

ORPHAN TRAIN - TRAINED TALES

The 'Orphan Train Movement' occurred between the late 19th, and early 20th c., [1856-1930] when approximately 200 thousand 'orphans' from New York were placed out west by railroad to rural towns and farm communities in Michigan, Missouri, Oregon, Arkansas and Nebraska. In some scenarios, children found homes, in others, they served as farm and domestic labour. **1** Many of the children were not orphans but illegitimate and destitute children. **2** Record keeping of genealogical history was loose and in the spirit of modern day America —home of the self-made man— the relocated children were expected to start over in a new life and forget the past, with little or no contact with their biological families.

A need for secrecy was often warranted by the long illustrious stigma of bastardy. Today in Canada, adoptees' birth records are still sealed, even though the social stigma of illegitimacy is no longer as powerful. Canadian adoption laws are still structured onto an outdated framework despite numerous studies proving that an adoptee's psychological make-up is healthier knowing her/his dual history. Many countries, like New Zealand, Sweden, Israel, England, Scotland and the provinces of British Columbia and Newfoundland have successfully opened birth records to adoptees. Support groups of people from all sides of the adoption circle are currently providing a base for political action as they lobby to change adoption law.

THE BED BOX THEATRE

TRAINED TALE #1: Pretend as if.

ORPHAN TRAIN RIDERS — children who were placed out on trains — were sometimes encouraged to put on small performances at their many stop-overs, in order to attract an audience of potential parents. **3** This is telling because as the child is adopted, so the child can adopt certain performances. Rehearsing TRAINED TALES may play a part in the adoptee's identity development. However, the belief in certain myths supports the closed system of adoption. The performances are designed to be sensitive to the needs of a particular audience and so shift and slide in their improvisations.

Performative pretending. PRETEND AS IF you were born to your adoptive parents. PRETEND AS IF your birth parents do not exist. PRETEND AS IF the past does not matter.

Some adoptees frequently ADOPT the passive position of the fatalist. This can be attributed to the lack of control they feel they have in life.

“Whatever fate gives you, that’s what you’ve got.” **4**

They have had no choice in their relinquishment and little choice when attempting to retrieve their sealed genealogical or medical history. There is no control in the ‘passive’ Adoption Disclosure Registry — both the adoptee & the birthparent must be registered for there to be a match and subsequent search procedures can begin.

There is little control in an independent ‘active’ search process either. Working towards adoption reform can be a way for some adoptees to regain a sense of control over their lives.

THE BINGO STAIRCASE

TRAINED TALE #2: You were hatched.

Adoption has long been shrouded in secrecy. This has led to the fabrication of many fantasies for adoptees in order to cope with the unknown. An Immaculate Conception was a recurring fantasy as the father is scarcely mentioned in early adoption records. The unwed mother assumed all responsibility for her ‘shameful’ condition. The father was regularly known only by his initials: P.F. Putative Father. **5**

PUTATIVE; adj., Assumed to exist or to have existed.

As the unwed mother was seen as a ‘fallen woman’, so an adoptee could feel like s/he fell from the sky. There was also a common belief in young adoptees that they were ‘hatched’. **6** The buried subject of their biological heritage led them to believe that their lives started when they were adopted, instead of when they were born.

THE HOME FOR LITTLE WANDERERS

TRAINED TALE #3: You were chosen.

The name of a New England orphanage in the 1930’s — THE HOME FOR LITTLE WANDERERS **7** — echoes the sentimental rendering of the orphan’s plot in Dickensian literature. Likewise, the ORPHAN TRAIN MOVEMENT has been romanticized as an adventurous journey for orphans ‘gaining a new life in the pure rural environment of the honest farmer.’ The orphan was presented as ‘thrown into the world friendless,’ lost and wandering, in need of the saving grace of a good home. **8** Idealized language is used to mask the plight of orphans as the term WANDERERS offers up a romantic scenario far from the very real economic and social pressures which had women relinquishing their children to the care of others. In fact, even though some of the children in orphanages were indeed orphans — having no living relatives to care for them — a good many were simply

destitute or defined as ‘illegitimate’ for having been born outside of the institute of marriage. In Great Britain, many of the child migrants sent to Australia (1913-1968) as well as a great number of the 100,000 “home children” shipped to Canada (1869-1948) were not technical orphans, having at least one living parent. As well, here in Canada, many of Quebec’s ‘Duplessis orphans’ (1930-1950s) were not orphans but children of unmarried parents at a time when illegitimacy was seen as a great social burden.

IDEALIZED LANGUAGE also shaped reality for children adopted in the last century as the question “Where do babies come from?” brings up the adoption story. Many adoptive parents even today, tell their children Valentina Wasson’s classic children’s story, ‘The Chosen Baby’ (1939) **9** when attempting to explain how they came to them. The story begins with the adoption and glosses over the ugly fact of abandonment. This myth neglects the fact that a child was first unwanted to be ‘chosen.’ **10**

Yet again, the term UNWANTED is a loaded word that weighs heavily on the adoptee’s psyche. It is a term that may serve to reassure adoptive parents: a childless couple could gain comfort in the thought of ‘saving’ an abandoned, unwanted baby. While many babies were indeed put up for adoption because the parents did not want to parent, other babies were very much wanted — relinquished because of familial, social and financial pressures.

Parents telling their adopted children that they were CHOSEN conjures up the image of children being picked from rows upon rows of cribs in an orphanage setting ‘à la Oliver Twist’ for the adoptee. A more common scenario was how the Placement Agencies matched children to families: the sex, age, race, religion and physical appearance of the child was used to match them with prospective parents. The adoptive parents have little choice in the process. A child does not WANDER into a new home; they are placed out for economic and social reasons and to fill the needs of childless couples.

