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## The Power of Rainbow Identities

Rosemary Jones

A homemade photo album served as one of my first books. Within it, the story of my adoption, always recounted to me sitting on my mother's or my father's lap. This is you, all the way in China! And this is Mommy and Daddy and your older sister at the airport—we had to fly fourteen hours to go and get you and bring you home! I don't think many kids have the privilege to say that one of the first stories their parents ever told them was their own. I suppose I should have felt special and empowered. But, hearing about my adoption was normal to me and my mommy-made picture merely represents one of my first experiences with reading.

Books have always acted as a sort of bridge for my family. The demographics and DNA varied vastly between the members of my family, but I never felt out of place as a little girl, no more than other children anyway. I never wondered why my skin was tan, but Mommy's and Daddy's were not. I never wondered why Mommy had blonde, curly hair, but mine was dark and straight. I never wondered why Daddy and my older sister wore glasses but my younger sister and I didn't. Why would I? The books that filled my home revealed that our entire world was full of colorful, different looking people. We had books with lovely watercolor pictures of little Asian girls with tan skin and black hair. Some of our books illustrated Indian girls with dark skin and long brown braids, young hispanic girls with thick cocoa hair and long eyelashes, and even little girls who looked like Mommy, with creamy white skin and pinned-back blonde curls. So what that my family did not look the same? It didn't even cross my mind. We were a beautiful, rainbow family and I loved that.

However, America's idolization of similarity became clear to me as I grew older. Not all families are rainbows. In fact, most aren't. In this world of sameness, parents pass down their traits to their children— skin tone, shoe size, talents, mannerisms, even medical histories. In second grade, my entire homeroom class did a “fun” project where my teacher asked us to go home and inquire whether we had a history of high blood pressure in our family. I can't remember what we were going to use our collected data for, but I do recall my mom telling me that my dad had high blood pressure in his family... but that I didn't have high blood pressure because we were not blood related. At the time, I didn't really understand. I took my family's data into school the next day anyway and put a tally mark on the board with the rest of my classmates that yes, my family had a history of high blood pressure. Because my family did have a history of high blood pressure... or at least my dad did. He didn't share that trait with me. What did that say about our type of family? About my type of home?

I could find nothing to comfort my escalating confusion, not even my beloved books. Instead, they actually offered an even wider selection of variables to consider. What should a real family look like? How could I find value and worth in my own physical traits when they were so vastly different than those of my family's? One of my favorite series is the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling. If you know anything about this series, or even have merely watched the movies, you will know that Harry Potter inherited his father's unruly hair and his mother's green eyes. These features were not just part of his appearance, but a part of him. Having his father's hair and his mother's eyes were treasured parts of Harry's identity— after all, these traits were all he had left of his deceased parents. I love the Harry Potter series, however, I could not relate to Harry at all in this sense. My parents weren't deceased; My parents were alive and well. So how could I take what I learned from him and apply it to my own life? How could I look at my own

face in the mirror and see the features reflected back as beautiful when they did not have any sentimental value to them? I am five feet, one and a half inches tall— exactly average height for the typical female in the People’s Republic of China, but two inches shorter than the typical female in America, where I was raised (“Average Height by Country 2019”). My parents are both taller than America’s average, so they could not possibly share their past experiences to me of how they were also short in America because we do not share that similarity. To me, it seemed like my physical traits were simply the wrapping on a gift— shallowly pretty on the outside to hide what treasure was hidden on the inside.

My experiences seemed to alienate me, in a sense. I was Chinese, but I was adopted into a racially white family, meaning that I grew up with privileges that many of my own race did not have granted to them. I identified with tweets about “basic white girl” problems and my favorite Starbucks drink was a Mocha Frappuccino. I have no clue what it is like to grown up in an Asian home with Asian culture. No, I can not speak Chinese. I wish I could, but that was not the kind of home that I grew up in. I have never felt fully Asian, but I am certainly not white either. What does that make me? Irrelevant? My status is up in the air, so “unique” that there are no books about this. Besides two or three children’s books and some homemade photo books, I have never read literature about an internationally adopted child growing up in America. My dueling identities have always been in the back of my mind, but I ignored them until I reached college.

