

Article

Class, Shame, and Identity in Memoirs about Difficult Same-Race Adoptions by Jeremy Harding and Lori Jakiela

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Abstract: This paper will discuss two search memoirs with widely divergent results by British Jeremy Harding and American Lori Jakiela, in which the memoirists recount discoveries about their adoptive parents, as well as their birth parents. While in both cases the adoptions are same-race, both provide material for analysis of class and class mobility. Both searchers discover that the adoption, in more blatant ways than usual, was aimed at improving the parents' lives—impressing a rich relative or distracting from the trauma of past sexual abuse—rather than benefiting the adoptee. They also discover the importance of various kinds of shame: for example, Harding discovers that his adoptive mother hid the close connection that she had had with his birthmother, because she was trying to rise in class. Jakiela imagines the humiliation her birthmother experienced as she tries to understand her resistance to reunion. Both memoirists recall much childhood conflict with their adoptive parents but speculate about how much of their personalities come from their influence. Both narrate changes in their attitudes about their adoption; neither one settles for a simple choice of either adoptive or birth identity. Contrasts in their memoirs relate especially to gender, nation, class, and attitudes to fictions.

Keywords: adoption; search memoir; identity; adoptive parents; class; shame; secrecy; birthmother; orphanage; Irishness; immigration; Jeremy Harding; Lori Jakiela

1. Introduction

British and American TV shows regularly ask, “Who Do You Think You Are?” and answer in terms of heredity. On Facebook and in marches, adoptee rights activists sometimes protest that the sealed records in most of the United States (US) deny adoptees the right to know their own identity. However, memoirs in which adoptees seek and contact a birthparent often do not show this contact, important as it is, of itself giving an answer to identity questions (Novy 2012). Two recent search memoirs, indeed, complicate the story further by intercalating and at times foregrounding a quest to understand their authors' now dead adoptive parents and those parents' influence.

Jeremy Harding writes in his memoir *Mother Country*, “It is one of the axioms of adoption that when you go looking for people you don't know, you begin to discover the people you imagined you knew” (2010, p. 42). This may be an axiom, but it is rarely documented as thoroughly as does Harding. And in Lori Jakiela's memoir *Belief is its own Kind of Truth, Maybe* (Jakiela 2015), a discovery about her adoptive father's childhood experience and how it may have motivated her adoption is climactically placed, and the memoir, even more than Harding's, is full of speculations about which of her qualities come from nature and which from nurture. These two search memoirs, one by a London-born man who lives in France and one by a woman born and living near Pittsburgh, both professional writers well-known in their respective worlds, also portray and analyze strained relationships with less educated adoptive parents. Harding's previous books include *The Fate of Africa* (Harding 1993) and *The Uninvited: Refugees at the Rich Man's Gate* (Harding 2000), which won the Martha Gellhorn award

for journalism in 2002. Jakiela wrote previous memoirs, *Miss New York Has Everything* (Jakiela 2006) and *The Bridge to Take When Things Get Serious* (Jakiela 2013). She won the City of Asylum Pittsburgh Prize in 2015, and that year, *Belief* won the William Saroyan International Prize. The outcomes of their birth family searches are strikingly different. But both of them reject for themselves the idea of finding identity in birth origin alone.

While in both cases the adoptions are same-race, and thus the adoptees do not have to deal with racism directed at them, both provide material for analysis of class and class mobility, exploring what has been called “the identity politics of . . . class” (Hipchen and Deans 2003, pp. 168–69). Both searchers discover that the adoption, in a more focused way than usual, was aimed at improving the parents’ lives—impressing a rich relative or, at least in part, distracting from trauma. They also find the importance of various kinds of shame: Harding learns that his adoptive mother broke off the close connection that she had had with his birthmother¹, because she was trying to rise in class. Jakiela imagines the humiliation her birthmother experienced as she tries to understand her resistance to reunion. She also discovers her adoptive father’s early sexual trauma and how this shaped his personality. Perhaps surprisingly, the British birthmother is much less injured by her past than the American one. Both writers, however, conjure images of their adoptive parents at their best as they find narrative closure.

Both Harding and Jakiela make careful and emphatic choices about adoption language. Jakiela, from a working-class background, where “real mother” is a term often used by contrast to “adopted mother” (for example, by a policeman, p. 124), opens her memoir by writing, “When my real mother dies, I go looking for another one. The Catholic Charities counselor’s word for this other mother I want after decades to find is biological” (2015, p. 13). Soon after, she refers to “My mother, the mother who raised me” and says that “biological” makes her think of “warfare”. (14) The phrase “the mother who raised me” continues until p. 95 and resurfaces once at the end. The other one is almost always “birth mother”—“birthmother” in the Catholic Charities reports she quotes and builds on later. (In the fictional improvisation on them, she becomes Marie). Harding, by contrast, rejects the term “birth-mother” (2010, p. xxii). He says he “wouldn’t really want to say ‘my mother’ about either, even though I do” (2010, p. 5). Sometimes he calls them “Mother One” and “Mother Two”, but most often, they are Margaret and Maureen, respectively. Otherwise, he uses “natural mother.” Many adoption professionals have discarded that term because they think it implies that adoption is unnatural (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Foster Care, Adoption and Kinship Care 2014). For the more intellectual Harding, the opposite of “natural” is “cultural”, and he writes, “Adoption is one of the modest triumphs of human culture” (2010, p. xvii). However, he breaks down this opposition by continuing, “Another . . . is the fact that a mother may feel something like love for her biological children throughout her life, whether they are insistently present or torn away from her by circumstance at an early stage.” Retrospectively, Margaret comes to exemplify this; close to the end, she becomes “my first mother, also my last” (p. 177), while Jakiela’s birthmother does not.

