

Book Review Editor
Ruth Stewart



The positive approach taken in this account to the child achieving maximal physical and emotional potential and independence is welcome — the more so since the importance of the needs of other family members is not neglected. There is recurrent emphasis on the fact that the child is the sufferer of the disease and must have the opportunity to contribute to decision making, particularly since this will be his responsibility ultimately.

Barbara Horgan's theme and approach in this book is perhaps best summarized by her dedication quotation:

God give us the serenity
to accept the things
we cannot change,
Courage to change the
things we can and
Wisdom to know the difference.

Anon.

YOURS BY CHOICE.

by Jane Rowe. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 188 pp., \$9.50.

Reviewed by: Dot Shamley, Ph.D.,
Lecturer,
Department of Social Work,
La Trobe University.

Jane Rowe clearly maps out the history of adoption and the introduction of legislation in 1926 in Great Britain.

This book is basically a manual for prospective adoptive parents.

The author points out very meticulously the pitfalls of adoption; society's double standards, a set of rules for adoptive parents and no laws for fertile humans. Fertile humans are allowed to bring into the world a child when they are ready to conceive and impregnate irrespective of their age, social status, role, class and marital status. The two delimiting factors stopping conception and procreation are the biological factor of menopause for women and the fertility of the male, who can sire a child technically until the day he dies. This fact must be very irksome to adoptive parents, who have postponed having a family for financial reasons; then, when they have been unable to conceive, time has elapsed between investigations and trying new method of artificial insemination and that, too, has failed, years have passed only for the couple to feel that they have left it too late and they are disqualified because now they are too old to adopt.

Ms. Rowe spells out several alternatives to adoption for prospective adoptive parents who don't qualify to adopt a baby. It

is strongly feared that an agency may have many young children on their waiting list, and an enthusiastic young worker may place unintentional pressure on a couple to adopt a young child. Maybe the implied communication might follow this sequence: 'If you want to adopt a baby you must show that you are congruent in that you want a baby and as a baby is not available a child will do, or a handicapped child will do'.

It is a far cry from raising a baby from scratch. One's main concern would not only be for the prospective adoptive parents but most certainly for the child who would have no escape from the situation where the adoptive parents might decide that they can't cope and that is not what they had in mind, and return the child. On countless occasions we have seen clinically the devastation to the child.

Ms. Rowe gives down to earth advice on how to prepare the home, family and the extended family for a new baby, what to say and how to say it, and also how much to tell about the child's background. Further, the need and the importance of telling the child before the rest of the world lets him know. It is interesting that in the Human Rights Declaration in the rights for the child no provision is made that the child has the right to biological information — who the parents of procreation were.

Further, Western society does not protect the child from learning about the adoption from the school grounds or from a sticky beak neighbour, or from a malicious relative. Of all the problems related by adoptees, the most painful is the deception and the deviousness of the adoptive parents. Here, again, Ms. Rowe, although she does not suggest it, highlights for us that there is a lack in legislation protecting the rights of the adoptee of knowing their biological origins in an honest way.

This book was written with the express purpose of assisting adoptive and prospective adoptive parents. However, the neophyte social worker would do well to read this book and gain access to what the clients would have as their information base. Further, the neophyte social worker would have to expand the knowledge base and state of the art of counselling in depth adoptive parents from other sources. Further, the new areas not covered in this book are the legal aspects of surrogate motherhood, where the biological parents have to adopt the child from the carrier mother. This new form of adoption has many variations, and it would do well to address the issues of the 21st century's solution to infertility and the myriad of

complications and combinations, donor sperm, non donor sperm; donor ova and non donor ova; and bearers of fertilised ova will pose.

It will most certainly be that the problems arising in this new area will present themselves to adoption agencies as the most logical agency to refer to as they have in the past dealt with allied problems. One would hope that Ms. Rowe, being the most experienced in the field of adoption, would like to address these issues in a forthcoming book both for professionals, parents and children born as a result of the advances of medical science.

