

# One Reading from an Adopted Position

Until we can understand the assumptions  
in which we are drenched we cannot know  
ourselves.

—*Adrienne Rich*

How do we get our ideas about what adoption means? Whether we grew up in an adoptive family, adopted children ourselves, relinquished them for adoption, know people who did any of these things, or not, we live in a world in which adoption is represented in film, theater, literature, television, and other media. People not personally involved with adoption may form their main impressions from these sources, unless they have friends who discuss adoption openly. Even people who are personally involved may find themselves interpreting their own experiences in terms of adoption plots well known in their culture. Those plots loomed heavily over me as I grew up in the 1950s and later, an adoptee not supposed to discuss adoption, and knowing no one who spoke of it.

In her recent book *But Enough about Me*, Nancy Miller discusses the interplay of identification and disidentification she feels when she reads memoirs.<sup>1</sup> This book grows out of a similar interplay I feel when reading literature dealing with adoption.

Most of the adoptees in canonical literature, fairy tales, and folklore, find their identity in meeting their birth parents. In the story of Oedipus, for example, a man discovers that he was born to a different set of parents than the ones he knows. He has unwittingly killed the man who begot him and married the woman who gave birth to him. After this discovery the parents who raised him no longer matter. Shakespeare's play *Winter's Tale* is less famous and has a happier ending, but it also shows the adoptee leaving the adoptive family behind after meeting

birth parents. These plays have rarely been discussed in terms of adoption, but how much did the cultural knowledge of their plots, and similar ones, contribute to the fear of many adoptive parents that their family won't survive contact between adoptee and birth family, and indirectly to the laws sealing adoptees' birth records? Or, in the case of *The Winter's Tale*, encourage the dreams of adoptees that meeting their birth family will tell them who they are?

Once I identified with these plots. For years I believed that my adoption had barred me from the people who would understand me most. Now I both identify and disidentify. In fact, finding my birth mother made me appreciate my adoptive mother more and see what I learned from her, though I also find my relationship with my birth mother valuable. And though my birth father is probably a happier and more successful man than my adoptive father was, and though he looks like me, I negotiate my life knowing that he has closed the door to a meeting or relationship.

According to the language used in folklore, most popular speech, and most literature up until recent times, I have now found my real mother and been rejected by my real father. But that is not what it feels like. I need to use different language, and so does our culture. This is why terms like *birth mother* and *birth father* have been invented.

Being adopted is a passive situation. Looking for birth parents, by contrast, is a choice. And so is deciding not to look, when it is indeed a decision and not the default result of sealed records and family discomfort. But what the adoptee finds out about them, or experiences, if lucky enough, in meeting with them, provides another situation of choice, though not a unilateral choice in a vacuum. How much, and in what way, can the adoptee identify with them? How much will they become an active part of the adoptee's life? How does knowing them affect how the adoptee sees or relates to the adoptive family? Where does the search belong in the adoptee's narrative of her (or his, but many more searchers are female) life story? By juxtaposing my story with the literary narratives, I want to emphasize the roles of narrative and choice in self-construction, and also to suggest something of the great range in the possibilities for adoption plots.

This is a book I wish I could have read when I was younger, and a book I wish my literature teachers in high school, college, and even graduate school could have referred to when teaching literature dealing with adoption. It is, for one thing, a book through which I hope to mit-

igate for other people the aloneness that some still find a part of living in an adoption plot (whichever role in it they play), the aloneness that I felt in my childhood because it was such an unmentionable topic. “Other people won’t understand,” said my mother when she told me, at age five, that she and my father had adopted me. I was given up so that I could be better taken care of, I was chosen, but I shouldn’t tell others. Our family was different from others in how it was formed, and I was different from other people, and if I wasn’t allowed to talk about them, these couldn’t really be good kinds of difference. I hardly ever broke that rule before I was twenty, and for years after that I still thought of revealing I was adopted as a special gesture of intimacy, like taking off my clothes in someone’s presence.

Adoption practices have changed in many ways since my childhood, but there are still many people uncomfortable about the adoption in their life story. One kind of evidence of this discomfort on the part of some adoptive parents is the fear of adoptees’ contact with birth parents, which contributes to the practice of sealing records. In this book I hope to diminish this fear by analyzing some of the literature that has transmitted it. I think this book can, in many other ways, help adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents to understand their lives. I also want to present literary examples as equipment for thinking about adoptive family construction and adoptee identity in a way that could be useful to people considering any kind of family construction or identity.

An analogy may be useful. Since the 1960s, feminist critics have pointed out that many literary plots identified women’s destiny as either marriage or death, that many fairy tales encouraged little girls to look forward mainly to a happy ending with Prince Charming. These plots were part of a cultural pressure that channeled most female expectations into a single track. However, some writers began to turn aside from these plots as other possibilities opened up for women. While factors such as economics were undoubtedly influential as well, writers both influenced, and were influenced by, different female behavior. At the same time, other feminist criticism looked back at the literature of the past to find moments of possibility among its confining narratives for women.

In this book I discuss adoption literature in an analogous spirit. Using adoption as a lens, I see patterns previously unnoticed. I point to adoption plots that have been the dominant cultural influence, but also to elements in literary works that complicate them. I point to works

that deliberately rewrite such traditional plots, indicating possibilities for new life stories. And I occasionally tell how my own life influences my reaction to literature, sensitizing me to the fictionality of certain plot elements, such as the search that ends with finding true identity in one's birth family.

## Truth and Fiction, Reality and Pretense

This book is about how adoption has been treated fictionally, in novels and plays. But it is also about the contrast between, on the one hand, considering adoption itself as a fiction in the sense of pretense, or constructing it as something that should imitate the traditional biological family as closely as possible in appearance, in the so-called "as-if" family, and, on the other hand, considering it as a different but valid way of constructing a parent-child relationship.

Truth and fiction, reality and pretense—these oppositions are impossible to escape in considering the literary and historical treatment of adoption. Not only does literature sometimes use the term *real parents*, but also adoption has repeatedly been called a fiction of parenthood. The classic use of this term in analyzing adoption is in Henry J. S. Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861). This book is distinctive for the view that "without the Fiction of Adoption which permits the family tie to be artificially created, it is difficult to understand how society would ever have escaped from its swaddling clothes and taken its first steps toward civilization."<sup>2</sup> In the late twentieth century, the anthropologist Judith Modell quotes Maine as an example of how established is the psychologically somewhat self-contradictory view that adoption is a fiction, the biological family is the reality, and the two should be regarded as legally and socially identical: "'We must try to regard the fiction of adoption as so closely simulating the reality of kinship that neither law nor opinion makes the slightest difference between a real and an adoptive connection.' No one doubted, then or now, that the 'real connection' was the genealogical connection."<sup>3</sup>

Adoption plots often move toward an end that defines what is to be considered the true family of the central character. The longer literary tradition is behind the idea that adoption is a fiction and the biological family is real, as in the Oedipus story and *Winter's Tale*. But in novels such as George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*,

Lucy Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, the ending is the confirmation of adoptive parenthood. *Silas Marner* and *The Bean Trees* make very explicit points of defining parenthood by behavior rather than by biology. The move toward acceptance of nontraditional parenthood in these novels parallels the argument made by many anthropologists today that, rather than distinguishing fictive from authentic kinship, we should say that all kinds of kinship are fictive, because all institutions are constructed by social agreement.<sup>4</sup> But *Silas Marner* and *The Bean Trees* present the redefinition of parenthood as not a conclusion arrived at by retheorized scholarship but as an emotional victory for characters marginalized in their societies.

In my childhood, during the postwar baby boom and era of assimilation of the 1950s, the association of adoption with pretense was at its height. A friend of my mother's wore a series of differently sized pillows when she was in the process of adopting a baby, so that everyone would think she was pregnant.<sup>5</sup> This was the exaggeration of the "as-if" model, which dictated that adoptive parents should be a heterosexual couple of the right age to conceive the children they adopt, with some physical similarity to them. I was adopted according to this model. Still, I would never consider my mother just a pretend mother.

In the homes of most adoptive families and their friends, it is obvious that adoptive parenthood is real to anyone who uses that word. However, many people still call birth parents "real parents." For part of our society, parenthood has been redefined to focus on behavior rather than on biology; part cling to an older definition, and others would say that the redefinition should be expanded to include the possibility that a child can have more than two parents. The United States today is divided in its understanding of motherhood, fatherhood, parenthood, and corresponding issues of family, kinship, and identity.

