

CHAIN OF LIFE

A FEMINIST ADOPTION REFORM NEWSLETTER

Issue 3 • September/October 1989 ▲ P.O. Box 8081, Berkeley, CA 94707

Editor: Janine Baer

Songs about Adoption

(And Those That Should Have Been)

"Now You Think I Should Be Happy With Your Money and Your Name..."

Over my years as an adoptee, I have heard and enjoyed various songs that seem to express the experience of being adopted -- not only songs specifically about adoption, but those that remind me of some aspect of adoptees' unusual life predicaments.

Let me explain. A song I liked as a teenager in the 1960s, "Johnnie Be Fair" by Buffy Sainte-Marie, can be interpreted to reflect the confusion of the adoptee who doesn't know her origins. Written in a folk music style, this song is about a young woman who can't marry any of the boys in town because, her father confesses: "I'm sad to tell you, daughter, what your mother never knew / Johnnie is a son of mine, and so he's kin to you." This same refrain follows her interest in several other young men.

The ending has a proto-feminist twist. The daughter decides to complain to her mother about the situation, and Mom answers:

Oh daughter, haven't I taught you to forgive and to forget? / And if your father sowed his oats, well, still you needn't fret / Your father may be father to all the boys in town and still / He's not the one who sired you, so marry who you will.

Fear of incest, and the realization that other people (such as the keepers of sealed records) have information about yourself that you don't have, are concerns of adoptees (and donor offspring) reflected in this lively song.

A sad, country-music style song from the '50s that can also be appreciated in an adoption context is "Silver Threads and Golden Needles" by J. Rhodes and R. Reynolds (resurrected in the '70s by Linda Ronstadt). It is a ballad about a lonely woman, who lacks an identity or financial resources separate from her husband's. But with a little imagination, the song's narrator can also be interpreted as an unhappy adoptee who doesn't know her birth name, experiencing the feelings of loss in adoption. "Your cheatin' game" in this context is the closed records system:

Now you think I should be happy / With your money and your name / But I hide myself in sorrow / While you play your cheatin' game / Cause silver threads and golden needles cannot mend this heart of mine / And I dare not drown my sorrow in the warm glow of your wine / You can't buy my love with money, cause I never was that kind / Silver threads and golden needles cannot mend this heart of mine.

Remember "Love Child" by the Supremes in the '60s? Closed records and amended birth certificates function, among other things, to "protect" children from the stigma of so-called "illegitimacy" (a patriarchal concept if ever there were one), and the frequent poverty of single-mother parenthood. Of course, adoptees figure out that their birthparents probably weren't married, since that has been the major



to a favorite blood relative.

reason for adoption in the U.S. in years past. The amended birth certificate provides a veneer of respectability for the adoptive family, but the stigma that society attaches to being a bastard does not escape the adoptee.*

"Love Child" is about a woman who does not want to repeat the stigma of unmarried parenthood with her own child. And with birth control and abortion of limited availability in the 1960s, avoiding sex with her boyfriend is her choice:

il-le-git-i-ma-cy \il-i-'jit-i-mə-sē/ n 1 : the quality or state of being illegitimate 2 : BASTARDY 2
il-le-git-i-mate \-'jit-i-mət/ adj 1 : not recognized as lawful offspring; specif: born of parents not married to each other 2 : not rightly deduced or inferred : ILLOGICAL 3 : departing from the regular : ERRATIC 4 a : not sanctioned by law : ILLEGAL b : not authorized by good usage c of a taxon : published either validly or invalidly but not in accordance with the rules of the relevant international code — **il-le-git-i-mate-ly** adv
il-fat-ed \il-'fat-əd/ adj 1 : having or destined to an evil fate : UNFORTUNATE (an ~ expedition) 2 : that causes or marks the

Don't think that I don't need you / Don't think I don't want to please you / But no child of mine will be bearing / The name of shame I've been wearing / Love child, never quite as good / Ashamed, afraid, misunderstood.