2. Ancestry Search Stories

The ancestry search story in *Mother Country* begins with Harding contemplating his original birth certificate, which lists Margaret Walsh as his mother, with an adoption counselor. He is in his fifties, his adoptive mother, Maureen, is in the throes of dementia, his adoptive father, Colin, is dead; so, he assumes, is Margaret. He explores the addresses listed on the certificate and begins the adoptive family search as well, interviewing Colin’s sister Rosemary and old friend Boris, who tells him that Colin was able to get family money after he produced a child. Harding goes to the Family Records Center to find marriage and birth records and then to the Kensington Public Library for voting records.

¹ Outside direct quotations, I will use “birthmother”, which reform activist Mary Anne Cohen (Cohen 2010), says was popularized as one word by Lee Campbell in 1976 when CUB [Concerned United Birthparents] was founded.

He looks for neighboring houses and sees the name Privett, mentioned by Rosemary as someone who had been an intermediary in the adoption. He visits Peter Privett and discovers that Peter's now dead wife, Lillian, had once been a close friend of Maureen, but had totally broken with her after adopting a little boy, who was Harding himself. This break was motivated partly by the desire to keep the adoption a secret from the aunt who would provide money and partly by Colin's desire to solidify Maureen's rise in class by removing her from her previous working-class friends. He sees a friend of the Privetts' who knew Maureen and wonders if this man is his father. He hires a professional tracer and starts calling people living near or perhaps related to some of the many Margaret Walshes he finds in the records. Eventually one calls back and identifies herself as his cousin and Margaret as a lively seventy-year old. The three meet for a very long lunch and talk, so successfully that near the end Margaret says, "We were all nervous . . . and now we're none of us nervous" (p. 177). The relationships are clearly to be continued. Other adoption memoirs show that such a meeting is the beginning of another story. It is not always a happy one, but a post-book interview suggests that his has been (Novy 2012; Kellaway 2006).

Jakiela's birth family connection story begins in a Catholic Charities office with a counselor interviewing her, first in person and then with a questionnaire with questions such as "What is your expected outcome?" (2015, p. 17). She returns home to find an e-mail saying, "I am your sister" (p. 29), but the timing is coincidental, and the e-mail is the result of gossip. The e-mails, from someone with the username Blonde4Eva, continue, and their semi-literacy dismays Jakiela. The counselor tells her not to answer. In a few days, she calls to say that the birthmother has refused any kind of contact and swore and screamed at her, as no one else ever has. About a week later, Jakiela finds many angry 3-a.m., and thereabouts, phone messages from her sister on her voicemail.

Some time later, she gets an e-mail from her brother. He has read her first memoir, which mentions her birth name and her birthmother's name, told to her long ago by her parents. He is more rational and welcoming, and they talk, first on the phone, then in person, and then with spouses and the other sister. Not long after, she receives more angry social media messages from her birthmother, oddly beginning, "I will pray for you" (p. 215). She names the birthfather, hostilely calling him "the Jew". Hate-filled messages from her birthmother and the first birth sister continue, while her brother and her second sister warmly accept her as part of the family.

After the first contact with her brother, Jakiela places an imaginative reconstruction of the early pregnancy of her birthmother, whom she calls Marie, hiding out in her older sister's closet, humiliated by the family members who knew and by their priest. Then, she provides three other imagined narratives: one of Marie's father's violence, lack of love, and paranoia; a second of the appearance, deceptions, and smooth dancing of the man who got her pregnant; and a third of her time in the home for unwed mothers, mocked by a multitude of statues of the Virgin Mary, repelled by her new baby's clubfeet, which remind her of her father's leg injury. The reconstructions come in part from Jakiela's official record, in part perhaps from what her siblings have told her; they are her attempt to understand her birthmother's rejection of her as a reaction to shame and other suffering.

Jakiela continues to be obsessed by this rejection and the hostile messages, in the hope that the mood will change, and she will get at least a family medical history. Concern with them becomes as obsessive for her as is her usual concern for her children; she later identifies her mood as grieving. Looking for her birth mother's "buried softness" (p. 239), she examines the records again and finds it. In the last reconstruction, Marie returns to the orphanage about a year later, touches the child's belly, asks if the child seems happy, and asks twice if the child will have the necessary surgeries. Jakiela writes her a long e-mail, thanking her birthmother for a good life and saying that it was the right thing to give her up to a "woman who loved [her] and who [she] loved" (p. 247). The first response she receives is the most civilized that her birthmother has ever sent: "I've thought of you often. It's just too much after all these years. What's done is done". But the second one is that she wishes she had had an abortion. After this, Jakiela finally asks her husband to send a message to stop the e-mails, and they do stop. In the epilogue, she tells us that her relationship with her brother, and to a lesser

extent, with the sister she met with him, continues, and even Blonde4Eva sends her a non-hostile message that she has a new job and is happy.