As an English major, there were specific literature classes I was required to take to graduate. In my first year, my perspective was turned on its axis when I was acquainted with Edwidge Danticat, Haitian-American immigrant and world famous author of children’s books, novels, literary critiques, short stories, and more. I spent the entire semester of my English Studies 202 class reading and analyzing her writings. Week after week, I grew deeper in a relationship with Edwidge’s literature, and by proxy, Edwidge herself. In her book *Create Dangerously*, she describes herself as an author— an “immigrant artist”. Take careful note of the duality of that phrase; Danticat sees herself as an immigrant as well as an artist. Because of her life experiences as a Haitian immigrant, she has the ability to be an artist, creating to communicate her story of immigration, as well as those of her people. Having overlapping identities does not hold this woman back. Instead, it empowers her. She has the ability to speak into many groups of people, including Haitians and Americans. She has the ability to act as a bridge between the two groups, two nations, two totally different worlds.

My name is Rosemary Jones. According to the U.S Department of State, I am one of approximately 4,536 baby girls adopted from China in 2001. In other words, I am not alone and I have never been alone, even when I felt like it at times. There are a scattered group of us out there, girls and boys who were internationally adopted and raised in rainbow families. We do not all have the same stories, nor the same struggles, but we can understand each other better than many others can. It took me a long time to embrace that my physical appearance is beautiful. No, I do not share the same eyes with my mom or hair as my dad (oh, the blessings of that one). I don’t need to share the traits of my parents to be confident and comfortable in my own skin. There is a gap in the literature community relating to international adoptions. We deserve to be known. We deserve to feel like we belong in our nation. Most of the books I have seen that mention adoption relate to either the American foster care system or puppy adoption. I will not go off too far, but let’s be clear and respectful here: I’m human. If people can write children’s books, young adult fiction, memoirs, and short stories on puppy adoption, we can write about human adoption too. That is where I come in.

I am an internationally adopted artist. Take careful note of the duality of that phrase; I am internationally adopted as well as an artist. I have the power to share my story and speak into the lives of many people across the nation and the world. My multiple identities offer me a rare window of opportunity to bridge lives together in understanding and love. I have the power to share my story with several overlapping groups of people and my many identities might allow more people to relate to me. I know that my own story of international adoption cannot sustain the weight of the stories of everyone who was adopted, but it can serve as a good start.

One of the children's books that we had at home when I was growing up was called *The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairytale* by Grace Lin. The author is one of the few to ever write about Chinese adoptions and my family and I always delighted in her works. In *The Red Thread*, Lin weaves a tale of a king and a queen who live in a beautiful kingdom, and rule with fairness and kindness. Except, they begin to experience a horrible pain in their chests, which none of the royal doctors can diagnose. One day, old peddler comes by and reveals that the problem is that there is a red thread tugging at each of their hearts, which he can see wearing a special pair of spectacles. In order to ease their agony, they must follow the thread to see what is at the other end, so that's what the king and queen do. They follow the red thread across mountains and valleys until they come upon what the thread has been leading them to all along: a baby girl. Books have the power to bridge people together—to join rainbow families and unite our nation. Books reveal that we are all much more similar to each other than we thought, but not in the way that our American society promotes. We do not have to be the same color, gender, sexuality, or religion to know struggle and loneliness. Who cares who is liberal and who is conservative? Who cares who has more money than who? Who cares what color skin we wear? We all know what it feels like to be misunderstood. Books reveal to us that we are all rainbows—identifying with many labels and that only offers us the ability to connect with more people. By recognizing our own individualism, we can join together and celebrate our differences and similarities with each other.

In August 2001, a king and queen (as well as their nine year old daughter) felt strong tugs on the strings of their hearts. They travelled from a faraway land, across oceans and nations to find a little baby girl and bring me home. It may seem unconventional; it may seem strange. But who's to say that's a bad thing?