* "Do not use the words 'illegitimate,' 'bastard,' or 'adopted' in casual conversation or out of context. We are illegitimate bastards who are adopted and out of context; there is nothing casual about it" wrote Amy Jane Cheney in *Hints for the Non-adopted in Relating to the Adopted*, 1987. (Continued on page 2)

When Are Lesbian Mothers Safe from Donor Custody Claims?

In issue 2 of CHAIN OF LIFE, I asked if a lawyer could clarify whether contracts between lesbian mothers and sperm donors have been successfully challenged by donors who changed their minds and sought custody. I was familiar with the "Mary K." case (*Jhordan C. v. Mary K.*, 179 Cal. App. 3d 386 (1986)) in which visitation was granted to a donor against the mother's wishes. But I knew that Mary K. and Jhordan C. had not written a contract to explain their relationship, as lesbian mothers are now advised to do. Had other cases resulted in donors winning rights?

To get an answer, I called the offices of attorney Donna Hitchens, an expert in lesbian and gay family law, and spoke to her assistant, Wendell Ricketts. He assured me that the law, at least in California, is clear on this question: mothers who use *medical doctors* to perform the inseminations are safe from custody challenges by donors. It is also recommended that mothers and donors write contracts. He had not heard of any successful donor challenges in California when contracts were used.

To her credit, Hitchens has instituted a registry of the names of donors in conjunction with a woman physician who does inseminations. The registry allows the possibility of a mother or child contacting a donor in case of a medical emergency, or if the child/adult at age 18 wants to try to contact the donor/father, while protecting the family from legal claims of paternity.

This registry is a very enlightened move. Sperm banks and doctors have historically guarded the identity of donors at all cost, and most still do. The Sperm Bank of California in Oakland is an exception, having the "yes donor" option in which donors can choose to have their names made known to their 18-year-old offspring.

Here the distinction between "knowable" and "known" donors should be mentioned. To avoid the chance, however remote, that a known donor who involves himself in the child's life could be declared the "presumptive father," some lesbian parents prefer using a knowable donor, who is known only to a third party (such as a lawyer's registry). His records have not been shredded forever. A knowable donor still may not satisfy a child's curiosity prior to age 18, but is far preferable to an unknown donor in that regard.

Anti-gay sentiment that makes these choices necessary is society's real crime. That the lesbian and gay communities in the San Francisco Bay area have acknowledged the rights of children to have access to the truth of their genealogy by creating donor registries shows a creativity that can become a model for other communities of all sexual orientations. Hitchens and Ricketts discuss these and related issues in their excellent article, "Lesbian and Gay Families: Creating New Traditions in Law," *San Francisco Barrister*, December 1988, pp. 19-23.

For information on the legal situation in other states, Ricketts recommended the National Center for Lesbian Rights, 1370 Mission St., 4th floor, San Francisco, CA 94103, (415) 621-0674.

He also told me that the former foster father I met on Lesbian/Gay Pride day, who was told that his county had a law against lesbian and gay foster parents, was misinformed. California law says the opposite: that foster parents should not be discriminated against solely on the basis of their sexual preference -- and the man should find himself a good lawyer! ▲

"Let us be grateful to our parents: Had they not been tempted, we would not be here."

-- Talmud: 'Abodah Zarah, 5a

(MUSIC, Continued from page 1)

Jumping ahead a decade and a sexual revolution later, in the mid-1970s the Berkeley Women's Music Collective recorded the song "Gay and Proud." Not only was it about the taboo topic of being gay and proud, it was about being an adoptee. Written by Debbie Lempke, the song starts this way:

*I was born a bastard; my mother, well, she
couldn't keep me / Sent me off to a foster home,
where they tried to teach me / that girls can't go
climbing trees or playing with certain toys / got
to dress in dresses or else they're called tom-
boys / But I can say it loud now, I can say it loud
now, Gay and Proud / When I got adopted, they
took me to a shrink / Couldn't understand why I
cut my hair short and didn't want to wear pink.*

A few years ago, a tape of music called "Adoption Adventure" was produced by Beth Lockhart of Arizona. It is the only collection of songs I know of that are specifically about adoption. "Little Green," originally written by Joni Mitchell about a birthmother's experience of relinquishment is a classic (sung by someone else, the original is available on Joni's *Blue* album). "We're Together Now" is a song that conveys some of the emotional realities of relinquishment and reunion, and makes an excellent (if unofficial) theme song for the open records movement. It was written by Steve Rillera, husband of birthmother Mary Jo Rillera.