The summaries I have given of the development of the birth family connections in these two memoirs leave out much of the books, for both are filled with vivid memories and thoughtful analyses of adoptive parents. Both memoirists are trying to make sense of the meanings of adoption and family, but Harding evokes more visually his family home and routines and London's various geographies, as well as the subtleties and large patterns of class relationships and Irish immigration history. Jakiela, by contrast, recounts more of the day-to-day vicissitudes of child-rearing and partial parallels to her life in the life of other adopted and/or working-class friends and family members.

3. Class, Shame, Irishness, and Religion

The genealogy search in *Mother Country* reveals a story of class scorn and class shame, while the narrative in *Belief* reveals two stories in which class disadvantage and shame and sexual shame are combined. Harding remembers Maureen's fascination with the musicals *Oliver* and *My Fair Lady*, and this takes on special meaning as he discovers that she grew up in working-class poverty, though marriage had raised her out of it and her first husband had even paid for her to have elocution lessons (p. 106). Colin, her second, "was fiercely opposed to any social arrangement that might keep disadvantaged people alive too long and put a burden on more fortunate families like ourselves" (p. 16). Hating working-class people in general and wanting to keep away from them as much as possible, he was the crucial force in barring her from her early friends. However, her memory of their friendship may have affected the sympathetic way she described his birthmother to young Harding—as a "little girl", he came to think of as "frail" (p. 55). Harding spells out the consequences of Colin's general exclusionary attitudes in spatial terms: they were "moat people" (p. 15); when they visited other parts of London, it was important to avoid public housing projects, which, even if well-built, Colin detested (p. 14). As memoirist, Harding gives almost without comment the monologue in which Colin's old friend Boris reveals the mercenary motive for the adoption, not intervening but letting the reader imagine his feelings, to which Boris is clearly insensitive. When he tries to get more information, asking about Mrs. Privett, who had been mentioned as a possible go-between, Boris is scornful and changes the subject to Colin's bridge game, and deflected feelings emerge: "I felt unusually, pathetically eager to defend my father and perhaps inflict pain on Boris's poodle" (p. 51). Maureen had continued to be friendly to working people and temporarily enjoyed becoming a flower seller (more connections with *My Fair Lady*), but Colin stopped this job and stopped such interactions as much as he could. A few moments after telling Maureen's former friend John about the end of the flower trade comes one of the few times in which Harding stops the narration of conversation and events to reveal his feelings directly: "I suddenly felt very blue about Maureen, sad about her life" (p. 107).

Though the economic and cultural deprivation of her birth family was worse, Jakiela's birthmother and her adoptive parents are all working-class people. Her parents were, as she writes, "too old to qualify for a healthy baby girl" (2015, p. 111) but were given her because she had two clubbed feet, which required many operations. Although she knows this now, they always presented the adoption to her as their choice and growing up she often felt good about it. They were open about it, telling her her original name and that of her birthmother, but there were times when suspicion of her origins emerged. When she used at the dinner table new words she had learned by secretly reading the dictionary, her mother would say, "I don't know where you came from" (p. 34). Later on, she says, "You probably get your smart mouth from *her*" (p. 119). Though she sometimes encouraged Jakiela's search for her birth family, wishing that children and adoptive families could be better matched in personality, at other times she was hostile to them, whether because of a sense of moral superiority to a presumably unwed mother or because of fearing competition for her daughter's love with another family or, indeed, the outside world. She would say, "I want what's mine to stay mine" (p. 35), and "She'll get ideas" was an ominous prediction to her. Many of these attitudes can be associated with

anxiety about a child leaving a class, ethnic, or religious group (Rubin 1976, p. 208; Kagan 2007, p. 146; Kelly and Kelly 1998, pp. 264–68).

The idea that Jakiela had inherited her interest in words is quickly deflated when e-mail contact with her birth family begins and her sister writes, “I all ways KNEW” (p. 31). One of their mother’s hostile messages, showing ignorance of how strongly Jakiela feels about her working-class identity, says, “Your ancestors were hard working and proud individuals and you just beat that down” (p. 222). All she knows about Jakiela, besides her desire for contact, probably, is that Jakiela has published a book that reveals her name and therefore the history that she has been trying to keep secret. As with the other mother, it seems, it is partly the interest in words that marks Jakiela as different. Her new brother’s e-mail is more articulate and formal than her sister’s, but he has “a distinct working-class accent [she’s] heard all her life and tried to escape” (p. 137), because so many of its Pittsburgh speakers have treated her badly. Fortunately, his voice is softer and “sounds like [her] father” (138). They can find a commonality in singing Irish songs, but he admits to envy at her growing up without “the deadbeat piano playing father, his mother, her troubles” (p. 183).

