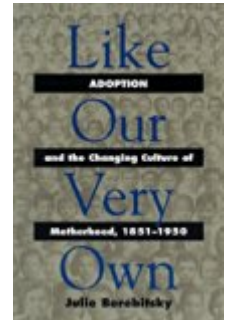


Julie Berebitsky. *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. vii + 248 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1051-8.



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In *Like Our Very Own*, Julie Berebitsky traces "how adoption reflect[ed] and affect[ed] the larger culture's understanding of family" from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century (p. 12). In 1851, Massachusetts became the first state to pass an adoption law, and most states had done so by 1900. Berebitsky shows that over time adoption increasingly became "a positive way to create a family that closely mirrored the biological ideal" (pp.1-2). Biological parenthood remained the model, but after 1920 a growing number of Americans viewed adoptions controlled by social workers and psychologists as an acceptable alternative. This new attitude toward adoption happened at the same time that "social experts and middle-class Americans increasingly focused on the nuclear, democratic family--the sexually satisfied, playfully compatible heterosexual couple with 'planned for' children living in an 'emotionally healthy' home-as the ideal and only legitimate family" (p. 3). But child welfare advocates noted that all families needed expert advice. Professional assistance could make adoptive families exact copies of those created by nature. Good parents, especially mothers, were created, not born. As

child welfare professionals and policy makers embraced the middle-class family ideal, the definition of acceptable adoption practice narrowed. According to Berebitsky, the focus on mirroring the middle-class family ideal made adoption more acceptable, but also reversed liberal adoption patterns common during the early years of legal adoption in the United States. She explains, "in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, adoption, as many Americans understood it, was less rigid, adoptive parents more varied, and the structure of adoptive parents more diverse" than after 1920. In other words, as the middle-class family ideal became entrenched as the prescription for all families, adoption agencies designated a growing segment of the population as inappropriate parents either for a specific child or for any youngster. Blood ties were ideal, but with the help of experts, adopted children could be "like our very own." Those adults deemed outside the ideal were rejected for parenthood.

Berebitsky's book is a welcome addition to studies examining the history of adoption in America. The work is a skillful revision of the au-

thor's well-researched dissertation. Berebitsky integrates original research gleaned from popular magazines, government publications, adoption agency records, and child welfare organizations with previous scholarly studies. For example, Robert Bremner's *Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) includes documents outlining the legal history of adoption in the United States and its greater acceptance by the 1920s. Berebitsky agrees with interpretations included in Marilyn Irvin Holt's *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) that put adoption in the context of the history of foster care, and Peter Holloran's detailed study, *Boston's Wayward Children: Social Services for Homeless Children, 1830-1930* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989) chronicling Boston's civic and charitable support system for orphaned children during a century of change. Berebitsky overlooks Linda Tollett Austin's, *Babies for Sale: The Tennessee Children's Home Adoption Scandal* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), but she acknowledges Linda Gordon's *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) to show that political and moral controversies over adoption were common throughout its history. Berebitsky does not use Judith Dulberger's edited work, *"Mother Don't Fore the Best": Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), but she finds useful parallels in Linda Gordon's *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence in Boston, 1880-1960* (New York: Viking, 1988) that reveal the complex reasons why some children were placed in institutions, with no intention of ever being adopted. To date, E. Wayne Carp's *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) is the most comprehensive history of adoption law and the philosophy surrounding the practice in the United

States and Berebitsky relies on this legal and social examination of disclosure and secrecy.

Berebitsky's focus on the shifting prescriptions for motherhood and their relationship to adoption gives her work a new perspective and firmly places it within the historiography of American women's history. For example, Berebitsky cites Regina Kunzel's, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) and Linda Gordon's, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) as evidence of the growing attention of experts to unwed mothers and their children in early twentieth century America. Other recent works have also looked at this trend in the context of public policy and child welfare advocates' embrace of the middle-class family ideal, including Joanne L. Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and my own, *"A Right to Childhood": The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). The shifting social prescriptions for motherhood and its glorification are examined in Molly Ladd-Taylor's, *Mother-work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) and Ladd-Taylor's edited collection completed with Lauri Umanski, *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). Recent studies by Margaret S. Marsh and Wanda Ronner, *The Empty Cradle: Infertility in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) discuss the increasing pressure on women unable or un-

willing to have children during a century promoting the middle-class family ideal for everyone. Berebitsky's cites most of these works and uses the lens of motherhood for viewing changing attitudes toward adoption. Her research also shows how potential adoptive parents often rejected the experts' embrace of matching and other restrictive policies.