"One of a Kind," a self-esteem song sung with the help of Native American children, and "Out There Somewhere," about an adoptee searching for her birthmother, are other highlights of the tape. Both were written and sung by woman adoptee Sammi Whytecap.

One song on "Adoption Adventure" that bugs me is "You're My Real Mom and Dad." Sung by a young child to her adoptive parents, the adoptee reassures her parents of their "real" status. I think parents should understand their roles, as well as the importance of birthparents in their child's life, before ever adopting a child to avoid putting their child in this position.

This tape is available from Adoptive Parents' Education Program, P.O. Box 32114, Phoenix, Arizona 85064, (602) 957-2896, for \$9.95 plus \$1. shipping.

I'd be interested to hear of any other songs about adoption -- and those songs that should have been -- to add to this list. ▲

bastard \ˈbɑːstərd/ n [ME, fr. OF] 1: an illegitimate child 2: something that is spurious, irregular, inferior, or of questionable origin 3 a: an offensive or disagreeable person -- used as a generalized term of abuse b: MAN, FELLOW -- **bastardly** adj 2 **bastard** adj 1: ILLEGITIMATE 2: of inferior breed or stock 3: MONGREL 3: of abnormal shape or irregular size 4: of a kind similar to but inferior to or less typical than some standard (~ measles) 5: lacking genuineness or authority: FALSE

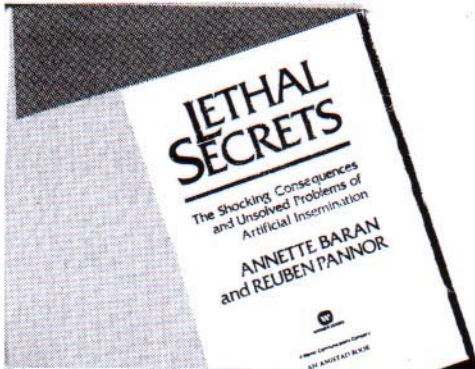
(LETHAL SECRETS, continued from page 3)

mother looked sad, and half-joked that he was selling her grandchildren. Years later, the donor agreed with her view. Baran and Pannor conclude that the typical young donor "has no understanding of the emotional impact of fatherhood . . . He cannot conceive of the lifelong implications of his actions. . ." (p. 97)

Lethal Secrets is not against donor insemination, only the secrecy and anonymity that have been practiced throughout its history. The book recommends DI when there is ongoing communication with a known or knowable donor. This would require a major overhaul of practices entrenched in the male-dominated medical establishment, as well as clear legal protection for lesbian mothers. But children deserve no less than the choice to know their heritage in a society that supports the safety and self-definition of their family units. ▲

Lethal Secrets: New Book About Donor Insemination

Lethal Secrets, by Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor. New York: Warner Books, 1989. 183 pages. \$19.95.



Lethal Secrets is the first book to explore the views of all participants in donor insemination births: the parents who choose DI, a former sperm donor, and the so-called "donor offspring," children conceived by donor (or "artificial") insemination. One chapter is devoted to lesbian mothers who use DI. Another, "Who Is My Father?" describes a group interview of five adult children of donor insemination ranging in age from 16 to 37. Authors Baran and Pannor are social workers whose 1979 book *The Adoption Triangle* is well known for its sensitive exploration of the desire of many adopted people to find their birth relatives -- an outcome of closed records adoption that initially took many people by surprise.

Subtitled "The Shocking Consequences and Unsolved Problems of Artificial Insemination," *Lethal Secrets* uncovers warped family dynamics in heterosexual families in which the true paternal genetic parentage of their children is a secret to the children themselves. (The use of DI is generally a family secret among those heterosexuals who have a child this way.) The biggest problem seems to be an estrangement between the social father and his children. Feeling inadequate because of his infertility, feeling unentitled to a full parental role like that of his wife because he is not a biological parent, the father may suffer in silence, or become critical of his children as a defense against his feelings of inadequacy. A problem in some families, lesbian as well as heterosexual, is the inability of the children to know their donor fathers.