Jakiela draws on an environment not totally foreign to her, as well as on the Catholic Charities files and information from her brother, when she imagines the humiliation of the woman she calls Marie. Hit herself in childhood with a wooden spoon by her mother and a belt by her father (p. 102), she can easily imagine that Marie’s more violent father “would beat the child out of her if he knew” and that “sometimes Marie becomes her father and beats her own head” (p. 145). Jakiela’s father, a mill worker, mistrusted people in general and much preferred dogs (2006, pp. 34–36); she hypothesizes the same of Marie’s father, a construction worker (2015, p. 152). Such conversion of class shame into depression and generalized anger is quite frequent (Turner 2014, p. 186; Kagan 2007, pp. 146–47). Perhaps Marie’s father was especially bitter, because he had lost a leg, presumably in a work accident. Similarly, she writes of her father, “Because of the terrible things that happened to my father, he called people cockroaches” (2015, p. 234). She sees much of her birthmother’s shame as coming from Catholic tradition, writing of “the Irish Catholic horror I was born into” (p. 80) and imagining the many images of the Virgin Mary in the Rosalia Foundling and Maternity Home as meant to say “You can pray to us for salvation because we are what you’ll never be” (p. 173). She writes, “Marie grew up in the church with her parents and their parents and so on. She knew cruel” (p. 173). She thinks of the church-run Irish Magdalene homes, which exploited unwed mothers and mistreated many of their children (p. 45), when Blonde4Eva writes that her mother, an immigrant from Ireland was raised “Very proud Irish. Catholic” (p. 48). Jakiela still ambivalently identifies as Catholic, by contrast to her “born-again Christian” in-laws but writes of the “American Catholic [perhaps implied from the above phrase, horror] I was raised in and thought bad enough” (pp. 80–81), and remembers her pastor Father Ackerman’s advice that parents should make their children grateful by using “their hands for beatings, so children would feel that physical connection” (p. 115).

The Irishness of the birthmothers is emphasized in both memoirs, though with the significant difference that for Harding, who does not interview anyone Irish until he hears from his cousin near the end of his search, it has no particular associations with religion, beating, or shame. But indeed there would have been contrasts in the experience of mid-century Irish immigrants to London and children of earlier Irish immigrants to the US. Since the 1930s, many more Irish people have immigrated to Britain, especially women to London, than to the US, and they probably felt less embattled (Travers 1995, pp. 149–50; Gray 2004, p. 107). Looking through various records for Margaret Walsh, Harding sees many Irish names and notes the areas of London where they are found. Their listed occupations give him a social history of the change from immigrants to “first-generation exiles” (p. 126), and he tries to envision the lives of those in the “tough immigrant drama”. He finds “Irishness” attractive but more relevant to understanding Margaret than himself. Later, when his cousin Mary asks him about Irishness, he thinks of rooting for an Irish rugby player, Mick Doyle, Irish writers, and Irish songs (pp. 174–75). He learns that Margaret had been able to keep another son before she got married, so somehow she had become able to deal differently with social stigma. It may be partly a matter

of the fact that the meeting with Margaret and Mary occurs so late in the narrative, and few details of their lives actually appear, but in *Mother Country*, apart from the pressure to have him adopted, shame appears much more in his adoptive family than in what he would call his natural one. There are traumas in their world—giving up the baby was hard, Margaret did not want to talk to the social worker afterwards (p. 34), and the father is still not to be mentioned—but she has got beyond them.

The second story of sexual shame that occurs in *Belief* is one that Jakiela actually discovered not during her search for her birthmother, but more than five years earlier. She includes it in this book, close to the end, as part of the lead-in to her father's death; the revelation occurred about a month before, as if he wanted to make sure she knew while he could tell her. He tells the story as if he were a child (he was 9 or 10 at the time): "He touched my peepee" (p. 269). It was his soon-to-be brother-in-law, Whitey. Jakiela's mother had known about this for a long time, it turns out. Jakiela's father had a beautiful voice as a child and sang in the church choir. Whitey was in a band and so had an excuse to listen to his singing, alone. Afterwards, the boy cried for a long time. No one noticed. He told no one. He stopped singing. His submission to Whitey and his failure to tell may have resulted in part from the deference to authority emphasized by both Catholic and working-class cultures, obviously overlapping (Kelly and Kelly 1998, p. 262; Wilkins and Pace 2014, p. 391). Whitey's attentions are probably paramount among the terrible experiences of her father mentioned a few paragraphs ago. Her mother tells her, "I think that's why he's always been so miserable We thought maybe adopting you would help I think it helped, having you" (p. 271). Depression is indeed frequent among child abuse survivors, so combining that shame with his class shame, it is remarkable that he was able to feel and express love for his daughter as much as he did (Kagan 2007, p. 147).

Just as Harding does not react explicitly to the news that he was adopted to help his parents' finances, Jakiela never comments directly on the revelation that she was adopted as therapy for her father. Her mother had unsuccessfully tried for years to persuade him to get real therapy. But in this case, any possible anger on her own behalf is far outweighed by compassion for her father and anger at Whitey and at his sister, who has always refused to see any signs of the abuse. The story is relevant to this book not just because of the light it sheds on the reason for her adoption and the psychology of her father, but also because of the connection she makes between her father and her birthmother: "He called people cockroaches. I think of my birth mother like that, a hard shell, refusing to die, scaring everyone she crawls past" (p. 234). She is like a cockroach but at the same time like Jakiela's beloved father in that mistreatment makes her lash out. As Jakiela writes earlier about her sister, "Cruelty is a bandage" (p. 88). Sociologists support this analysis: sexual abuse and deprivation due to class both lead to shame, repressed and sometimes expressed anger, and depression (Turner 2014, p. 186; Kagan 2007, p. 147).

