

# Invisible Ties and Secret Origins: Adoption in Literature and Culture

Ned Balbo

Marianne Novy. 2005. *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press. 292 pp. + viii.

**Marianne** Novy's *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* is an essential resource not just for scholars but for anyone who cares about adoption's pervasive influence in our culture. Novy, professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, is a leading voice in the movement to consider adoption as embedded narrative in literature and the arts. The editor of several anthologies, including *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*, she is also a founding cochair of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship (ASAIK), which recently held its second national conference. Novy's work on an earlier book, *Engaging with Shakespeare: Responses of George Eliot and Other Women Novelists* (1994), led directly to the new book. Noting the frequent use of adoptive characters and plot elements in her reading, she formed the idea for a study that would examine "[t]ruth and fiction, reality and pretense [. . .] oppositions [that] are impossible to escape in considering the literary and historical treatment of adoption" (Novy 2005, 4). Novy's insights are valuable on several levels: while they are the products of a mind engaged with the texts at hand, they are also the

result of long reflection on a subject that, for her, is unavoidable. *Reading Adoption*, therefore, achieves a careful balance: through scholarship informed by autobiography, Novy uncovers enduring narratives whose influence extends well beyond the page.

Fundamental to adoption studies is the tension between reality and pretense. In the opening essay, "Reading from an Adopted Position," Novy uses anthropologist Judith Modell's account of Henry J. S. Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) to identify and expose the contradictions of adoption: for example, that "adoption is a fiction, the biological family is the reality, and the two should be regarded as legally and socially identical" (Novy 2005, 4). In fact, few are able to consider the two equivalent and, in practice, most gravitate toward one pole or the other: the belief that parents are either those who raise us or those whose blood we share. The bias toward biology is more common and even finds expression in language, as Novy observes: "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'" (Novy 2005, 5). For some, then, adoptive families can only pretend to be "real"—that is, biological—families. The difficulties are obvious. Birth mothers undergo the trauma of relinquishment, while adoptive parents struggle to see themselves as real parents. Adoptees face legal obstacles in their pursuit of blood-ties, or live within the silence that often surrounds their lives—the taboo against uncovering the past. (In *Journey of the Adopted Self* [1994], Betty Jean Lifton speaks of a "ghost kingdom" in which an adoptee's "forbidden self" seeks the lost birth mother and the child she never raised—a powerful metaphor for losses inseparable from adoptive identity [57–58].) Ultimately, adoptees navigate these contradictions by way of often unacknowledged cultural narratives. At the same time, both sets of parents struggle with clashing signals that alternately reinforce or censure their choices. As Novy puts it, "The United States today is divided in its understanding of motherhood, fatherhood, parenthood, and corresponding issues of family, kinship, and identity" (Novy 2005, 5). Complicating any resolution of these issues are the variety and complexity of historical and contemporary adoption arrangements.

Novy understands this and, in part, offers her own story to clarify her perspective. The daughter of a Jewish-American G.I. and a Christian mother, Novy was born in 1945 and adopted by a Cleveland doctor and his wife. Acutely aware of time and place, Novy offers autobiographical analogues to the areas that *Reading Adoption*

will explore. Especially subtle is “Ethnicity and Religion,” a discussion in which Novy examines the ambivalences of anti-Semitism as well as mid-century attitude that ethnicity would “melt” before the larger force of American identity. Today, by contrast, many adoptions are international and require, at very least, a different response. Especially “where children’s ethnicity is visibly non-European,” she writes, some adoptive families import the relevant culture into their homes (Novy 2005, 18).<sup>1</sup> Recent changes in the ethnic makeup of adoptive families work against the secrecy that adoption arrangements once assumed, the pretense of biological unity exploded with a glance at children whose genetic background clearly differs from their parents’. Still, the concept of ethnicity is not a settled matter, and Novy supports sociologist Mary Waters’s view that ethnic identity is a choice, not a “primordial” characteristic: those of “multiethnic heredity” often decide for themselves “which one or two of their ethnicities they will claim” (Novy 2005, 19). Novy moves smoothly from personal account to cultural critique, recognizing the ways that adoption has changed in recent years while clearly showing how time and place exert their power.<sup>2</sup>

Novy’s method proves its value when she turns to literature. Identifying Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* as foundational adoption texts, Novy looks past the usual critical assumption that “identity and parenthood are based on birth connection” (Novy 2005, 39). Instead, Laius and Jocasta must be recast as birth parents with the distinctions of adoption kept in mind. Novy recounts the possibilities of infant adoption in ancient Greece, including the practice of “exposure” (leaving an unwanted child to die) and explains how the practice, transformed by art, partly inspired narrative patterns that center on issues of identity and fate. Ancient Greece, Novy explains, respected adoptive fatherhood but harbored profound doubts about nongenetic parental bonds. Even so, “nongenetic kinship was imaginable,” however tragically Oedipus’s own discovery ends (Novy 2005, 41–42). The subtitle of Novy’s chapter on Oedipus, “The Shamed Searcher-Hero and the Definition of Parenthood,” captures the taboo against the quest for origins when carried out against a culture’s prohibitions. By contrast, Novy’s analysis of George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* shows how the novel rewrites conventional adoption plots. Raised by Silas, Eppie learns that her true father is Godfrey Cass, Silas’s landlord and party to a scandalous secret marriage; with Eppie’s birth mother long dead, Godfrey asserts his claim to parenthood, but bows to his daughter’s wish to remain with Silas. “In *Silas Marner*, adoptive parenthood is the crucial

parenthood,” Novy observes while acknowledging adoption’s “mythic dimension” (Novy 2005: 125, 123).

