

Book Review

Pieces of Me: Who Do I Want to Be?

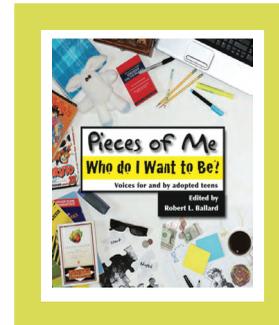
Edited by Bert Ballard

Reviewed by Shannon Riehle

Pieces of Me: Who Do I Want to Be? is a collection of heartfelt poems, essays, songs, and artwork that give voice to the unique struggles and experiences of adopted teenagers. The book's guiding image is putting together a puzzle made up of all of the pieces of the adoptee's identity, history, and experiences. Editor Bert Ballard, himself an adult transracial adoptee, writes in the introduction, "You have some pieces that you know and others you don't. You have some pieces you want to find, but don't know how. You have some pieces you wish you didn't have . . ."

Organized into thematic sections ("Gathering the Pieces," "Stolen Pieces" and "Fitting the Pieces"), the individual contributions are sometimes painful, sometimes hopeful, sometimes direct offers of advice. The unifying message to teenage readers is that they are not alone—others share their feelings and experiences. There are some very moving essays and poems about the experiences of loss and reunion, searching for pieces of one's history, or grieving for those pieces that are irretrievably lost. In keeping with the puzzle theme, and echoing the sentiments of many of the authors included here, Jennifer Arndt-Johns writes, "...gradually, piece by piece, like a collage, I have been reconstructing who I am and who I want to become."

Most of the pieces are by adoptees, though some are by birthparents and adoptive parents. The book was written specifically for teens, and many of the contributors are teens themselves. The majority, however, are adults reflecting on their experiences during childhood and adolescence. Artist Stacy K. Pearson contributes some beautiful artwork that reflects upon her reunion with her birthfather. Several people write about lingering fears of abandonment and how these feelings have affected



their views of themselves and their ability to form relationships. Others describe the profound effect of finding information about their birth families. Some of the most painful pieces are about teenaged adoptees struggling with patterns of damaging or self-destructive behavior. And many pieces address issues of race and how they impact the lives of transracial and international adoptees. Ballard contributes an essay on the "narrative burden" placed upon adoptees and discusses ways of handling the curiosity of other people and their demands for the adoptee to tell his or her story.

Pieces of Me is full of variety and nuance—no two voices are alike. Mixed in with the poems and essays are a number of exercises for the reader to do if he or she chooses, such as writing about the missing pieces of one's history, or creating a postcard to draw or write down expressions of grief, loss, happiness or excitement regarding one's experiences as an adoptee.

I did find some aspects of the book's layout distracting. There are a lot of changes in font and shading from one page to the next, along with overlaid graphics and sidebars. Sometimes, I would assume that the sidebar contained information about an author, only to find that it was a short piece by a completely different person. And certain fonts and shadings made individual pieces more difficult to read. But the teenagers this book is geared toward may not share my opinion!

As a parent, *Pieces of Me* is a book I would absolutely make available to my child and would hope that it could open up some important discussions. I think that it makes an important contribution to adoption literature and is a valuable resource for young adoptees and those who love them.