UNDERSTANDING ADOPTION — A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Ed. Rosie Snow, Fontana/Collins, Sydney, 1983. Recommended price \$6.95, 198 pages.

Reviewed by: Marilyn Etherton,
Social Worker,
The Adoption Service of the
Uniting Church.

Former Department of Community Welfare Services adoption worker, Rosie Snow has recently produced a book entitled 'Understanding Adoption' aimed at the general public but particularly directed at 'the adoption community, that is the adoptive parents, the natural parents and adoptees, as it is these people whose lives have been most affected by the impact of past adoption policies'. The work is somewhat misleadingly subtitled 'A Practical Guide' since apart from Rosie's own chapter on the workings of adoption agencies and some brief discussion of the part which may be played by infertility groups in helping couples assess their readiness to adopt, it is comprised of short pieces contributed by consumers and professionals on what they consider to be salient ethical issues or particularly vexing difficulties associated with our present adoption laws and their implementation. In this respect, it is a particularly timely work, preceding the report of the Victorian Adoption Legislative Review Committee by only weeks, and including chapters by some members of that committee, as well as by Cliff Picton, whose research is heavily drawn on in sections of the report. However, the A.L.R.C. report is not directly mentioned and at times it may be difficult for the more naive reader to distinguish be-

tween what is existing legislation and what is proposed, between strictly personal 'ideas for the Future' and those which are actually incorporated in the document currently being considered by Parliament. Such historical framework as is given appears in the introduction where it may easily be overlooked, and in later chapters where it is considered in respect of particular aspects of adoption, i.e. the access to birth records debate and the controversy which has continued to surround the placement of Aboriginal children for adoption. To the extent which the book is influenced by the A.L.R.C. it also suffers from related problems — chiefly a failure to provide a consistent definition of what adoption means at present and what it can come to mean in the future, a tendency to forget that while the child's interests in adoption must be voiced by the adults around him we can never be totally sure that these are accurately represented and a certain myopia and dogmatism on the part of some of the pressure groups which can be more alienating than inspiring.

The list of contributors to 'Understanding Adoption' is impressive. However, only one of the writers, Sandy Dodge, Principal Adoption Officer at the Royal Women's Hospital, is a current practitioner, and one feels that the opinions of the psychiatric team are somewhat over-represented by comparison. This leads to a certain datedness in the discussion of current adoption practices (particularly in respect of the assessment process and special needs adoption) and also, at times, to a prevailing negativism which could justifiably result in the reader wondering whether adoption ever really serves the parties it sets out to.

The book differs from its overseas counterparts in the breadth of its focus. Most earlier works have been concerned mainly with the preparation of adoptive couples or with the search by adoptees for their birth parents. I know of little literature for the general public aimed at parents considering relinquishing an infant and none to do with giving up an older or disabled child. 'Understanding Adoption' canvasses the opinion and experience of all these groups to a greater or lesser degree and also tries to put these in a broader social and legal framework. The sheer diversity of opinion gathered together here is perhaps unique and at times creates a potential for confusion. Issues such as open adoption, the adoptee's right to know identifying information about his birth parents and the most appropriate time and means of telling a child about its adoption are covered in several of the chapters and the writers at times express differing and at times contradictory views. A little more editorial comment could have gone, judiciously used, a long way towards helping the reader understand these variations on a theme without introducing a bias in favour of one interest group or another.

The selection of material to make up such

a broad overview must have necessitated some difficult choices. Ms Snow mentions the comparative lack of attention paid to overseas adoptions, for example, and some readers have expressed disappointment in the coverage given to the adoption of older children or those with permanent disabilities. No doubt a different editor would have come up with a slightly different collection of topics and authors, but 'Understanding Adoption' has in many ways provided an initial outline from which such gaps as there are may easily be recognised and which may provoke the yet dormant groups in adoption to do something towards filling them.

A proliferation of local material on adoption would be welcomed by consumers and professionals alike.