## Custody Battles and Adoption Plots

That division was particularly evident in 1993, when a two-year-old girl known as both Jessica DeBoer and Anna Schmidt was the center of a custody battle between the DeBoers, who had raised her and wanted to adopt her, and the Schmidts, her genetic parents, to whom she has now been returned. In this case, Jessica/Anna's birth father, Dan Schmidt,

had not been informed of his parentage, and so was not given a choice about her relinquishment for adoption. After her birth mother, Cara, told him the child was his, and they got married, the Schmidts sued the DeBoers for custody. In the extensive media coverage, which involved both a *Newsweek* cover story and a long article in the *New Yorker*, many writers reflected not just on this case but on other adoptions that the authors experienced or observed.<sup>6</sup> It was in this year, not just because of this case but partly because of the public interest it revealed, that I decided to try to bring into this conversation the literary history of adoption, as I read it in relation to my own life.

Jessica/Anna's contested parenthood resembles in some ways the situation at the heart of novels by George Eliot and Barbara Kingsolver that I will discuss later in this book. Both emphasis on parental behavior and emphasis on heredity have a long history, and have changed their forms at times during that history.<sup>7</sup> Janet Beizer has argued that today the increased emphasis on genealogy in the United States (the second most popular hobby and the second most searched-for subject on the web) is a reaction to the increase in adoptive and other nontraditional families.<sup>8</sup> Each view of parenthood has left its trace in literature dealing with adoption, which then reinforces that view and its social, political, and psychological effects.

Adoption has figured importantly in literature for a number of reasons. Adoption plots—like contested custody cases—dramatize cultural tensions about definitions of family and the importance of heredity. Representing adoption is a way of thinking about the family, exploring what a family is, that is at the same time a way of thinking about the self, exploring distance from the family. As Freud discussed in his theory of the family romance, for most people—nonadopted people—the fantasy of discovering that they were adopted and can be reunited with a different family elsewhere is a way of dealing with negative feelings about their parents.<sup>9</sup> So is the fantasy that they are orphans who are happily adopted by someone else. And so is the fantasy that they are outsiders who belong in no family at all. Adoption narratives can also help consider family issues from a parent's perspective. I have a daughter (by birth and nurture) who is very different from me. Liz is a risk-taking athlete, and I am a physically cautious scholar. I barely glanced at the sports pages before she was in them. In a novel that focuses on an adoptive mother's difficulties in dealing with a child from a different culture, I see a reflection of my life with my teenager.

European and American culture has typically used three mythic stories to imagine adoption: the disastrous adoption and search for birth parents, as in *Oedipus*, the happy reunion, as in *Winter's Tale*, and the happy adoption, as in *Silas Marner*.<sup>10</sup> These stories are myths, even though they conflict, because they act as paradigms to shape feelings, thoughts, language, and even laws about adoption, and to reflect deep cultural beliefs about family. In the two versions of the search story, the birth parents are clearly the “real parents.” In the happy adoption story, the birth parents may exist in memory, but no matter how important this memory is, as in *Oliver Twist*, it does not constitute a living complication to the reconstructed family.<sup>11</sup> What all three have in common is the assumption that a child has, in effect, only one set of parents. To many readers, this will still seem like an inevitable axiom. But for others it is not so obvious. These narratives provide conflicting interpretations of the DeBoer/Schmidt story, my own story, and other stories of adoption. For Jessica/Anna, for me, and for many others, all three narratives are inadequate.<sup>12</sup>

Although these are the dominant paradigms through which our culture has tried to imagine adoption, much literature complicates them considerably, as this book will show. Even the works I mention have more dimensions to their analyses of adoption. Some texts follow these dominant plots; others, however, look at them obliquely, examine their cost, follow their characters after their supposed end, or play off against readers' expectations, explicitly dramatizing deviation from them. One of the purposes of the book, indeed, is to emphasize how much variety is possible in imagining adoption, even though many of the same conflicts recur in different contexts.

Orphanhood in literature has been discussed much more than adoption in literature.<sup>13</sup> Many people associate adoption with orphans—and indeed Jean Paton, the first U.S. author to write about searching as an adoptee activist, named her organization and her book *Orphan Voyage*.<sup>14</sup> But there is a significant difference between the conditions of adoption and orphanhood, and adoption today is usually not the adoption of orphans. Though adoptees have often been told that their parents are dead, typically they do have other parents alive in addition to the adoptive parents. The law of most states in the United States, however, tries to make the birth parents not legally dead but nonexistent in relation to the child by erasing their names from the birth certificate once the adoption is final, and then preventing even the adult adoptee

from learning about them.<sup>15</sup> The extreme denial of the birth parents' existence here sometimes represents an attempt to fend off one of the myths of adoption—to make it impossible to find out that this child has the curse of illegitimacy. However, today it may be even more significant as an attempt to keep in place the family boundaries established by the adoption process: to assure that the adoptive family doesn't lose a child, and that the birth parents don't experience the return of one that doesn't fit into their current families.

But as the DeBoer/Schmidt case shows, law and popular culture are internally divided on the issue of which are the rightful parents, and this division, which parallels contradictions surrounding other recent reproductive and familial trends, emphasizes reasons to question cultural definitions of parenthood. Is parenthood defined by genetics? By gestation and childbirth? By the work of child care? By fighting to have, keep, or reclaim a child? By not fighting if it might hurt the child, as in the judgment of Solomon? By the child's best interest as defined by a court? By the meaning those involved give to their biological link or child care? By the child's preference? According to any of these definitions but the first two, a child may have two "real" mothers and two "real" fathers, or if adopted by a gay couple, three mothers and one father or the reverse.<sup>16</sup>

The public conflict over Jessica/Anna, who was born before the Schmidts were married, was possible partly because of the decline of the mythic curse of illegitimacy. Partly because of the decreasing stigma of birth out of wedlock, and partly for other reasons traced by Rickie Solinger in *Wake Up Little Susie*, there is now somewhat less popular foreboding about the character of a child so born, whether raised out of wedlock or adopted.<sup>17</sup> But the Schmidt/DeBoer conflict also dramatizes the failure of the two happy-ending myths. Jessica/Anna was not an orphan whose adoption provided a family-less child with a home. On the other hand, she did not immediately recognize her birth parents by an instinct of blood and happily join them without protest.

The case of Jessica/Anna drew so much attention because it focused so many key problems in current adoption policy. It was a kind of Rorschach test in which many people with very different kinds of experiences of adoption nevertheless identified with the contested child or one set of parents, and used the conflict as a jumping off point to write about their lives in newspaper columns and letters to the editor. It was a stark example of a situation where a plausible argument can be made

for each set of parents to have custody, depending, on one side, on genetics and the mother's experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and loss, and, on the other side, on the child's experience of care in infancy. It exemplifies the economic imbalance that typifies adoption in our society and many others: most often birth parents have more economic difficulties than parents seeking to adopt; therefore, if the best interest of the child is seen in terms of economics, adoptive parents will usually have an advantage. It evokes the typical association of the birth mother with illicit sexuality: for Cara and Dan Schmidt to seek custody, they had to make public Cara's sexual history to explain why she put another man's name on the original birth certificate, an act that prevented asking Dan about custody at the time. It raises the question of how much time ought to be given the birth mother to make decisions about giving up custody after birth, since the speed with which Cara was pressured on this was part of her case against the DeBoers.

The one belief the Schmidts and the DeBoers seem to have held in common was that parenthood involves absolute rights of possession over a child and that a child, therefore, cannot possibly have more than one set of parents. This is a belief that they share with the legal system of most of the United States. It is the belief of many other Western countries—but it is not the belief of all cultures, and not all cultures maintain it in the same degree at all times. Even countries as similar to the United States as Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia allow adoptees, at least in adulthood, to see their original birth certificates. This position is still consistent with the belief that the adoptee while a child belongs only to the adoptive parents but nevertheless needs information about birth parents. The most radical position, practiced in Polynesia and Micronesia—that parental nurture does not entail exclusive ownership—is now being developed by a few adoptive parents, scholars, and theorists such as Janet Beizer, Judith Modell, Drucilla Cornell, and Mary Lyndon Shanley, and occasional courts and individuals that award or work out shared parenting. Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*, we shall see toward the conclusion of this book, ends with this model. Many more families than these now have a less radical kind of open adoption in which it is clear that the adoptive parents have authority over the child, but one or more birth parents have a place in the extended family in a position comparable to that of aunt or uncle. I will return to discussion of open adoptions and their implications for kinship later in this introduction.