And so begins the fragmented adoption narrative. Adopted children piece their stories from many sources: a chance remark, overheard conversations, and their own fantasies. Images of being conceived in a filing cabinet, grown in a cabbage patch, carried by a stork, plucked from a row of cribs, saved from the gutter, abducted from royalty, or selected from a furniture store display, abound in adoptees’ imagination. All of these fantasies involve the child being chosen for their unique qualities. It is disillusioning to find out that often, there is little choice in adoption for any of the involved parties.

THE DRESSER AND THE CLOSET
TRAINED TALE #4: You look like yourself.

An unknown medical history is like a SKELETON IN THE CLOSET, something that must be hidden. There is shame at replying a mumbled, weak: “I know nothing (...)” to a doctor’s insistent questions. The skeleton is but a pile of jumbled bones; some are missing and you are not sure which bone connects to which socket.

To not see your face reflected in family members can be an alienating experience: a generational rift. The double in the MIRROR is a stranger. Faces — and especially intimates — are scanned almost immediately for the telltale features which mark them as possible kin.

There are empty DRESSER DRAWERS in the adoptee’s identity construct, to be filled with imaginings, daydreams & fantasy figures in an attempt to make whole a spotty genealogical history. This identity formation is precarious — to embark on a ‘search’ to retrieve a missing part of the self, adoptees risk that they will also lose that vital part which is based on fantasy. When the imaginary is a crucial component of her/his early structuring of identity, to dismantle the fantasy can dismantle the self. **11**

The adoptee can learn early how to split in two; the part that wants to know more (the bad adoptee) is CLOSETED by the part that does not want to stir up the past or hurt their adoptive family (the good adoptee).

THE BAD BLOOD AND GHOSTLIMBS GRAVEYARD TRAINED TALE #5: Forget the Past.

The old fear of adopting a child of BAD BLOOD is still a real scenario. Blood is suspect — a carrier of what unknown entities? Madness, psychosis and promiscuity floating in globular platelets. Disease.

Yes, the child is bound to have bad blood: a clotted bloodline, a pool of congealed lineage, the flow from past to present to future having been stayed. When you amputate a limb, the presence of that limb is still felt, a ghost presence, and a felt absence. There is also an over-idealization of that missing limb. In the closed system of adoption, a part of the adoptee is cut-off, amputated, and so s/he mourns a ghost parent. A HEREDITARY GHOST also haunts the adoptee: with little or no knowledge of her/his genealogical history, there is no way of knowing what can be PASSED ON to the next generation. Or still, what has been passed on already? **12**

With today’s medicine relying on genealogical patterns to diagnose and treat certain hereditary disease, starting a family presents a whole new crop of anxieties and fear for the adoptee with only guesswork and incomplete stories about their medical history. As the birth mother is supposed to pretend as if she

never had a child, the adoptee is expected to enact the same scenario. Dead to each other. There is no formalized ritual for the mourning of a person you never met or have known as 'real'. It is an unrecognized loss. Buried.

We are told that a GOOD ADOPTEE does not dig up the past. Will he/she have the courage to stir up the past in an attempt to face the future?

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Notes:

1 THE ORPHAN TRAINS - PLACING OUT IN AMERICA, Marilyn Irving Holt, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln & London, 1992 (p.31-32)

2 Ibid (p.24)

3 THE ORPHAN TRAINS - PLACING OUT IN AMERICA, Marilyn Irving Holt, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln & London, 1992 (p.49)

4 Ibid (p.182)

5 GONE TO AN AUNT'S — REMEMBERING CANADA'S HOME FOR UNWED MOTHERS, Anne Petrie, McClelland & Stewart Inc.: Toronto, 1998 (p.113)

6 THE STRANGER WHO BORE ME — ADOPTEE & BIRTHMOTHER RELATIONSHIPS, Karen March, University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1995 (p.33)

7 THE HOME FOR LITTLE WANDERERS, (Boston, Massachusetts, USA) existe encore aujourd'hui sous un mandat différent car l'organisme a changé d'une manière dramatique depuis sa fondation en 1799. C'est la plus ancienne et la plus grande agence du bien-être d'enfants sans-but-lucratif en Nouvelle Angleterre.

8 THE ORPHAN TRAINS - PLACING OUT IN AMERICA, Marilyn Irving Holt, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln & London, 1992 (p.58)

9 THE CHOSEN BABY, Valentina P. Wasson, 1939.

10 PSYCHOLOGY OF ADOPTION, Ed. by David. M. Brodzinky & Marshall D. Schechter Oxford University Press: New York, 1990 (p.45)

11 JOURNEY OF THE ADOPTED SELF - A QUEST FOR WHOLENESS, Betty Jean Lifton, Basic Books: New York, 1994 (p.162)

12 IN SEARCH OF ORIGINS, John Triseliotis, Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1973 (p.116)

TRAINED TALES

Through the website and the exposition of the Orphan Train installation, I present my own views on adoption, coloured by my experience as a reunited adoptee. I would like to get feedback, hear differing opinions and collect stories about people's experience with adoption.

An important aspect of the project is the interactive element: the public is invited to contribute their own TRAINED TALES about adoption.

You can contact me:

1. by E-mail: julie@cuckoografik.org
2. or by filling out an on-line form:

www.cuckoografik.org/trained_tales/

Thank-you for participating!
Julie Lapalme