'Understanding Adoption' is divided into four parts, the first of which concerns itself with infertility as a life crisis, the importance of that crisis' successful resolution prior to the understanding of adoptive parenthood and the similarities between the dilemmas facing consumers and practitioners in adoption and in technologically assisted pregnancies. In a chapter entitled 'Parenting Alternatives' Ms Snow, in collaboration with Jenny Wright, a worker formerly involved with couples presenting for A.I.D., makes a plea for those concerned with programmes aimed at producing such pregnancies to be aware of the relevance of certain lessons which in adoption were learned only through the bitter experience of many.

This chapter needs to be read in conjunction with Jan Aitken's 'The Dimensions of Infertility' and Sandy Dodge's 'Coming to Terms with Infertility' and together they provide a tantalising and thought-provoking insight into the feelings and experiences of the couple who are unable to conceive or successfully carry a pregnancy to term, the steps they must work through in order to resolve their grief, the role counselling plays in assisting them with this process and, most importantly, the rationale behind the adoption practitioner's deeply-held conviction that 'a child is not the cure for infertility'. One of the few direct references to the rights of the child also occurs in this context:—

'Many couples have said often enough, 'We wouldn't have to prove we were good enough if we weren't infertile.' This is true enough but as the adoption service is advocate for the child, it is the agency's responsibility to choose the most suitable parents.'

This section of the book is effective because it alerts the reader to a whole range of questions and experiences beyond its immediate scope rather than presenting one all-encompassing view with simplistic solutions.

The next section of the book deals with 'The Adoption Process' and begins with Ms Snow's lengthy chapter addressing itself to 'Adoption Agencies and How They

Work'. Her case material relating to the assessment of potential adoptive parents dovetails nicely with the previous section, one of the examples clearly showing how unresolved grief over infertility can hinder a couple's commitment to the adoption process, but her statement that 'past experience of poor placements indicates that unresolved infertility and difficulties in the marriage are major factors which interfere with healthy family functioning' is an oversimplification. Placements can get into strife for many reasons, including the age, personality and abilities of the child and events in the family's wider social network which can produce a change in its internal equilibrium. Perhaps most commonly difficulties occur because of a particularly unfortuitous combination of all these factors and more it enhances neither the understanding of workers within and without the profession, nor the confidence of the adoption community-to-be to make gratuitous statements such as the above.

The chapter is also somewhat problematic in that adoption agencies generally exhibit some flexibility in regard to policy and therefore the accuracy of information relating to eligibility criteria for various programmes, as well as the assessment procedures used and the after-care offered to consumers is likely to be undermined. Potential clients would need to check out the information given with their agency of choice.

Ms Snow briefly considers the agency role with parents contemplating relinquishment of a child for adoption, touching on such subjects as their need to see and perhaps handle their child before making a final decision. The practical and emotional issues which must be faced in surrendering a child for adoption are not elaborated and once again would-be consumers would be well advised to make direct enquiries. More lengthy consideration is given in this to those parents whose consent to an adoption is 'dispensed' with by the Courts. The grounds on which adoption agencies may seek to dispense with parental consent are notoriously narrow and moreover subject to seemingly capricious interpretation. Although such cases are numerically few, they merit special consideration not only because lack of understanding of the basis on which they are undertaken reinforces the still extant belief that 'the Welfare' sits poised and waiting to spirit off any child whose parents are facing difficulties, but also because the children at the centre of these disputes make up a significant core of the 'harder to place' group because they need parents who can accept the risk that they may never be freed for adoption and may always be required to keep up some natural parent contact, however unrewarding this may be.

Maryanne McGalliard, a solicitor and member of the Victorian Standing Committee on Adoption, in her chapter 'Adoption and the Law' returns to this sub-

ject and looks at suggested reforms to the laws governing dispensation which, it is hoped, will free more of the 'children who wait' for adoption without usurping natural parent rights. Otherwise, this chapter presents a rather confusing amalgam of existing laws and emotive interpretations of their consequences with little recognition of the attempt made by most agencies to soften their blows, together with more suggested reforms. Particularly noteworthy are Maryanne's comments on open-adoption of which she has an especially liberal view.