## Parentage

Unlike Jessica/Anna, I met my birth mother as an adult through my own choice. My adoptive mother had saved the papers with my original name on them, and when reunion stories were beginning to appear in newspapers and I was, in my late twenties, finally talking about the issue, she gave me the papers. This enabled me to get my original birth certificate and write a cautious, guarded letter to my birth mother asking about her parents. I sent it to the address listed on the birth certificate. A neighbor forwarded the letter to her current address, and she wrote back, “You must be my daughter. I’d like to hear from you.” She couldn’t travel and was unsure about where we could meet (what other people would she have to tell?), but after six months of correspondence and occasional phone calls, I took two planes and visited Geraldine at her home.

Meeting her was a happy event. She is a kind person and a loving one, and brave enough to tell her family, her minister, and some friends about me—no small matter in her setting. However, I was struck more by our differences than by our similarities. After giving me up for adoption, she had married and had seven sons. The demands of raising them had left her little energy, apparently, for any interests outside of fundamentalist religion. To count our interest in religion as a similarity I would have had to elide the difference between her conservative evangelical Church of God and my liberal ecumenical-minded Catholicism. (At a meeting of the American Adoption Congress, someone tried to persuade me that having strong views about religion and politics—though on opposite sides—is having something in common. It doesn’t feel that way.) She is fair and I am dark. You could see a similarity in the way our hair falls if it happens to be cut the same length. The space between her front teeth is the way mine used to be, and, alas, we both have a tendency to depression and are not good at housekeeping. What sort of interests did she have before life wore her out? She did win an art contest, she told me, but that has little resonance with any of my talents. Meeting her was important to me, but it did not really tell me who I am.

Meeting Geraldine gave me a new appreciation of my adoptive mother and of the advantages that she had and could give me partly because of her temperament. Twelve years older, Dorothy had much more energy. She could take a three-hour bus ride to visit me, while Geraldine was tired walking around the block. Neither one had gone to

college immediately after high school: Dorothy was the daughter of a printer and Geraldine was the daughter of an accountant, so Dorothy's class wasn't higher than Geraldine's to start with, but she had worked before and during the Depression of the 1930s to put her brothers and my adoptive father through college, and then put him through medical school. When I was older, she gave music lessons in the neighborhood, got a high school equivalency diploma, and began evening college (a very unusual thing for a woman of her age to do at that time). She survived and outlasted an increasingly difficult marriage, lived on her own for more than ten years, mostly teaching kindergarten in a Catholic school and continuing those college courses, and was, when I met Geraldine, preparing to marry again. She had passed on to me her desire for education, her active religion, some of her interest in music, and a general (if often naive) enthusiasm for high and middle-brow culture. We both sometimes thought my graduate school education put me in a world different from hers, but once I met Geraldine, it seemed that Dorothy and I were really in the same world after all, by contrast with the world of small-town fundamentalism.

But Dorothy was not without her biases. She had told me about my English, German, and Norwegian nationality, as we then called it, not telling me that was just on one side. It was only when I was out of graduate school, teaching at the University of Pittsburgh, and with a psychiatrist talking about adoption for almost the first time, that she mentioned, seemingly accidentally, my biological father's Jewishness. I had gone through grade school, high school, and college in schools where the students and faculty were virtually all Catholic, and there were no Jews in any of our neighborhoods in Cleveland's West Side suburbs. But in graduate school I had made Jewish friends for the first time, and by the time I was teaching in Pittsburgh my mother had met some of them. This may have contributed to the emergence of her memory about my ancestry.

My birth father's name—I'll call him Murray, though that's not it—was on my birth certificate. When they met, he in his late teens and Geraldine a naive twenty-six, they were both in the service, in Virginia. After her time in an unwed mothers' home and his in a POW camp in Germany, they went back to their previous neighborhoods half a continent apart. A few months after I met Geraldine, Murray answered the second letter I wrote him seeking contact. What he sent was not a letter but a newspaper article about himself (how I learned about the POW

camp), complete with photo. At least in terms of coloring and height, I look more like him. We have the same dark hair and eyes and dark circles under our eyes, and maybe even similar scrawly handwriting, assuming he addressed the envelope. He was then (1978) running for a political office, portraying the incumbent as soft on crime. I imagined he feared an Ibsenesque scenario in which an opponent (or perhaps I myself!) would discover and expose my relation to him, and did not proceed further. He lost anyway. According to the newspaper, he had had a certain amount of success as a lawyer, helped start a community center, and was active in the Free Soviet Jewry movement. He had three children, then teenagers, and a wife who for a long time had been in partnership with him as a lawyer.

I tried a few more letters, with no response. Many years later, after I sent one very guarded letter about doing research, not mentioning my relation to him at all, he called back, but hung up when he realized who I was. Once when I happened to be in his city, I found his name on the building directory, though he had retired. I went up to his floor and knocked on the door to borrow the rest room key. A dark-haired young man—my brother?—seemed to be packing things up.

Should I have tried harder to meet Murray? This man who, the article suggested, would probably agree with me on little socially and politically and didn't want contact? Someone could say once again, "You both care about politics and religion." Cold comfort. More relevant, though, may be memories of my dear uncle Dan, a man sometimes seemingly obsessed with the need to punish criminals, but also a charmer who got me interested in opera and poetry and the Greek classics at a young age. But Murray wouldn't have been a charmer to me.

I have inherited his appearance, more than anyone else's (some people have thought me Jewish, though others have thought me Italian), and one could argue that his legal career and my career as a literary critic and teacher involve similar interests in language and argument. The newspaper article credits him with knowing Russian, French, Spanish, and Yiddish. I was thought to be good at learning languages as a child, though I haven't kept it up much, and I could see my linguistic ability as inherited—but who knows if the newspaper isn't exaggerating his skill, anyway? He does sound more successful at life than Frank, my adoptive father, who was president of Kiwanis in our Cleveland suburb when I was seven, but then had a serious heart attack, cut back his medical practice, and became the distant, depressive man I remember. I

thought of Murray sometimes when my daughter worked on her high school mock trial team, but not enough to send him another letter sure to be unanswered. I have, however, looked for mentions of him on the World Wide Web, and there are some recent enough to assure me that he is probably still alive.

Many autobiographies by adoptees, like some fictional works I shall discuss, present the discovery of biological parents as the key to the adoptee's identity. Indeed, such autobiographies were important in developing the adoptee rights movement, and short versions of such stories and similar rhetoric fill the newsletters of many search and support groups.<sup>18</sup> The meeting with my birth mother, and the information about my birth father, were important to me, but did not tell me who I am. Thus, while I advocate open records and the right to search, in this book I critically analyze myths in fictional treatments of search and discovery. I want, for example, to point out erasures of adoptive parents, and fantasies of mirroring between adoptee and birth parents. Yes, I know that adoptees often find birth parents who look more like them than my birth mother looks like me, but even that is still not the absolute mirroring that some literature imagines. Yet on a listserv I recently found an offer to adoptees to reconstruct their unknown mother's face from a picture of the adoptee.<sup>19</sup>

But I also want to point out fantasies of ideal harmony between adoptive parent and child, and erasure of birth parents. I want to explore the variety of ways that literature constructs the adoptee's identity, the dominant elements in each work as well as submerged ones, hints at across-the-grain possibilities. And I want to suggest that adoptees' experiences differ so much among themselves that there are some not yet represented in literature at all.

## Ethnicity and Religion

Many adoptees who lack information about their birth parents feel the lack of knowledge about their ethnicity as an important aspect of their deprivation. Sociologists developed the concept of ethnicity as a way of getting away from biology and race, but in discussions of ethnicity by adoptees (and other people as well) assumptions about biological transmission frequently emerge. Barbara Katz Rothman points out that a standard definition of "ethnic group" is "a group with a common cul-

tural tradition and a sense of identity which exists as a subgroup of a larger society,” but also that “to the extent that ethnicity leads people to marry and to procreate more within than outside of ethnic groups, it lives on in the body.”<sup>20</sup> Unless child and family are matched with remarkable precision, the ethnicity that lives on the adoptee’s body may be very different from that which predominates in the subgroup in which they grow up, though in America today fewer and fewer people live in subgroups characterized by ethnicity.