The chapter about lesbian couples avoided prejudice. "How much the participants learned from the researchers is unknown," wrote the authors about the lesbian interviewees. "It is, however, clear that we had a great deal to learn from them." One of the couples used an unknown donor out of fear of custody challenges, based on one of the women's previous experience of losing custody of her child to her ex-husband because she was a lesbian. Some couples interviewed used known or knowable donors.

Initially, I thought it odd that the book described the clothing and physical demeanor of each woman in the five lesbian couples who agreed to meet for the group interview. Then I decided that these descriptions could actually help prevent readers from filling in with their own stereotypes about the way lesbians look.

In this chapter the authors conclude: *...the donor presents many faces to the lesbian couple. He is at once their liberator. . . (and) at worst, the (known) donor could be a legal threat to the vulnerable lesbian couple (pp. 136-37).*

Since children of lesbians generally will know, at some point in their lives if not from the beginning, that they were conceived by donor insemination, secrecy about their conception is not a problem, but not knowing their paternal heritage may be. In families using unknown donors, the children experience "partial openness," of which the authors are critical:

If any group must be aware of the need of available information for the children, it is the group who practices partial openness and then locks the door. We feel that a child growing up with the knowledge of a donor/father needs to know that person as part of his identity formation. (p. 138)

Since they are social workers and not lawyers, the authors do not address ways lesbian families can be protected from custody claims. Fortunately, the lesbian and gay communities have begun to address this issue -- see the article on page 2 in this newsletter for more information.

The perspective that children should have a right to know the donor is not based simply on conjecture, or even on an extrapolation from the concerns of adoptees. In the chapter "Who Is My Father?" all five adult and teenage donor offspring want to know the identity of their donor/fathers. They all believe that donor offspring should eventually be told how they were conceived. A 28-year-old woman in this group said,

I'm struck by the difference between adoptees and donor offspring. Adoption records may be sealed, but the possibility of unsealing exists. For us, they made it a point to never keep records. We have questions and no answers (p. 67).

A 37-year-old man says, "I really think that if a man donates his sperm, he should be willing to have the child he produces meet him." And a 30-year-old man admits, "If I could meet my donor father, I would probably freak out with fear, but I would meet him anyway."

To provide a role model of openness for people using DI, Baran and Pannor include a story about a (heterosexual) couple that manages to meet the donor. The social father chose donor insemination to avoid passing on diabetes to his children, and did not have feelings of inadequacy related to sterility. His wife convinced him that knowing as much about the donor as possible, even meeting him, was desirable.

Their local fertility clinic physician, however, thought they were crazy and refused to perform an insemination in which the couple would meet the donor. But they persisted and found a sympathetic doctor who envisioned "open" donor insemination as an interesting experiment. He knew a donor who was similarly interested in meeting the parents and, as with open adoptions, introduced all parties to each other. They met four times before the inseminations began. The couple was so pleased with their first child that they decided to use the same donor again for a second child.

One day the donor accidentally met his child in the waiting room at the fertility clinic, had a friendly chat with the social father, and the possibility that he might meet the second child at some point was kept open.

Of course most donors never meet their offspring, and sometimes have regrets about their role. A chapter in *Lethal Secrets*, "If I Knew Then What I Know Now," describes a donor's experience. It tells the story of a doctor who helped support himself through medical school with his work as a sperm donor. He recalled that when he had proudly told his parents about his work, they had not been entirely pleased. His

(continued on page 2)

Announcements

•LESBIAN AND GAY-RELATED•

Tape of Lesbian and Gay Adoptee Workshop Available

A cassette tape of the American Adoption Congress workshop, "Lesbian and Gay Adoptee Issues" presented in April 1989 at the national conference in New York is available by mail. Send \$9.75 to: Von Ende Communications, 3211 St. Margaret Drive, Golden Valley, MN 55422 (612) 529-4493. Ask for tape # 61.

