage care and their age at the time of placement do correlate with higher incidences of learning differences and other adjustment issues related to transitioning from one world to another. But Katch, perhaps unintentionally, pathologizes internationally adopted children by allowing three children who face serious challenges to stand for a large and diverse population. That is a problem, when in fact the vast majority of internationally adopted children show incredible resilience, thriving in healthy families and schools when given the chance.

As an adoptive parent, I'm always on the lookout for books that may be useful to other parents and educators. But I'd be hesitant to recommend this book to any of my daughter's teachers or to her school librarian.

Alison Seevak, a teacher and writer, lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her eight-year-old daughter, Anna.