I had some information about my birth parents’ ethnicity early in my life, and I now know much of the rest of that story. My mother’s withholding of my birth father’s Jewishness from me is one of the silences in my childhood and young adulthood that I regret, though I have no idea how I would have dealt with the information at that time. Several other adoptee narratives I have read (and other autobiographies as well) tell similar stories; these silences are effects of our culture’s deeply rooted anti-Semitism, analogous to silences about black ancestry.<sup>21</sup> It was important that I finally found out the truth, and yet this truth did not provide a simple message of how or whether, given this ancestry, I should redefine myself. I will discuss this problem further in my George Eliot chapter when dealing with *Daniel Deronda*, her novel about a character in a somewhat analogous situation.

I grew up the only child in a family that was mixed ethnically, religiously, and in appearance—my mother was fair and my father was dark; my mother was Irish, English, and German and my father was Czech. My mother was Catholic, but her mother was Protestant; my father was a nonpracticing Protestant, but his mother had been Catholic long ago. I was conceived by parents who were also ethnically and religiously mixed—also a fair mother and a dark father. My placement was probably an example of the matching between adoptee and adoptive parents that was prized in adoptions in the 1940s. Frank’s partner in his medical practice took care of the Florence Crittenton Home in Cleveland (one of a national network for unwed mothers) and helped with the placement, perhaps expecting that whichever biological parent I looked like, there would be some resemblance to one of my adoptive parents. It may also be relevant that adoption matches were ordinarily made by religion, and someone from a mixed couple, or a mixed couple trying to adopt, might fall through the cracks if they were not grouped together. Or maybe I was just the first girl to come along at the right

time—my father’s partner had considered adopting me himself, and, with two girls already in his family, chose a boy instead.

But in spite of his willingness to adopt me, Frank was at least mildly anti-Semitic. I remember a group conversation when I was quite young in which this nonreligious man, said, apparently out of nowhere, “I don’t understand why the Jews didn’t accept Christ.” I imagine my mother stopping him from going further. Long after his death, his partner’s daughter gave me a thank-you letter my father had written him when I was a baby, in which he joked that, because he had adopted me, he must be kosher, and remarked on my intelligence. Were it not for the “kosher” remark, I might think how lovely for my father to be seeing me as intelligent from the beginning. But since intelligence is part of the classic ambivalent anti-Semitic image of Jews, I wonder how complicated it was for him later when it was clear that I was doing very well indeed in school.

Mostly, ethnicity didn’t seem very important in my childhood family. After all, in the 1950s and early 1960s the melting pot was really supposed to melt. A girl I met on a summer job in high school tried me out in a game in which you pick three words to identify yourself. What I said was “Marianne Novy, American, Catholic.” (She said that most people she asked began, “I’m a girl.”) My father, whose parents had emigrated from Czechoslovakia together long before, did not belong to any group based on being Czech, and had no Czech friends, to my knowledge. (Did he have friends of any kind?) Our one Czech neighbor was someone my mother, not my father, had known as a child. My mother’s mother was German; Dorothy told me that her father emphasized being Irish (though he was, she thought, half English), but she didn’t explain behavior by “nationality” nearly as much as she said, for example, “Boys will be boys.” (As I look back, I realize that her two closest friends were German and Irish-German, but it is probably more relevant that they were both adoptive mothers, one of orphaned nephews and one after giving birth twice.) If I was asked about my nationality I said, “Czechoslovakian, from Bohemia, English, Irish, German,” that is, if anybody let me say all of that without going on to the next person in line. However, I had very little sense of particular traditions associated with any of these groups, except for St. Patrick’s Day, celebrated enthusiastically and nonexclusively at my Catholic grade and high schools and college.

I both did and did not believe that the combination of my parents' nationalities I have just listed was mine. On one hand, I thought of Frank and Dorothy as my parents, not as my adoptive parents, and so in some way I thought of their nationalities as mine. On the other hand, I did not then have the concept of cultural transmission. My adoption was supposed to be a secret; my mother told me I was English, German, and Norwegian, and that was supposed to be a secret as well. So claiming the nationalities of my adoptive parents was part of the act of covering up the differences in our family, and I do mean act. (I remember telling someone that I was supposed to look like my father and act like my mother: I meant that "supposed to" in a more literal way than the hearer probably thought.)

As far as I can tell, my only parent with a strong ethnic identification—considering Jewishness here as an ethnicity (I don't know what country his ancestors were from; later I will consider Judaism as a religion)—is the one I have never met, who does not want to meet me.

Perhaps this is the consequence of the opposition between adoption (especially as it was practiced in the 1940s and 1950s) and the predominant popular construction of ethnic consciousness, which does emphasize "blood" and heredity rather than cultural transmission. Presumably it was partly because of his valuation of Jewish heredity that Murray did not want to marry Geraldine in the first place, thereby making it difficult for her to keep me (though it was probably even more because he never really cared much for her), and it is partly because of his valuation of Jewish heredity—transmitted according to Orthodox law through the mother—that he now feels little connection with me, the daughter of a gentile. On the other hand, it was partly because of my adoptive parents' comparative lack of ethnic identification that they could adopt a child whose heredity was different from their own.

Although I value multiculturalism as an ideal, I am ambivalent about ethnicity and uncomfortable with folk associations between ethnicity and personal characteristics transmitted by genetics. Perhaps it's partly because of my realization that what I learned further about my ethnicity didn't really tell me much about myself, though it did tell me more about my history. When I was asked to fill out my daughter's nationality on a form for one summer camp, I wrote, with a sense of irony, "European-American." The space on the form was not big enough to list all the ethnicities that might be relevant; furthermore, we

had just returned from visiting Germany, the Czech Republic, and Austria (the home of my husband's grandmother). The ethnic subgroups in both my biological and adoptive families are all white; my adoptive parents' comparative lack of ethnic identification could be reframed as white ethnic identity in opposition to the racial other. But identity as white simply because not black or Asian is not the kind of identity I want.

If ethnic identification was limited in importance in my adoptive family, religious identification was very important. I was raised in Dorothy's Catholic religion, which was always much more attractive to me than Frank's position of being a nonpracticing Protestant—she was a warm, generous, lively person, he was solitary and irritable, and the nuns at school liked me. I went to a Catholic college during the opening up of the Second Vatican Council, and my religion evolved into an ecumenical left-wing Catholicism with a concern for social justice. About the time I began working on this project, my parish was dissolved for lack of membership and my admired pastor was exiled, or so it seemed, to a rural church in the hinterlands, and after a year of exploring others, I began to participate regularly in an Episcopal parish nearby.

My birth mother's Church of God has little appeal to me. Judaism—the term to use now considering it as a religion—has more. If my birth father had acted differently, if my best Jewish friend were not a Unitarian, it might have been a more important issue in redefining my identity, fighting more actively with the Christianity that feels so much a part of me. Upon reading Adrienne Rich's essay "Split at the Root," about her experience of reclaiming a Jewish identity in midlife, I was startled to discover that only her father was Jewish.<sup>22</sup> But he was her father in a much fuller sense than Murray is mine. Reclaiming her Jewishness gave her connections with her family in a way it could not for me. For her it replaced a Christianity that was merely a social form. Not so for me. Like many in the nonevangelical tradition, I am not comfortable talking or writing about my religious beliefs, but for all my secular behavior, my Christianity links universal human dignity, inclusion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope, which are my ideals, with the message of Christ, and I feel passionate about this linkage. I know that many people find something similar in Judaism and others in other religions and in humanism, and I also know that the institutional Christian churches have often gone against this message. Fortunately, at this

point in history, I can affirm that the religious tradition of Christianity is more than prejudice, and also both find common cause with and explore the differences of other traditions.

By “blood” I am as Jewish as Adrienne Rich. But now I use “blood” only with quotation marks, visible or invisible, when referring to genetic ties. I found it revelatory to learn that the usage comes from an ancient (false) tradition that semen is refined blood.<sup>23</sup> “Blood” in the sense of biological kinship is a fiction—especially when applied to fathers, since the tie of pregnancy is a more literal tie of blood. I hold on to this information from the history of science as if it explains why the language of blood and ancestral identity doesn’t work for me the way it works for many adoptees who have found their heredity.