Like Our Very Own follows a chronological and topical organization. The book's first two chapters outline the early years of legal adoption. Berebitsky notes that Massachusetts' 1851 "statute reflected the new sentimental view of children and the cultural emphasis on their needs, especially for nurturance." By the end of the nineteenth century, according to Berebitsky, all state adoption laws centered on the "welfare of the child" (p. 22). She uses the records of the Washington City Orphan Asylum (WCOA), established in 1815 to serve the needs of children made homeless by the British raid on the capital during the War of 1812, the Board of Children's Guardians (BCG), and a Pennsylvania orphanage to uncover the major adoption themes for the nineteenth century. Responding to fears about biological inheritance, *The Delineator* magazine's "Child Rescue Campaign", which began in November 1907 and continued through February 1911, "emphasized the importance of nurturance and environment over heredity in a children's development," (p. 30). Adoptive parents were praised in the press for rescuing needy children and encouraged to believe that they would personally receive psychological benefit from adopting a child. Parents were also assured that children came from "good stock" and had no blood relatives who could "make claim" (p. 34). But, as Berebitsky shows, fears about adopting a child remained. Adults worried that heredity was stronger than good parenting and maternal and paternal ties created through adoption could never equal those resulting from blood relationships.

Chapter three looks at representations of adoptive mothers in the popular press from 1900-1950. "Motherhood and maternal sacrifice were glorified" and it was believed that "all 'normal' women were or wanted to be mothers" (p. 75). The belief that the desire for motherhood was natural, but that good mothering must be learned influenced the broader acceptance of adoptive mothers as "real" parents. Men faced increasing pressure to become fathers. But women were usually the ones to seek out adoption. In chapter four, Berebitsky shows that "for one brief moment in history, the culture's belief in all women's maternal instinct and the relative unpopularity of adoption overlapped and allowed unmarried, theoretically celibate women to become mothers with little, if any, public disapproval" (p. 127). This circumstance also made it possible for older couples to adopt and those with limited means were not discouraged by adoption policies.

This liberal application of adoption law did not last. As Berebitsky shows in Chapter Five, beginning in the 1920s, child-placing professionals altered the practice of adoption and moved it into a new stage. Social workers increased their oversight and by the 1950s held very narrow definitions of "acceptable" families. Couples over thirty-five years of age were judged as too old. Single women and men (always in unusual circumstance) were disqualified as unfit. Most importantly, social and biological matching became common practice. Physical resemblance, similar intellectual capacity (using IQ tests), and religious and cultural background were all considered when matching adoptive parents with children. The ability to provide a "good" home also included income. Many couples wishing to adopt experienced growing frustration as social workers narrowly defined who was an acceptable parent. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the baby boom years, adoption's popularity soared, but the number of couples seeking children far outstripped the pool of available adoptees (a fact that had been true since the turn of the century). Cou-

ples also sought children they could raise from infancy, thereby further underscoring the desire to mirror biological parenting.

Berebitsky also shows that the desire to adopt led many frustrated individuals to reject the standards of professionals, and work outside of the system. International adoptions became increasingly common, beginning in the Korean War years—a situation that clearly rejected the expert practice of "matching." Controversies over transracial adoption grew as a large number of African American children were held in foster care when social workers could not find enough black adoptive families. Couples became willing to adopt children who were "not like them." In her epilogue, Berebitsky argues that since the late 1960s the "innovative potential [of adoption] has resurfaced." She maintains that the growing controversies over adoption practices are signs of the continuing debate "over the meaning, function, and future of the family." Adoption, like the American family, does not have "a static and largely unproblematic past." Instead, adoption as a legal institution and courtroom process developed at a specific historical moment because it responded to the needs of that moment, and it changed as American society changed" (p. 178).

Like Our Very Own is a thoroughly researched and logical study. The focus on shifting attitudes about motherhood illuminates the importance of women's role in adoption policy history. However, it also obscures the experiences of children. Throughout the book there is little attention to the youngsters who are the "objects" of adoption policy. If adoption policy met the "needs of that moment", was it responding to the best interests of children or adults? This is perhaps unfair criticism of a book that clearly focuses on women. It does, however, suggest the need for a similar study centered on children and shifting adoption practices. On another level, the author's apparent admiration for the early years of adoption camouflages the abuses that were also a part

of that era. As Marilyn Holt has shown, not all foster and adoptive parents acted in the best interests of children. And blood ties were and remain an important aspect of adoption law. Biological ties still override psychological binds according to the courts. Such laws are couched in terms highlighting the best interests of the child, but in reality often favor the desires of adults. Berebitsky unintentionally hints at such problems by noting that in the early years adoptive parents were more likely to want boys than girls. But this trend changed as adoption more closely mirrored the middle-class family ideal. Parents often looked to children as a means to maintain their middle-class status or to improve it. The improved status of women suggested that girls could be as good, and perhaps better offspring than boys. Social stereotypes portrayed girls as more passive and easier to control. An educated daughter might attract a husband that could raise the entire family's socio-economic status. In addition, Berebitsky acknowledges that she pays little attention to the role of African Americans in the story of adoption policy. She rightly assumes that because blacks were largely viewed by social workers as outside the middle-class family ideal, they had little affect on formal adoption policy. But greater attention to attitudes about adoption and motherhood among black Americans and other minority groups might provide new perspectives on the ability to resist the professionals' narrowly prescribed ideal. Despite these unanswered questions, Berebitsky has written an insightful and useful history of adoption policy's relationship to the changing definitions of family and motherhood since the mid-nineteenth century. This alone makes the book a welcome addition to the growing literature on American women's history and child welfare policy history.

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