4. Adoption and Identity: Changing Interpretations

Harding and Jakiela both narrate changes in their ideas about their identity related to adoption and the events of their search. Harding had, for much of his life, thought of himself as "a free spirit" by contrast to his "marooned" parents (p. 8) and "impartial" by contrast to "most other people . . . condemned to peer at the world across the obscurity of the breeding hutch" (p. 153). He had rejected the maxim "blood is thicker than water" (p. 5) and identified with water, but as he meets John Webb, who had known his mother and who he wishes were his father, he realizes that he would like to be saved from watery fluidity. The issue of possible hereditary similarities in appearance comes up briefly at that point, earlier with regard to his wonder how his parents thought they could keep the adoption secret when they were short and he was tall, and at the end with regard to his cousin, though not his mother. More importantly, he comes to realize ways he has been influenced by Colin, and in some cases, by Maureen, that he regrets—he is not as impartial as he thinks. He compares himself to Colin in letting Maureen down by not showing her affection—"a pair of undemonstrative men" (p. 80). As he walks through a public housing project near where Margaret used to live, he realizes that he shares some of their anxiety about such projects (pp. 88–89), thus having some of their class

feelings. But his attitudes begins to change. When he interviews someone who lived in Margaret's neighborhood long ago and cannot read where she belongs, he feels he has "begun falling aimlessly, or gently rotating in zero gravity, with the familiar markers of class and social identity turning gently about me like luminous debris in the aftermath of a space-probe disaster" (p. 146). And when he finally meets Margaret, he feels "robbed of the words for . . . difference or affinity by social group and background; wealth and poverty" (p. 176). While he had earlier critiqued Colin for his "them and us" attitude, it is clear that he shared some of it, even if with different divisions, but now, he feels that he is getting beyond that, ready to picnic with Margaret over "the battle lines of the British class system" (p. 176). He suddenly sees his worldly success as a sign of limitation: "I'd been able to pile up wealth, incapable of functioning in the world without the thought that it was there to fall back on" (p. 175). On the other hand, he realizes that Margaret's large family, and her closeness to them, constitute another kind of abundance.

Through most of the memoir, he describes how what he learns has made him more sympathetic to Maureen and more critical of Colin for cutting Maureen off from her friends and her flower-selling. However, he makes a point of evoking a farewell image of each in relation to his affection for them in early childhood. He imagines Colin in his gardening clothes, off on the boat to do the shopping. "We both liked the river" (p. 141). He sees that if he had just met them briefly, "they'd have seemed bracingly eccentric" (p. 172). His last image of Maureen is of her quickly reaching out to save his two-year-old son from falling into the water, showing her motherliness—the image of the falling boy is one he had applied to himself earlier in the memoir, in analyzing a photograph of his christening party.

Jakiela remembers having often said and felt that adoption was not an issue for her and even having felt good about the idea of having been wanted and chosen. However, she includes many memories of times in which it was an issue, such as a vignette of how she and her African-American cousin, also adopted, looked and felt out of place when some family photographs were taken (pp. 110–11, 114, 119–20, 121). She often felt sad about not identifying with any of the ethnicities in her adoptive or her birth family. "Until I married and had children, I was single, solitary, someone who most days wanted to take up no space at all" (p. 47). In *Miss New York Has Everything*, which includes a narrative of her time as an airline stewardess, she feels uncomfortable about the fact that the ethnicity people are most likely to attribute to her, from her appearance, is German (2006, pp. 162–69). When her birthmother refuses contact, Jakiela realizes even more fully how much she felt deprived by being adopted. She had really wanted "to know something that looked and moved and laughed and loved and was sad like me" (2015, p. 99). She often feels that whatever similarities she has to either her adoptive parents or her birthmother are painful. Hearing about her birthmother's screaming at the social worker, she thinks, "I've found my roots, the map of what I was born with" (p. 94). For decades, she writes, "I've tried not to be like my father" in his suspicion of the world (p. 265). She understands her mother's worries and fear of loss. Sometimes, she thinks, "There is so much of my parents in me I barely believe in blood" (p. 77). But when she neglects her children because she is obsessed by her birthmother's rejection, she thinks, "I am a terrible mother. Like the birth mother before me, and so on and so on. And this time my mother, my real mother, a good mother, is not here to tell me otherwise" (pp. 236–37). She does not conclude with this attitude, however. She resolves, "If paranoia and cruelty run like cancer in my birth mother's bloodline, I am hoping something else will show up to provide balance and grace" (p. 240), looks at the Catholic Charities report again, and finds the memory of her birthmother's final visit and touch. Here is the hidden kindness that she had hoped to find in her bloodline, as a sign of her own possibilities, even if her birthmother can no longer extend kindness to her.

Jakiela's memoir many times recounts with annoyance people telling her that she was lucky and should be grateful. But toward the end, she accepts these words. In escaping her birthmother, she *was* lucky and more like her birthfather. "We were both, my father and I, lucky. We made it over the wall" (p. 220, she has just referred to her father as "a German and a Jew" so implicitly crossing the Berlin wall is made an image of their other escapes). She tells her birthmother that she is grateful to her for

giving her up to a mother who would love her, and she recalls with gratitude her last days with each of her adoptive parents. Before the epilogue, updating relationships and also what has happened in her hometown of Braddock, a steel town near Pittsburgh, she writes about her daughter's perfect pitch, a tie to her father's early singing, and her daughter's hope that the last caterpillar in her daughter's science experiment will transform into a butterfly. Can she and her children keep the good things in their family history and leave behind the bitterness?