Today, many adoption agencies and activist groups emphasize ethnicity, and urge telling all adopted children about the ethnicity of their birth parents. In cases where children’s ethnicity is visibly non-European, many adoptive families join together and find authorities on the relevant culture so that their children, inevitably identified as foreign, can develop a sense of group membership as, for example, Korean. These practices are, of course, unlike the usual processes by which culture is transmitted. But what else can the adopted parents do to give content to ethnicity, other than rely on stereotypes?<sup>24</sup> In *Ethnic Options*, Mary Waters quotes an interview subject, Susan Badovich, who after adopting a son she says is Irish, Austrian, and English, decides to celebrate St. Patrick’s day and asks a friend who goes to Europe to bring him back “a pair of lederhosen, these little Austrian pants, for the Austrian part of him, and I hope to instill in him some pride in his ethnic background.”<sup>25</sup> To me, lederhosen seem an inadequate basis for such pride, yet according to Waters’s book, most Americans who identify strongly with some ethnicity have little content to their identification except a few such symbols. Indeed, Badovich reports that her husband, who grew up with a Baptist mother, identifies himself as a Russian Jew and has a mezuzah on their door and thinks his Jewish and her Catholic traditions are similar. Maybe this idiosyncratic use of symbols is easier in San Jose, where they live, than in Pittsburgh, where there are many people for whom Judaism has a more definite, if contested, content. Presumably the less content one’s sense of ethnicity has, the fewer stereotypes one has to deal with, which might be good

except that one still has to deal with other people's stereotypes; a better alternative would be a knowledge of some of the complex history of each tradition involved.

The Badovich interview is the only place where Waters mentions adoption. However, her book is suggestive for an adoptee because she emphasizes that ethnic identification is a matter of choice, although she notes "the common view among Americans . . . that ethnicity is primordial, a personal, inherited characteristic like hair color." (Indeed, one of her reviewers, Alan Wolfe, has argued that "ethnicity with freedom of choice is no longer ethnicity.")<sup>26</sup> Like many sociologists, she critiques the biologically based view of ethnicity, but admits that it involves "the *belief* on the part of people that they are descended from a common ancestor" (17). Studying answers to questions about ethnic identification on the census and in interviews, she analyzes some of the factors involved when people with a multiethnic heredity decide which one or two of their ethnicities they will claim (this is not necessarily determined by which one or two involve the largest number of their ancestors). She argues that the white Catholic suburbanites she studied in the late 1980s have an almost contentless "symbolic ethnicity" that "makes you both special and simultaneously part of a community. It is something that comes to you involuntarily through heredity, and at the same time it is a personal choice. And it allows you to express your individuality in a way that does not make you stand out as in any way different from all kinds of other people" (150).

Even though Waters emphasizes the idea of choice in ethnicity, her language reveals that ethnicity works differently for adoptees. Those who know they are adopted cannot have "the belief that they are descended from a common ancestor" with their adoptive parents, unless they were adopted by relatives or placed with a family of similar ethnicity, so an "institution" such as ethnicity that is, in the United States today, perceived as centered on the family does not provide a common bond in their childhood home, unless their parents make exceptional efforts of imaginative sympathy. The adoptee does not have an ethnicity that comes involuntarily through heredity. What heredity she has, she may have had to struggle hard to learn, or else her parents have had to struggle to find its symbols for her. What comes involuntarily to her may be the habits and customs her adoptive family has because of their culture, and if she claims this culture as an

adult, identifying with an ethnicity that is not biologically hers, it may be even more of a conscious decision than the choices of Waters's interviewees.

Waters observes that most people are between the ages of seventeen and thirty when they choose which of their ethnic identifications to maintain, and she acknowledges that surveys sometimes force people to name fewer heredities than they actually have. I think she does not give sufficient attention to the possible choice of maintaining multiple ethnicities. She does, however, note that a complex genealogy may be one reason for simplifying ethnicity to "American." As one respondent said, "I would just have to say 'American,' because otherwise it would just go on forever" (48).

## Adoption and American Optimism

While Waters provides material for deconstructing the myth of heredity as identity, the frequent simplification of ethnicity to "American" among her respondents also elucidates some elements in the myth of adoptive family as identity. The idea developed in the founding of the United States that membership in the nation was a matter of citizenship rather than "blood" would seem to predispose Americans in favor of adoption. Many countries in Europe have a long tradition of emphasizing a national "bloodline," and the late-twentieth-century emergence of nationalism has involved the dissolution of a number of other countries—Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia—into the component parts of their most obvious ethnic mix. The fact that France and Germany, for example, each included heterogeneous ethnic and cultural groups has not been part of the French or German national mythology in the way that diversity has been in the United States, though in this time of global migrations both European countries are struggling with it. By contrast, our motto "E Pluribus Unum" (out of many, one), originally referring to the many states made one nation, has been for a long time reinterpreted to refer to ethnic multiplicity. With the same emphasis, Herman Melville wrote, "You can not spill a drop of American blood, without spilling the blood of the whole world."<sup>27</sup> Adoption has, of course, been practiced in many other countries—revolutionary France, significantly, promoted it strongly as a matter of equalizing its society—but that kind of adoption did not last long in the French code of laws. Adoption was

possible in nineteenth-century France under much more restrictive rules. It was long after the nineteenth-century formalization of adoption law in the United States that adoption became institutionalized in most of Europe.<sup>28</sup>

Adoption has sometimes been practiced primarily as a way of controlling how one's money is transferred into the next generation, or of getting an unpaid household servant, but for more than a century it has been associated with a very American interest in social reform. It has long been part of U.S. mythology that we do not give up on problems; instead, we try to do better. This optimism—closely related to Enlightenment ideals—has influenced the American institutionalization of adoption.<sup>29</sup> Gradually, in a process documented by Rickie Solinger and Barbara Melosh, a belief spread that out-of-wedlock birth, though a disgrace at the time, need not mark mother or child for life—so long as the mother in question was white.<sup>30</sup> Especially as the profession of social work expanded, experts emphasized children's need for a nurturing environment, and reassured potential parents that “good homes” were more significant than “bad blood.”

Adoption is also highly compatible with the U.S. belief in choice and freedom. According to the dominant paradigm in the mid-twentieth century, adoption would permit an unmarried mother to make a new start in life, while allowing a married couple to have a child they wanted. For the adopters, it could seem like an affirmation of their membership in a larger human community; it could also affirm their ability to surmount fertility problems, and emphasize that parenthood is a matter of conscious work rather than of biologically based instinct.

But the choice and freedom involved with adoption have their limits. Many advocates of reform in adoption law have criticized the Enlightenment optimism of American midcentury adoption as a quick-fix solution that neglects feelings, particularly those of the birth mother. Since white single women were pressured to have their children adopted and black single women were expected to keep theirs, adoption practices have often used “women's bodies and their reproductive capacity . . . to promote political agendas hostile to female autonomy and racial equality.”<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the image of adoption as an act of unlimited freedom for the adoptive parents who bestow a new identity on the child breaks down in practice as well. Choosing a child in adoption is usually choosing under rather severe constraints, accepting or rejecting one, for

example, with the chance of having another limited choice months later. Adoptive parents, like parents of all kinds, must confront the limits of their children's malleability. A nurturing environment can help children grow, but it cannot necessarily make them grow along a particular, specific line of development you plan for them. Ellen Goodman has even suggested that adoptive parents are likely to recognize that their children are different from them from the start and so have, in this respect, an advantage over other parents who must learn it as their children grow up.<sup>32</sup>

The adoptive relation reproduces the quintessentially American issue of communicating culture across "bloodlines": if immigrants have often been referred to as America's adopted children, their teachers and their government deal with issues of accepting difference that are related to those that face adoptive parents (though the situation is even more complicated for the parents of children internationally adopted). Optimism about both adoption and Americanization can be based on a belief in the universal similarity of human nature, and in its infinite malleability, but it need not be. The attempt to define America as a culture of pluralism and diversity, in Henry Louis Gates's phrase "a conversation among different voices," parallels the attempts by many trans-cultural adopters today to learn from and celebrate the culture of their child's birth parents, some of the recent experiments in open adoption, and the more ordinary openness of adoptive parents such as those Goodman describes.<sup>33</sup>

I shared many of Dorothy's values, and she accepted my differences from her to a large extent, but not always enough for me. I remember a particularly painful scene of screaming at her (in my twenties!) that I couldn't be the person she wanted me to be. I did credit to her in many ways, and I know she appreciated me, but I was never the good decorator and neat housekeeper she was. Nor, on the other hand, did she and Frank provide as much of a two-parent family as Geraldine hoped—nor did I bring them together as Dorothy probably hoped. Frank's emotional health was declining during the years I was growing up. They fought more and more, and separated during my return home after my freshman year of college. Frank died a year later. Dorothy, however, survived admirably for twenty-five more years.