This dimension includes adoption’s power as metaphor. Perdita of Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* is a case in point; as metaphor, her name gives her away. As Novy mentions, she is lost and labeled a “cursed wretch,” a line that recalls the curse on adoption in *Oedipus the King*. As an adoptive daughter, however, Perdita is also resonant:

thought to be illegitimate and brought up from childhood by another family, unconnected to her first family, and unaware of her own origin, [she] is the character in these plays whose situation is most similar to that of modern adoptees under the closed-record system. (Novy 2005, 79)

Novy deftly draws the line—the Western norm of closed adoption—that connects the sixteenth century and the twentieth. But in the absence of open discussion, other narratives hold sway as well, their sources residing in high art, popular culture, and the news. Novy herself is not exempt: *Reading Adoption* was born partly in response to Baby Jessica’s story, the 1993 custody case that made headlines across the nation. As birth and adoptive parents fought for the right to raise their daughter, Novy paid attention: “It was in this year, not just because of the case but partly because of the public interest it revealed, that I decided to bring into this conversation the literary history of adoption, as I read it in relation to my own life” (Novy 2005, 6). Although literature is her focus—in part because its narratives are accessible and lasting, in part because it’s her vocation—Novy knows that other sources are equally important, as evident in her awareness of television’s enormously influential *Roots*, or in her references to William March’s *The Bad Seed*, the novel adapted to stage and screen in which the criminal impulse is passed from mother to daughter, its origins hidden in the mother’s adoptive background (Novy 2005: 166, 162–63).

This discourse on adoption, often concealed in plain sight, is finally inescapable. It is one reason why Novy combines memoir and scholarship: it is her opportunity to place a lifetime of reading into the context of a vital, if problematic, institution. It’s also a way to trace the author’s evolving adoptive identity, moving out of its early silences to a more considered position:

In the early 1980s [Novy would have been almost forty] I read *Daniel Deronda* for the first time. This, I felt, was *my book!* I had

never before read any novel that discussed in such detail an adoptee's curiosity about ancestry, discovery that that ancestry was Jewish, nor finding a biological parent only to learn that a relationship with that parent was impossible. (Novy 2005, 122)

Far from disqualifying her as an even-handed scholar, Novy's adoptive background alerts her to key subtexts. She knows that for many who aren't adopted, the practice offers a "fantasy [. . .] to deal with uncongenial parents by imagining better parents elsewhere" (Novy 2005, 123); yet she also knows that real adoptees feel "a gut-level sense of difference," especially when they grow up "closeted"—that is, denying the origins that mark them (Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig 234).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Novy's very method reflects her adoptive position. Like the adoptee obliged to empathize with birth and adoptive parents, she turns to literature, history, sociology, and more in search of a greater understanding than any one perspective holds. Instead of working within the boundaries of a single genre, she blends scholarly rigor with the urgency of memoir. As Novy shows in her afterword, "Locating Myself as an Adult Adoptee," being adopted is a status that generates real-world insights that apply to both literature and life: "Some of the literature I discuss shows possible difficulties in adoptive family life, and I hope that my analyses will help people who experience these difficulties feel less alone and will help others avoid some pitfalls" (Novy 2005, 222).

Interestingly, Novy remarks at one point that Margaret Laurence's novel *The Diviners* is "the only work of literature discussed in this book except Albee's plays in which the author as well as a character is an adoptee" (Novy 2005, 216). Clearly, adoption is an experience that resonates for many, writers and readers alike, whether or not directly touched by it. One reason may be, as Barbara Melosh remarks in *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* (2002), "The law and practice of adoption reveal the larger historical changes that shape all families. [. . .] [It] is a quintessentially American institution, embodying the recklessly optimistic faith in self-construction and social engineering that characterizes much of our history" (10). Novy agrees with this assessment, acknowledging Melosh in *Reading Adoption's* opening essay: the institution is "compatible" with American views of "choice and freedom." Adoption allows families—unwed mothers, infertile couples—to start over; it gives homes to children who were given up. Even so, Novy reminds us, "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 [. . .]” (Novy, 2005, 21). In the United States, adoption is a source of metaphors and narratives in which a nation plays out its anxieties and hopes, its need to believe in reinvention, self-definition, a fresh start. Novy’s book, however, reaches beyond the U.S. to the ancient world, the Globe Theatre, Victorian England, and more, using literature as its compass on an interdisciplinary journey that takes in its vast subject as well as one adoptee’s life. It is wide-ranging, thoroughly researched, always engaging—the work of one who reads literature for the best reason: “to understand imagined people who are unlike me, with a hope that this will also help with real people unlike me” (Novy 2005, 234).

### Notes

1. Adam Pertman's *Adoption Nation* (2000) celebrates these trends in depth.
2. For an account focused squarely on this latter issue, see Julie Berebitsky (2000).
3. David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Marantz Henig analyze this "lifelong search for self" in *Being Adopted* (1992) and other works.

### Works Cited

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