5. Gender and Nation

The contrast in what each author includes and excludes relates to their contrast in gender and nation. Although class is important in Jakiela's memoir, Harding is even more explicit about its influence, as British writers often are, and extends its discussion in larger social analyses. It is striking, in comparison to Jakiela, that Harding says very little about looking for similarities to himself in his children, just "I'd had only a few years practice in the arts of physical comparison based on kinship" (p. 100); this may be British reticence, which could also be seen as reluctance to violate their privacy. But it is also related to the general expectation and experience that children are more likely to be important to a woman's identity than to a man's. Jakiela is living with and taking primary responsibility for her children during the time recounted here. Harding apparently is mostly not; his wife and three children are in France, where he usually lives (Kellaway 2006). He says in his preface that he thinks of this book as in part for his children and particularly to "show that people were joined up, and separated, in all sorts of ways" (p. xix). But they do not figure in the book much. Jakiela frequently discusses similarities between herself and her children, as well as recounting her care for them in crises; Harding, by contrast, mentions two occasions on which he intended to buy Christmas presents for his children and bought other things instead and has them with him only on two visits with family members. The image of maternal care is important to both of them: Harding several times repeats the phrase "good care" (p. 28) found in the social worker's report on his condition in his adoptive family, and almost the last image he evokes of his mother is of her instinctive reaching out to keep his two-year-old son from falling. But this iconic memory of her does not have the same two-sided personal meaning for him that it would for Jakiela. When Jakiela recalls her adoptive mother's speaking of anxiety that the social worker would find her unfit for motherhood, she identifies with this anxiety (pp. 73–74). As her mother is dying, she says, "You were a good mother", and her mother responds, "You're a good mother" (p. 246). Harding explicitly says that he chose his title as an analogy to "Indian country" (pp. xxi), suggesting, as does the work's origin in a BBC series called "Another Country" (p. 191), that the world of mothers is foreign to him. Indeed, this may be part of the impact on him of male socialization: most of the memoirists who have written about their search for birth family are female. If Harding is unusual as a male writing about this topic, Jakiela is also unusual among female search memoirists for the large role of her own children in her narrative. Many of them have no children at the time; a few, B. J. Lifton and Jean Strauss, mention their children occasionally during their books, and A.M. Homes describes her relationship as a mother of her almost-three-year-old as more important to her than her relation to any of her four parents near the end of hers, but Jakiela's ongoing care for her children is much more a part of her story (Lifton 1998; Strauss 2001; Homes 2007).

Gender and national differences may also both be relevant to the difference in the kind of research both authors do. Harding's book was originally published in 2006 in the United Kingdom (UK), where adult adoptees can see their original birth and adoption records. He wrote a new introduction into the American paperback edition of 2010, in which he explains this national contrast: whether adult American adoptees have the legal right to see their original birth certificates depends on the state in which they were adopted. Crediting Wayne Carp's scholarship (Carp 2009), he gives a history of adoption secrecy in the US, argues that sealed birth records are outdated, and suggests skepticism about the resulting American industry of 'intermediary programs' and parent-child registers (pp. ix–xiv). Jakiela's story reinforces such skepticism. Because Pennsylvania was a closed-record state, Jakiela had

to go through Catholic Charities to get her birth certificate. While her parents had long ago told her her birth name and her mother's, she did get more material from her Catholic Charities file. However, for a long time, she felt locked into allowing their social worker, whom she did not like, to be the intermediary in any contact that she initiated. Obviously, her birthmother did not like this social worker either. By contrast, Harding had a practical and generous adoption counselor who made suggestions for research. He consulted family friends and relatives, the Family Records Office, the voting rolls, and the street directory. Theoretically, Jakiela could have, for example, gone to a records office to try to locate her birthmother's married name by looking up years of marriage records, but that probably looked like an impossible task. She did have to take care of her children. And of course, those e-mail messages from her birth family started right after her meeting with the social worker.

6. Overall Experience, Personalities, and Beliefs about Adoption

Putting these two memoirs together suggests something of the great range of results that a search for birthparents might produce. It is ironic, considering the traditional belief that class barriers are stronger in England, that the English birthmother had a much happier life and thus was much more open to reunion than the American one, though there is much evidence that the US has become increasingly economically stratified, with a theoretically possible happy poverty difficult to find. The memoirs also suggest a great range of contrast in the personalities that adoptees might have. Jakiela portrays here a life very lonely before her marriage, full of shame and self-doubt. None of her adoptee friends or relatives has a good relationship with either adoptive parents or birthparents. They are all apparently working-class, and this depression could certainly be seen as caused by growing up in an atmosphere of economic and educational deprivation, as [Turner \(2014, p. 193\)](#) and [Kagan \(2007, p. 188\)](#) would see it. But not surprisingly, she seems drawn to the theory that separation from a mother to be adopted produces a "primal wound" ([Verrier 1993, p. 218](#)), though she does not commit to it. Harding mourns the loss of his easy relationship with his parents in early childhood, but they had the resources to send him to excellent boarding schools and Cambridge University ([Kellaway 2006](#)), and he has managed to turn his sense of "never quite [being] what anyone had in mind" (p. 154) into an advantage. At times, his introspection suggests that his search is shaking up a self-confidence that might even have been excessive. In his introduction to the US edition, it is clear that he prefers the "civil rights" argument for openness about birth records to an argument based on [Verrier \(1993\)](#) that adoptees are necessarily wounded (pp. xiii–xiv).