My adoptive family exemplifies how social workers can make mistakes about stability. Yet for all the problems I had growing up, I feel

that I benefited from being adopted rather than being raised by Geraldine, given her temperament and the environment in which she lived. I feel this, of course, because of the influence my adoptive environment has had on me.<sup>34</sup>

Both the myth of the adoptive family as identity and the myth of heredity as identity, though better than the myth of disaster, are inadequate not only to the Jessica/Anna story but also to my own life as an adoptee, and to much interesting literature by and about adoptees. I believe they are also inadequate to the lives of many others.

Yet they are powerful myths in our culture. As an adoptee, no matter how much I stress the importance of environment and the possible benefits of adoption, I must deal in some way with the issue of heredity, especially since I live in a time when the language of hereditary identity is used so often. On the other hand, no matter how much I stress the problematic aspects of adoption, often it does present the best possible solution for a child. The possibility of finding a nurturing family not determined by biology is an important affirmation of human freedom, educability, and ability to love across boundaries. However limited the accomplishment of these goals may be in practice, they are better ideals than ethnic purity. While the U.S. practice of adopting children from other countries may have problematic tendencies toward cultural imperialism, the prejudice that has existed in countries such as Italy, Romania, and Korea against adopting children of their own culture—especially if they are racially mixed or illegitimate—is hardly superior.<sup>35</sup> The summer of the DeBoer/Schmidt case was also the first summer of war between ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia. A country that had officially emphasized peaceful multiculturalism split violently under the influence of ethnic nationalism. Emphasis on genetic ties does not, of course, always lead to civil war, but it can. Given the power of belief in heredity, twenty-first-century culture desperately needs some belief in bonds that cross “bloodlines.”

## Adoptees and Community

At the beginning of her influential search autobiography, *Twice Born*, Betty Jean Lifton wrote, “The adopted child can never grow up. Who has ever heard of an *adopted adult*?”<sup>36</sup> Jean Paton, in her pioneering

work, wrote not of “adopted children” but of “adopted people” and “the adopted.”<sup>37</sup> Katrina Maxton-Grahame called her search autobiography *An Adopted Woman*.<sup>38</sup> But when the term *adoptee* became widely used, a self-identification cutting across age and many other categories became easier to formulate.<sup>39</sup> A group consciousness began to develop.

As a child, and through college, graduate school, and my first job, I had no other friends I knew to be adopted. (I didn’t even know that one of my father’s sisters had adopted rather than given birth to my cousin June.) But when I was almost thirty, people were beginning to open up about adoption. I answered a personal ad in the *National Catholic Reporter* from a woman in New York State who wanted to discuss being a feminist adoptee, and corresponded with her for years. I discovered that a local female friend was adopted and a male friend had been raised by foster parents; I met Betty Jean Lifton after she spoke at my university, wrote to Florence Fisher and Jean Paton, and joined with other local adoptees to form Pittsburgh Adoption Lifeline, a search support group. Such groups were forming all over the country. Adoptees previously largely invisible to one another have begun to develop a community. However, this is not an easy task. Unlike many minority groups, neither adoptees nor adoptive parents necessarily grow up among, raise children with, or wish to socialize with others in their category. But the experience of searching, or of trying to open records legally, or of dealing with a blended family provides more of the basis on which a community can grow.

Sometimes I think that, because of the laws of secrecy it is trying to combat, the adoption reform community’s public voice has emphasized too much the importance of heredity. However, like many adoptees, including many in the American Adoption Congress, I feel strongly the importance of environment as well as heredity. Many of us emphasize positive feelings about our continuing bond with adoptive parents. As adoption becomes more visible, I as an adoptee find myself feeling an affinity with adopters as well as with other adoptees. I have an impulse to celebrate nurturing that crosses over heredities, even while recognizing its difficulties. But I also celebrate my own birth mother’s ability to welcome me, crossing over environmental obstacles, and I want birth mothers, and potential birth mothers, to receive fair treatment. I want a community in which members of the adoption triangle can speak to one another and also provide perspectives and resources to others consider-

ing adoption. As part of establishing this community I want to examine a range of literature that tells stories about adoption, including its relation to the cultural myths I have described and its attempts to suggest new myths and new plots.

## Adoption and Feminist Criticism

I come to this project not only as an adoptee but also as a woman and a feminist reader, influenced, in several ways, by feminist criticism, and hoping that the experiences of feminist criticism will be useful for readers interested in adoption. First, I want to write about literature in something of the spirit of pioneering feminist critics such as Mary Ellmann, Kate Millett, and Simone de Beauvoir—that is, I want to analyze the relation of literary works to cultural myths and social history that obviously still affect people’s lives. I assume that people often respond to the world partly with attitudes they have unconsciously drawn from literature they have read, and that analyzing the assumptions governing that literature—or offering other ways of reading it—may help them consider different possibilities for seeing themselves and others. Just as feminist critics recognize different aspects of literature by reading with special attention to gender, and with a critical attitude about myths of gender, I have been seeing different aspects of literature by reading with special attention to adoption, and with a critical attitude about myths about adoption. And since some of these myths about adoption are myths about birth mothers and adoptive mothers, these ways of reading sometimes overlap.

But my book will of course have the mark of its own time, and its approach will be influenced by later feminist critics as well as those early ones. I have learned from many feminists who include their personal voice in their scholarship and criticism, such as the historian Carolyn Steadman, whose *Landscape for a Good Woman* exemplifies the possibility of writing about the mismatch between one’s life and cultural myths, the contributors to the Greene and Kahn anthology *Changing Subjects*, about the interplay of the personal with one’s scholarly and critical development, and the novel critics Rachel Brownstein and Suzanne Juhasz, who wrote about their experience of reading.<sup>40</sup> There will be much more in this book about readers’ responses and possible reader and viewer identification than in most works of criticism

today—though this has continued to be one strand of writing in feminist criticism. But writing as an adoptee is inevitably different from writing as a woman or a feminist in some ways.

Feminist criticism has affinities with a feminist movement that critiques many different aspects of its society, with a broad consensus on many necessary changes (for example, ending employment and other economic discrimination against women, ending rape and sexual harassment), even if in disagreement about strategies. It has much convincing evidence of oppression against women that can plausibly (though not inevitably) be related to cultural myths of idealization and degradation. Adoptees are a much smaller and much less visible group than women; it is impossible to make a reliable estimate of our numbers, or to test any claims that we are discriminated against in any way beyond the denial of our genetic records. Arguments that adoption—or a certain system of closed adoption—is psychologically damaging rely largely on some autobiographies, case histories of adoptees who are not necessarily representative, selective use of psychological research, and a cultural belief in the importance of heredity. Arguments that adoption, or a certain system of adoption, is beneficial, made in particular by the National Council for Adoption, the main group supporting closed records, also rely largely on autobiographies, case histories, selective use of psychological research, and a cultural belief in the beneficence of adoptive parents.<sup>41</sup> Psychological research in this area is especially problematic partly because one's assumptions determine who would be the relevant comparison class—those raised in biological families in the same environment as the adopted subjects, or those raised in circumstances close to those the adopted subjects' birth mothers would be able to provide.

Some adoptees and adoption reform activists have made their belief in inevitable psychological damage due to closed adoption the basis for their politics. Others, and I count myself among them, would say that even if only part of identity is based on heredity, and even if many adoptees are not psychologically damaged by closed adoption, at least all adult adoptees who wish should have the right to open records.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps women's history provides another useful parallel here. Can we compare the women who, in presuffrage days, never wanted to vote, to adoptees who don't miss the information that they can't have? Adoptees claim a great variety of different experiences. Besides those who stress heredity, some emphasize their relation to their adoptive

parents, others the mix; still others find both sets of parents irrelevant. I would not claim that those in any of these categories are in denial. The voices of the angry and the victimized are important testimony, but to read as an adoptee, it is not necessary to read as a victim.

Yet, if not necessarily victimized, adoptees and adoptive families are still marginal in our society's understanding of family structure, in spite of all the ways that contemporary families have changed. Adoptive mothers are still writing in to women's magazines complaining about the attribution of maternal love to blood. Attacks on the possibility of gay marriage—ignoring many other people besides adoptive parents—frequently say that procreation is essential to marriage. But it has been argued by many writers, especially those associated with the philosophical position called standpoint theory, that people in marginal positions have a special opportunity for insight into their society. This doesn't lead to a simple conclusion. From this point of view, it might be said, for example, that adoptees have a better chance to see that parenthood is actually more about love than about biology, as the literature of adoption indeed shows; or, as I have argued already, that all parents have to deal with their children's difference from them; or, alternatively, that adoptees have more of a chance to see the predominance of commodification in our society (the conclusion to which Albee's *American Dream* points), or the extent to which it still considers genetic ties important; or that, living in border-crossing positions, adoptees have a better chance to get beyond our society's dichotomies.<sup>43</sup> Thus considering the thematics of adoption in a literary work, we (not necessarily only adoptees) can understand more deeply how it presents parent-child relations, or nurturing across difference, or the social stress on genetics, or commodification, or border crossing.