Eighty-five other workshop tapes on adoption are also available. (I haven't received my copy yet, but I'm still hopeful.) ▲

Children of Gays Meet

Teenage children of gay men and lesbians held their own conference in May, as part of the 10th annual conference of the Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Twenty-five teenagers participated in the conference, and are planning to publish a newsletter called "Just for Us," to be distributed to children of gay and lesbian parents across the country. ▲

-- information from Gay Community News, Boston, July 16-22, 1989

Choosing Children on Video

Choosing Children, the award-winning film about lesbians deciding to parent, is available on home video for \$69. plus \$5. shipping. Write to: Cambridge Documentary Films, P.O. Box 385, Dept. OB, Cambridge, MA 02139. ▲

from

Legacy

by Pat Parker
1944-1989

There are those who think
or perhaps don't think
that children and lesbians
together can't make a family
that we create an extension
of perversion

They think
or perhaps don't think
that we have different relationships
with our children
that instead of getting up
in the middle of the night
for a 2 AM and 6 AM feeding
we rise up and chant
"you're gonna be a dyke
you're gonna be a dyke." . . .

Pat Parker was a Black lesbian poet and adoptive mother. She died recently of breast cancer. This excerpt is from *Jonestown and other madness*, published in 1985 by Firebrand Books, Ithaca, New York. (\$5.95). Ask your local bookstore for it.

•ADOPTION-RELATED•

Sealed Records: Producing a Documentary Film about Relinquishment and Adoption

This 58-minute 16mm film will tell the true story of the life-long effects of relinquishment and adoption for birthparents, adoptees and adoptive parents. The film will be shown in high school classrooms, universities and colleges, community and rehabilitation centers, infertility and unplanned pregnancy programs, adoption support groups and on public television.

We recently filmed the American Adoption Congress rally and speakout August 5th, and need to raise \$1200 to process and get a workprint of the 99 minutes we shot. Once this money is raised, we will be fundraising to interview the over 100 triad members we do have.

If you can do a fundraiser in your home, we have a 10-minute video sample. Or make a tax deductible donation; please make checks out to: Film Arts Foundation, and mail to SEALED RECORDS, 2431 - 24th Street, San Francisco, CA 94110. Or call Sheila Ganz at (415) 821-0436. Thank you! ▲

The WOMB BBS

*An Adoption- and Search-related
Computer Bulletin Board System*

General Message Base; Electronic Mail;
Dedicated Message Bases for Adoptees,
Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents;
Reprints of Adoption-Related Articles
from Newspapers and Magazines;
Users' Search & Reunion Stories;
National Calendar of Events;
And Much, Much More!

To Log Onto The WOMB BBS, Call
(718) 998-6303

24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 8N1

TRY Adoption Center Opens in Massachusetts

TRY, Today Reunites Yesterday, is opening a center at 214 State Street, (P.O. Box 989) Northampton, Massachusetts 01060. TRY offers a library about adoption, basic search information, and a newsletter. Call (413) 584-6599. ▲

Search Consultant in Florida

Rachel Rivers of OASIS is a search consultant in Florida. OASIS stands for "Organized Adoption Search Information Services." If you are searching for birth parents or a relinquished child, you can write to her at: OASIS, P.O. Box 53-0761, Miami Shores, FL 33153; (305) 945-2758. ▲

Adopt a Refugee

Newsweek magazine (July 24, 1989) wrote of the "Plight of the 'Border Orphans.'" These are Central American refugees under the age of 18, mostly boys, who would love to be adopted as a way to stay in the U.S., often to escape the draft in their native countries, where official armies and opposition forces both may draft children as young as 14.

Some of these teenagers are truly orphans, having seen their families killed by death squads. Ninety percent of refugees who are caught by the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) are sent back to their home countries, but judges are reluctant to deport smaller children, who remain in detention centers in border states like Texas and California. Some are placed in adoptive or foster homes by religious and private organizations. ▲

New Open Adoption Newsletter

AdoptNet is a newsletter about open adoption, edited by an adoptive mother. Write: AdoptNet, P.O. Box 50514, Palo Alto, CA 94303. ▲