These contrasts are easy to map on to the contrast between the experience of a man raised in a privileged atmosphere and that of a woman from a family with less money and little educational guidance in her youth. But it is also relevant that Jakiela was in the Rosalia orphanage for close to a year—perhaps longer than many other children, because her clubfeet made her less "adoptable"—and that year probably did have the experience basic to the primal wound theory, as she explains it, of "scream[ing] and scream[ing] for mothers who never come" (p. 218), in addition to much lonely time spent in the hospital because of operations for her legs, while Harding was transferred to Maureen's care at the age of eleven days or less. This speed may have been possible, because it was a private placement, "organized outside the normal channels" ([Harding 2010, p. 28](#)); ironically, reforms in the Adoption Act of 1976, implemented in 1982, would make this against the law ([Keating 2009](#)). However, [Verrier \(1993\)](#) believes that he still would have missed his first mother.

7. Fictions and Truth

[Hipchen and Deans \(2003\)](#) point out that adoption life writing "blur[s] the boundaries between fact and fiction", p. 167), and Margaret Homans shows that many adoptees' memoirs involve creating fictions about their origins ([Homans 2013](#)). Jakiela creates such fictions in the vignettes in which she imagines her birthmother under the new name of Marie, not to pretend that she has found the identity of a birthmother, as is often all that can be achieved because of closed records, but to help understand and forgive her. Crucially, she says, "I choose to believe in my birth mother's underground tenderness

and mercy" (p. 245). For Harding, by contrast, fictionality is mainly associated with the stories that Maureen made up for him—that she was an orphan as he was, that she had a grandmother who gave her rides in a carriage and took her to Egypt—as well as with her identification with Eliza in *My Fair Lady*. He analyzes her story of adopting him as a class fable, notes that her favorite books are about families getting separated and then reunited again, suggesting that she wanted to believe that this could happen, and calls her "terrific with make-believe" (p. 102); his discovery about her previous life shows the falsity of most of what she told him about himself and herself. When his cousin contacts him, it is important that to him that when he says, "I've no way of knowing if any of this is true," she answers, "Sweetheart, it's all true" (p. 163). This contrast maps readily onto the fact that Harding's previous books are journalism, while Jakiela's previous books are memoirs and poetry. It is in Harding that we see "the work of the genealogist and the autobiographer . . . intersect[ing in what reads like] investigative journalism" (Hipchen and Deans 2003, p. 168).

Jakiela's title, *Belief is its own kind of truth, Maybe* (her own capitalization indicating some ambivalence), indicates from the start that she has more tolerance of fiction. For her, all family life, indeed all life, involves wishful thinking. She quotes her mother as saying, "People believe what they need to believe" (p. 182) and observes this in her mother's belief that the survival of her dogwood tree is a tribute to her care (p. 58), as well as in her parents' inventing "a movie version of their meeting" (p. 182), which is a little like Maureen's stories about her childhood. She acknowledges that her own beliefs may often not have objective grounds and does not feel objectivity is always necessary: "I believe a lot of things because it's better to believe them than to believe their opposites . . . [My parents] loved me enough to make me believe I was beautiful. The truth is, I have one of those faces people don't remember" (pp. 199–200). But for her, most important now is her relationship with her husband and children, and she thinks of this as to be maintained to a large extent by stories. As she anticipates retelling the story of the hospital room where the doctor discovered that her daughter had stuffed a toy reindeer's nose up her nose, she thinks, "This story will become one of our favorites. . . . We will tell them the way old ladies at church tick off prayers on rosary beads, which is how I think of family now, the most sacred thing" (pp. 255–56). But she is aware that sometimes family stories that are not true "are called true and these stories shape a life and that life is handed down in more stories and so on" (p. 289).

There are just a few points that suggest some appreciation of wishful thinking and family fictions in Harding. He remembers that when Maureen picked him up after his graduation, she asked him about his studies with just the word and tone a duchess might use—"for a moment there you were the real thing" (p. 184). And at the very end, after having discovered that her father was a "wine and spirits merchant's carman," when he thinks he has found the "genealogy" (using that word for the first time) of her stories of riding in her grandmother's carriage, he likes to imagine that her father "would have let her up on the dray when she was a little girl. Once or twice, surely, by way of a treat" (p. 189). With this playful use of "genealogy" to apply to stories, he signals again his view of the inadequacy of an exclusive focus on biological heredity to explain identity and implicitly concurs with a critical view like Julia Watson's of genealogy in the sense of defining humans by pedigree (Watson 2016, p. 108).

