

Book Reviews

Not Exactly as Planned: A Memoir of Adoption, Secrets and Abiding Love

Linda Rosenbaum
Bradford: Demeter Press, 2014

REVIEWED BY BRUNA ALVAREZ

Not Exactly as Planned is an autobiographical story by Linda Rosenbaum about her experience as a mother of two children adopted at birth (Michel and Sarah). Linda's son Michel was diagnosed at age six with irreversible brain damage from fetal alcohol syndrome.

Although the story is focused on Rosenbaum's motherhood experience, she also describes some episodes from her own childhood, which give context to explain her point of view about family secrets. Because of her grandmother's mental illness, that was maintained in secret, Linda consciously decides not to keep secrets in her own family. The book's narrative turns around Linda's struggle to accept her own family secrets.

Moving from Detroit to Washington, Linda eventually arrived in Canada, to Toronto Island. There she met Robert, whom she married. When they decided to have a child, Linda was unable to get pregnant due to polycystic ovarian syndrome. After spending a year trying, Linda and Robert decided to adopt. In Canada, adoption is not considered a secret, as it is in some other countries. So they let people know that they were looking for a birth mother

to offer them a child in adoption. One interesting feature of this book is the author's experiences with the two birth mothers of her children, which are totally different. The first one was a woman living with addiction from the same neighborhood where Linda and Robert were living, who didn't want to know anything about the baby or his future adoptive parents. This situation obliged Linda to keep a family secret about the identity of her son's birth mother, because they often met on the island. The second birth mother phoned the author's family in response to a newspaper ad. Although it was an open adoption, it wasn't until eighteen years later that the birth mother met in person with the author's family and their daughter. But they had been in phone contact since the birth.

Although the title of the book refers to the older son's illness, diagnosed when he was six years old, the author doesn't focus her story on her son's difficulties, but rather on how they have managed his differences. She reveals moments of anxiety, guilty and mother blame before they were told that their son had fetal alcohol syndrome. From that point, she details a story of the struggle to help Michel meet his goals, like having a Bar Mitzvah. Linda is Jewish, and although Robert isn't, they give a religious education to their children.

Far from the feeling of "it's not a big deal if you have a child with fetal alcohol syndrome" or "you can do the same as others," Linda describes with bittersweet words the very difficult moments of everyday life. For example, she describes the series of events that brought Michel to live in an institution for one year and her fears that he may never live without assistance. The secret of the book's narrative is that Linda explains all struggle in a positive way, and uses few—but very harsh—words explaining the real everyday difficulties.

This book shows how a difficult situation has been managed and described in a matter-of-fact way, without avoiding mentioning the great difficulties. At the same time, it's not a story about heroes. Rather, it is a story of a human life full of contradictions, and of finding happiness in the midst of the struggle to accept a new, never-before-imagined reality.

This book is a private story that is made public in order to make visible the struggles of a mother and family with a special-needs child. At the same time, this particular story shows us that family happiness is also possible, and that despite the challenges she faced, Rosenbaum was able to become a mother and a writer: <http://www.lindarosenbaum.com>.