In addition to the insight that adoption literature may provide in dealing with issues beyond adoption, I am interested, as I said earlier, in what its study can do to help people feel less alone in their involvement with adoption. Many adoptees and birth parents don't have such a sense of aloneness, but it may be a vulnerability that happier ones can identify with—just as women without breast cancer or sexual harassment can feel solidarity in working against these threats. Adoptees usually grow up looking more different from their parents than do other children, and they grow up in a family in a way made, from the beginning, differently from the norm. If their family tries to hide this, that secret is another difference. I think I grew up feeling those differences to

be basic, and then struggling to find similarities, which seemed like an effort. I want more of the next generation of adoptees to feel less alone, and more of the next generation of adoptive families to be comfortable talking about adoption, and I think writing about adoption in literature can contribute to this goal. I hope that adoptive parents can learn something from literature about the special challenges of their situation, and I hope that if they, adoptees, and birth parents understand something of the way literature has fantasized about them, they may be able to break the hold of some of those fantasies. And in addition I hope that readers who are not personally involved with adoption can find here insight that will help them be more self-critical about such fantasies, in the same way that seeing women as a group with a history that is partly a literary history enables us to be aware when literature produces fantasy images of women. Just as feminist criticism can help young women see through Prince Charming, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella stories, and help them be aware of when such fantasies are limiting their life choices, I hope that analysis in this book may help point out, for example, the fantasy nature of plots in which adoptees find their true identities and home in finding their lost birth parents. Indeed, the romance plot that ends in a reunited birth family and the romance plot that ends in marriage are structurally similar. The language of “sacredness” that Judith Modell finds in some adoptees’ descriptions of their reunion might remind us of language used in the literary tradition of romantic love.<sup>44</sup> Now that more adoptees have met their birth parents and shared the changes in their relationship over time, books about these relationships sometimes use a metaphor from marriage to hint at the transience of emotional peaks; they refer to happy times shortly after a reunion as a “honeymoon phase.” In life partnerships and in post-reunion relationships, we all need to negotiate cultural traditions if we are to build human rather than fantasy relationships. Somewhat as knowing women’s history can be helpful to parents of girls, knowing adoption history and literature should make adoptive parents more aware of the struggle sometimes necessary to meet the psychological needs of their children.

And if teachers in grade school, high school, and college can teach literature with more sensitivity to literary adoptees’ situation, their students living in variant family structures may have more tools for thinking about their own lives. My book discusses many frequently taught works, from the long canonical *Oedipus* to Barbara Kingsolver’s *Bean*

*Trees*, which has quickly made its way into the high school curriculum as well as many readers' hearts. If more teachers who taught either of these books made a point of locating the silences in their treatment of adoption, the alternative plots theoretically possible (Kingsolver has made this easy by also writing *Pigs in Heaven*), more people in our culture might get over the idea that it is a threat to the adoptive family if adoptees meet, or even know something about, their birth parents. The next chapter will conclude with pedagogical suggestions; I hope that readers who are teachers will extend pedagogical thinking to the other chapters as well.

The adoption scholar David Kirk has differentiated adoptive families according to whether they acknowledge or deny differences from biological families; yet Kirk has been criticized for emphasizing these differences too much, and he has acknowledged that there are times when the adoptees' differences are less relevant.<sup>45</sup> This problem of emphasis is similar to that confronted when feminist theorists argue about whether to emphasize women's equality with men or differences from men. I find some persuasive arguments on both sides, and perhaps most persuasive the views of writers as different as Nancy Cott, Joan Scott, and Jane Gallop that theory and tactics can best emphasize both at different times and in different contexts.<sup>46</sup> Analogously, adoptees are like others. We can, for example, have feelings about members of our adoptive families that are as strong as those in biological families, and stronger than in some. We can also have curiosity about our ancestors as strong as those in biological families, and stronger than in some. Also, like other people, we don't wish to be defined entirely in terms of our families and childhood situation. But in our experience of double parenthood, usually with one set of parents unknown for most of our lives, we are different from others.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes this experience is an important, conscious issue in our lives, and sometimes it is not. My argument here is parallel to Denise Riley's argument that one's identity as a woman is conscious and important in some situations and not in others.<sup>48</sup> Adoptees can well argue that in order to have an equality of rights with others, including such a simple thing as knowledge of our medical history, we need some laws particularly aimed at remedying our (in large part socially constructed) disadvantages, just as women have made analogous arguments.

In most of the literary criticism that I have done up to this point, I have written with my identity as a woman quite salient. But in reading

or moviegoing, which aspect of my identity dominates may be quite unstable; there are passages of Joyce, for example, that I read less as a woman than as someone raised Catholic (and to add to the specificity, a liberal rather than a conservative Catholic), and similarly in this book I read Albee's *The American Dream* less as a woman than as an adoptee, though the extent to which Albee identifies the adoptive *mother* as the more active cause of problems in the adoption he portrays is worth considering. I read one plot of *Daniel Deronda* primarily as a woman and the other plot primarily as an adoptee. Yet the particular way I read as an adoptee cannot be disentangled from my being a woman; most of the leaders in the adoption search movement and the greater proportion of the adoptees who have, like me, found part of a birth family are women.<sup>49</sup> Since many parents are more interested in adopting girls than boys—presumably seeing girls as more malleable or affectionate—it is even possible that more adoptees are women.<sup>50</sup> A woman has had to think about what she would do if unintentionally pregnant, and so she may find it easier to identify with her birth mother on that basis. Furthermore, an interest in family relationships is culturally marked for women; though a woman can turn to an exclusively nonfamily world of work, politics, culture, or hobbies, she is less likely to do so than a man.<sup>51</sup> Thus, an adopted woman's relation to her adopted and her birth relatives may well keep confronting her throughout her life.

Thus, while this book will be an experiment in reading as an adoptee, it will be feminist criticism as well. One of the important elements of early feminist myth analysis on which "adoption criticism" can draw is the recognition that our culture contains a contradictory set of beliefs, and that idealization is as much of a myth as degradation. Experienced in analyzing how some literature splits women between the exalted and degraded, we can observe how some literature about adoption exalts the adoptive mother and degrades the birth mother, and how other literature does the opposite; we can see how the two mothers of the "adoption triangle" make it particularly tempting for representations of adoption to exemplify this cultural split of views about women. We can also question to what extent such polarization occurs in cultural representations of adoptees and of adoptive and genetic fathers.

Scholars such as Marianne Hirsch have argued that feminist criticism so far has been too much from the daughter's perspective, and not enough from the mother's perspective.<sup>52</sup> But neither has enough atten-

tion been paid to the standpoint of the adopted daughter, the adoptive mother, the birth mother, or the men in similar positions. Perhaps the situation of the literary adoptee, in whose life nurture and biology identify different parents, is a particularly interesting location to explore in relation to conflicting views about biology within the feminist movement and within feminist criticism. From some feminist viewpoints it is important to demystify biological maternity, lest women be confined to it; from others it is important to celebrate it. Feminist comments on surrogate motherhood are split. But adoption is a different issue. Sara Ruddick is one of the few who has explicitly noted that her concept of mothering is not biologically based and thus includes adoptive mothers.<sup>53</sup> Most of the arguments about the relation of mothering to biology have been made without regard to the specifics of the adoption triangle and how it is presented in literature. But looking at adoption in literature has implications with regard to many other nontraditional families beyond adoptive ones.

## Kinship

In our society today, traditional genetic kinship is not enough to meet the needs of an increasing number of children, and the desires of an increasing number of adults. Not only adoptive families, and foster families but also stepfamilies, blended families, and families made by new reproductive technologies deal with the question of how you construct kinship bonds without genetic bonds. The history of adoption should provide some cautionary notes for the development of new reproductive technologies, including cloning. The vexed status of secrecy in adoption should provide warning that a kinship bond may be threatened rather than preserved by hiding from the child the truth about how that bond was initiated. Otherwise, constructing kinship without genetic bonds has much in common with constructing kinship *with* genetic bonds—for no matter how much a mother and child are genetically similar, they are still two different people—as my daughter, who looks like me more than anyone else I have ever seen in the flesh, constantly shows me.