This chapter also looks in a somewhat convoluted manner at relative and overseas adoptions.

Part 3 of 'Understanding Adoption' pertains to 'Individual Experience of Adoption' though the nomenclature is somewhat misleading as only one chapter is exclusively experiential. Catherine Swindon's moving and sensitively written piece 'An Adoptee's Search' brings the 'adoption triangle' vividly to life, showing its multitude of sometimes meshing, sometimes colliding needs and feelings coalesce into an interdependent whole. Her simple, honest approach succeeds where rhetoric may well have resulted in alienation.

This is illustrated by the C.S.M.C. authored chapter 'The Natural Parents View of Adoption' which, although it does include some first person material, concentrates more heavily on criticising the system, urging parents to assert their rights and suggesting reforms which involve a total re-definition of adoption as we know it. Natural parents as individuals tend to disappear behind a catalogue of steps all parents 'should' undertake regardless of their particular needs or personal styles. The tone is bombastic and very valid points get lost among more questionable assertions. Since many of the suggestions here

made are discussed at length in the A.L.R.C. report, I cannot help wondering whether a true 'personal experience' might not have fleshed out the picture more.

The Adoptive Family's viewpoint is represented by Valerie McLaine, a psychiatric social worker whose work includes work with adopted children and their families with fairly major degrees of disturbance in functioning. Her comments about the reactions of families to adoption are interesting, but not always representative of the less pathological family.

The final section of the book deals with 'Current Issues' and it is here that the difficulty of selectiveness must have been most apparent. Rosie has ultimately opted to include a lengthy and scholarly piece on 'The Access to Birth Records Debate' by Cliff Picton, who has conducted one of the few local researches into adoption, a very readable chapter by Graham Atkinson, late of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Service entitled 'Aboriginal Adoption — A Re-evaluation' and a lecture by Dr. Bruce Tonge, a child psychiatrist who has served as consultant to an adoption agency on 'The Adoption of Children with Special Needs'. The first two knowledgeable articles supply some historical and theoretical perspective which is otherwise absent and raises questions. Dr. Tonge's section, in contrast, clearly reflects that most of his involvement with adoption has been one step removed. He is most comfortable and accessible when he writes about his own therapeutic involvement with adopted children: when dealing with special needs adoption more generally his comments are either banal or simple reiterations of overseas experiences. His inclusion of mixed race children in the special needs category may anger some.

The book is somewhat marred by the absence of a final chapter relating all the

aspects of adoption back to one another again and stressing their interdependence. Because of this and certain other oversights it cannot perhaps serve as an alternative to the educational programmes run by some, but not all, agencies, and its usefulness to less sophisticated potential service-recipients may also be more limited than it need have been. My feeling is that its greatest uses may perhaps be for couples already beginning an adoption assessment and therefore having some avenue to further discuss issues or questions raised, the wider families of adoptive and relinquishing parents, those who adopted or relinquished some time ago and want an indication of current trends, and adoptees newly-embarked on a 'search' and needing to put their experience in perspective. The book would also be helpful to the large numbers of secondary and tertiary students who consider adoption as part of their courses each year, and to doctors, lawyers, counsellors and child care workers whose occupations bring them into occasional contact with one or other of the parties to adoption. The book is attractively packaged, easily-obtainable and for the most part simply-written, although it is in parts rather dry and the sub-headings within chapters occasionally intrude like unwanted physical tics.

Because it aims for breadth rather than depth, 'Understanding Adoption' perhaps does not offer as much to the adoption worker whose case load includes people from all sides of the adoption triangle, although it could be used as a tool working with particular clients. None the less, Rosie Snow is to be commended for tackling such an ambitious task while the rest of us merely talked about it and, in doing so, she has made the way easier for those who will hopefully turn their creative thoughts to those aspects of the topic not covered in this initial exploration.