8. Conclusion: Reconstructions of Identity

Both of these memoirs turn away from the idea of finding identity in birth origin and toward something more complex—what John McLeod calls "adoptive being," which treats "bio-genetic and adoptive modes of kinship as concomitant instances of 'being with'" (McLeod 2015, p. 27). Strained as her relationships with her adoptive parents have often been, in the course of her memoir Jakiela realizes that her birth parents provide very little material through which to construct her identity. She has tried the genetic roots fantasy and found it unlivable—she is related to her birthmother's life primarily as someone who has escaped it. She has also escaped some of the limitations of her adoptive parents' lives; while she can honor what they gave her and put her efforts into the family she and her husband have created and into her writing, she can maintain relationships with some sane

people in her birth family and her working-class loyalties. The hope for her daughter's caterpillar's metamorphosis into a butterfly is significantly placed at the end of the memoir proper, while the last page of the epilogue is about Braddock, where her mother was a nurse and her father a mill worker and where they are buried.

Harding has a less self-doubting personal and professional identity. He never mentions in this book how he used his sense of being an outsider in writing a thoroughly researched and grippingly written book on refugees. He began the book assuming his birthmother was dead and wanting to write a brief tribute to her, knowing her life must have been difficult; he briefly thinks of what sort of life he might have had if she had kept him, based on the lives of his brothers: "I'd have been the father of five children (4.3 to be exact) conceived with two partners. I'd have left school at an early age" (p. 175). None of them sound like they believe in roots, he writes, adding, ironically, "this much we had in common" (p. 174). Clearly, he, like Jakiela, prefers his current life to that one; but at the same time, meeting Margaret provides him with new relationships entirely different from those he already has, structured as they are by class and professional expectations, and he values this discovery.

These two memoirists both go through a process of reconstructing themselves in the time portrayed in their memoirs, in which they revise what they think about their relationships to all of their parents, not choosing an identity based exclusively on either birth or adoption. Though John McLeod is writing about transcultural adoptee experience and theirs is transcultural only in their partly Irish ancestry and therefore much less visible, his conclusions about the multiplicity possible in adoptive being apply to them as well. While a recent summary says that the typical adoption memoir "valorizes origins and troubles the primacy of social construction" (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 255), many other adoption memoirs also emphasize "the construction of families out of something other than sheer biology" (Hipchen and Deans 2003, p. 166). Many conclude with the acknowledgment that both their adoptive and their birth families and ancestries have contributed to their identities (Homes 2007, p. 238; Strauss 2001, p. 201; McKinley 2002, p. 288). However, few adoptees put as much stress as Harding and Jakiela on the details of adoptive family life.

Part of the reason for this difference in stress is that relatively few adoptees write search memoirs soon after their adoptive parents are dead, though that is a time when many searches begin. While in some memoirs adoptive parents figure primarily in terms of their perceived lack of understanding, Jakiela and Harding move beyond this point, and both end their books paying tribute to three-dimensional people whom they love and miss. Harding began wanting to write a tribute to his birthmother, assuming she was dead, but in the process became so moved by what he found out about Maureen that he decided not to carry the story of his relation with Margaret further after he met her. And, for even stronger reasons than with his children, because she is alive he may also want to respect Margaret's privacy. Jakiela begins her narrative writing "When my real mother dies, I go looking for another one", mocking the idea of the adoptive mother as a substitute by framing her search for her birthmother as a search for a replacement for her dead adoptive mother. In her epilogue she says, "I've never met my birth mother. I could, but I don't need or want to any more" (p. 290). Even if her birthmother could relate to her with less hatred, her dead mother is irreplaceable.

Many adoptees tell stories that put more emphasis than these on an experience of finding their identity by finding their ancestry. However, Harding's and, especially, Jakiela's memoirs give a caution against seeing identity in purely biological terms that might well be heeded by more people than white same-race adoptees. Roberts (2011) reminds us of the complex interactions in which environment determines which genes are activated (p. 203) and writes, with regard to African Americans in particular, "defining identity in genetic terms creates a biological essentialism that is antithetical to the shared political values that should form the basis for unity . . . we have considerable freedom to decide how much importance to give our genetics, family history, and social relationships" (p. 255). With regard to the desire that African Americans might have to use genetic tests to find and connect with their relatives, either African or white, Alondra Nelson writes, "DNA can offer an avenue toward reconciliation, but cannot stand in for reconciliation: voice, acknowledgment, mourning,

forgiveness, and healing” (Nelson 2016, p. 164); this is also relevant to adoptees. In these memoirs, we see acknowledgment, reconciliation, mourning, forgiveness, and healing mostly on the part of the authors in relation to their adoptive parents, though there is some of each with regard to birth family in both of them.

Harding’s final discussion of his ancestry search story breaks down the distinction between adoptive and blood relationship: “The process that Margaret and I had begun turned into a second adoption . . . What mattered was to want to engage with another person, and to continue believing this was a good thing to do” (p. 176). With her birthmother, Jakiela can no longer believe that it is a good thing to do. Of her brother, who has his own place in her epilogue, she writes, “That I met him is its own miracle” (p. 221). She says of him, as she says of no one else, “We’ll high-five each other when we say or hear something true” (p. 289). But the last sentence of her epilogue is an ambiguous tribute to the steel works of Braddock, a tribute which resonates with what she has said about her parents’ love of her, the title, her continued working-class solidarity, and the power of wishful thinking: “People who are born here find it beautiful” (p. 291).

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