We are used to the idea that mothering is a continuous activity of nurturance. Sara Ruddick, developing the concept of “maternal work,” goes so far as to say, “All mothers are ‘adoptive.’”<sup>54</sup> The relationship of

a parent and child who have always been together, the relationship of a reunited birth parent and child, and the relationship of an adoptive parent and child—all of these are in some sense constructed relationships—are built up out of many small interactions. In her book *Kinship with Strangers*, Judith Modell argues that openness in adoption is forming the basis for a new American system, “in which the significance of *work* in kinship will increase” and “genealogy is only one way of constructing parenthood.”<sup>55</sup> In this system, the idea that a child can have two mothers, or even more, may become much more accepted. No matter how important genetic makeup is, everyone needs nurture, and many different sources of nurture can be encouraged and valued. From this point of view, the reality of adoptive parenthood comes not just from the social or legal agreement to consider someone a parent—the sense in which, as I pointed out earlier, all kinship can be considered constructed—but even more importantly, from construction by individual work. The adoptive mother in Jackie Kay’s *The Adoption Papers* says, “She’s my child, I have told her stories / wept at her losses, laughed at her pleasures / she is mine.”<sup>56</sup>

But where does the adoptee fit in a world where—even as nurturing is scarcer—genetics is increasingly researched by scientists with an aim to discovering its predictive qualities? Perhaps this is not so far from the past world of “blood” and “race” that several of the works I shall discuss show us. But unlike some critics who discuss such works, I shall call attention to these concepts and not take them for granted. Today’s adoptees may reject the way some previous literature—including literature they love—would position them; it may well be revelatory to them to see the fictions about them envisioned in that literature, and the assumptions they involve. Like Adrienne Rich, in a different but not unrelated context, I am pursuing “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction,” because “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.”<sup>57</sup>

## The Range of This Book

One of the many ways in which this book is unusual among studies of literature today is that it does not confine itself to adoption in the literature of one country or to a limited time period. Instead, I deliberately

move here from ancient Greek literature to Shakespeare to nineteenth-century British literature to late-twentieth-century America.<sup>58</sup> I focus to a large extent on works in which the issue of defining parenthood, family, and the adoptee's identity is important, and not much on writings in which the adoptee is pathological or antisocial, or the adoptive or birth parents are monsters (apart from *The American Dream*). My selection is partly made to allow me to use my own reactions as case studies of how adoptees respond to literature, combining them with scholarship on books that I have lived with for a long time. Since high school I have been interested in classical Greece. Shakespeare was also an early love; I wrote my dissertation on the recognition scenes in his comedies and my first book on gender in his plays, and continue to teach them. George Eliot's relation to Shakespeare was the center of my second book, and my connection with *Daniel Deronda* is especially personal, as I shall discuss. As an adoptee coming of age in the 1960s, I had a special feeling for Albee's putting modern American adoption on stage for what seemed to me like the first time.

But the writings I discuss in these chapters have been widely read and formed many people's attitudes, not just mine. Many of them—*Oedipus*, *Winter's Tale*, *Silas Marner*, *The Bean Trees*—are taught in colleges and high schools, usually without much critical attention to their treatment of adoption. And yet, if we consider that treatment, these works can be seen as part of a tradition—the literature of adoption—that spans centuries and genres. Authors of many of the later works knew the earlier ones and sometimes refer to their attitudes critically by writing stories that end differently. George Eliot knew Shakespeare and Sophocles well.<sup>59</sup> Albee knew Sophocles too. An early review that he liked enough to include at the end of his preface to *The American Dream*, speaks of his play's "horrible aspects, which reach directly back to the butchery and perversion of the Greek theater . . . Sophoclean dismemberment."<sup>60</sup> Barbara Kingsolver knew George Eliot, and even mentions *Silas Marner* in a throwaway line in *The Bean Trees*.

Thus, my second chapter discusses a text long influential about adoption, and the way it has been used and responded to, Sophocles' play *Oedipus*. This play emphatically defines genetic parenthood as the only real parenthood, and associates adoption with denial. *Oedipus* has been used as a model by pioneers of the adoption search movement, but I argue that doing so is problematic.

My third chapter discusses three aspects of adoption in relation to

Shakespeare. His plays emphasize the birth family in the happy reunions of *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*. The representation of foster parents in these and other plays begins to suggest a different definition for parenthood, and the treatment of bastardy is closely related to adoption since its stigma has been one of the chief reasons given for closing adoption records.

My fourth chapter discusses the way in which a number of British novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—by Fielding, Burney, Austen, Brontë, and Dickens—portray the importance of both heredity and the influence of adoptive parents. It shows how these novels use adoption plots for psychological and social exploration: to dramatize struggles against stigma, to show class differences, and to emphasize the unexpected connections of widely separated characters. In these three chapters, adoptive parenthood becomes progressively more important, and this move could be associated with an increased emphasis on psychology and sentiment in literature and culture.

My fifth chapter focuses specifically on three novels by George Eliot that, unlike those discussed in the previous chapter, suggest that the adoptee faces a choice between two different ways of life, associated with two different sets of parents. It shows that in *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt* Eliot goes further than any of the earlier novelists to suggest that parenthood is defined by nurturant behavior and not by genetics, and that, in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, genetics turns out to be more important, though not exclusively. It explores the reasons for this change and finds that both criticism of English society and the increasing influence of the ideology of race affect the celebration of hereditary Jewishness in this novel.

The sixth chapter discusses adoption in drama from Edward Albee's *American Dream* on. It will show some influence of the adoptee search movement on the theater: whereas *The American Dream* presents adopting parents as controlling figures who commodify their child and leave him powerless, *Evelyn and the Polka King*, *Redwood Curtain*, *Mask Dance*, and *Homecoming* use adoptees' searches for parentage to explore American culture, history, and, to varying degrees, adoptees' consciousness. It will also compare three recent plays that focus on different kinds of parents' struggles over an infant: Jane Anderson's *The Baby Dance*, Kristine Thatcher's *Emma's Child*, and Albee's *The Play about the Baby*.

The seventh chapter considers the representations of cross-cultural

adoption in two novels by Barbara Kingsolver. In *The Bean Trees* (1988), Taylor's adoption of the abused Cherokee child she calls Turtle is seen as an unproblematic good for Turtle as well as part of Taylor's creation of a happy nontraditional family with Turtle and Taylor's friend Lou Ann and Lou Ann's son. In *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), however, the illegality of the adoption, anti-Indian prejudice, Turtle's Cherokee relatives, and her hereditary lactose intolerance must be reckoned with.<sup>61</sup> These novels change position on the environment/heredity balance much as do Eliot's.

The afterword briefly discusses four recent novels that portray adult adoptees as parents and would-be parents—Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Oscar Hijuelos's *Mr. Ives's Christmas*—showing that dealing with adoption is a lifelong experience in each of these books set in multicultural and multiracial America. I will then turn to my current relationship with my birth and adoptive families and discuss how becoming a mother myself has affected my understanding of adoption.

More of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century works I discuss take the influence and commitment of adoptive parents seriously, even though some are set in a country where adoption was not formalized by law. Unlike the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare, Eliot's novels, the twentieth-century search plays, and the recent novels of the Afterword present adoptees as having a choice in defining their identity. This anticipates (in Eliot's case) or correlates with the late twentieth-century development of a community of adoptees, including many interested in finding out about their heredity.

There are two simple views that public discourse about adoption falls into too easily. One is the view that only adoptive relationships matter; the other is the view that only birth relationships matter. Some people have articulated a third viewpoint, that both can matter but probably in different ways, that it depends on the circumstances, that adoptees can have a choice about how to negotiate their identity and their relationships. But this approach still is not as widespread as it should be. I hope that this book, by analyzing places in literature where simplifications are found and places where they are transcended, will show more people how the world looks with that third view.

I am the daughter of Dorothy and Frank, of Geraldine and Murray, in four different ways. I am different from each of them, and I am marked by all of them, in ways I know and in ways I will never know.

We adoptees are hybrids with heritages full of questions. But our position has, as well as a personal history, a cultural one—how adoption has been envisioned in the past—and in this book I attempt to claim, explore, and analyze some of that history. However different my readers' experiences have been, I hope that they will find my exploration a precedent for their own coming to terms with assumptions in which our culture has been drenched.