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Pieces of Me: Who Do You Want to Be?

(Ed.) R Ballard, EMK PRESS 2009

A rich seam of articles, emotive art, music and poetry, EMK Press's new book for adopted teens and their families will attract attention within the adoption community. With an adoptee at the helm as editor, the book's credibility and credentials are without doubt, pulling together as it does material from international adoptees, folks from foster care, and also the thoughts of adoption professionals and adoptive parents. Sometimes, the authors combine all of these titles, underscoring that the voices in the book speak from all sides of the adoption triad.

Who will the book attract as readers? It's clear that the intention is that the book follows in the EMK Press mould of 'toolkit' handbooks and that this is designed for adoptees in their teens. Cleverly taking the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle, and different ways one can put it together (and the frustrations when pieces don't fit or get lost), there's an instant appeal to younger teens. After a short editorial 'direction' on how each section is broken up in a way that may be helpful to teen adoptees (and general readers) – then, as it should be, the puzzle pieces are represented by the voices of the authors. Is the editorial steer a little directed? Not necessarily although the direction is there. Rather, each entry to the book within its five major sections (Gathering the Pieces, Stolen Pieces, Fitting the Pieces, Sharing the Pieces and Where Do these Pieces go?) tumbles the analogy of the jigsaw upside down and over. It's as if the pieces are within a kaleidoscope in ever changing positions – so that readers can read them from their own perspective and make of them what they will. The editorial steer simply helps the reader turn the kaleidoscope wheel.

Do the sections of the book make sense? Does the jigsaw puzzle piece analogy holdup, or is it strained? There a wealth of material in this book... at times it seems that articles from one section could just as well be part of another section. Yet rather and far more – they are all part of the jigsaw puzzle. It's natural that there's an overlap, and that articles flow over from one section to another. However, for younger adoptees, kids for whom what books say dictates thinking – this may confuse. Hopefully post publication, and with the establishment of chat room connections via the book, as the editor hopes, the walls of discrete chapters will fall down. After all, the 'trope' of the separate book chapter, and that of different ways of handling 'pieces of me' are only ways to get a grasp of the shape-changing conundrum that most adoptees see as their being.

Does the book succeed as a book for adopted teens? The contributors range in age from young teens to grown adults. Much of the book is however written by older adoptees, late teens and beyond. And this is as it should be, since the these are the mentoring voices of experience today's adopted teens and their families need to hear, before trying to work out for themselves how to piece together their journey within adoption. There's a caveat,

however. The language of the articles is uncompromisingly literate, literary and complex. Younger teens and also teens adopted at an older age, especially transnationally, may struggle somewhat with the length and depth of the articles.

The editor has, however, quite clearly attempted to 'lighten the literary load' for the younger audience with easily grasped 'thought provoking questions' in 'thought bubbles' deriving from teen mag art, and with layout art (pages designed to look like torn off jotter sheets) encouraging kids to journal/reflect on what effect different aspects of the book have on the reader. Whether or not this will make the book an effective tool for the younger and/or less literate teen will emerge as the book is read by its target audience. And, with care and permission, parents and professionals could use these pages in conjunction with snippets of the book, and make a smaller version of the book to suit early teen needs, and until the kid is ready to dip into the book on their own.

Does the book present too optimistic a view? That no matter what, adoptees can find a way? There will be adoptees that say yes, this book is overly optimistic about 'finding a way to a psychic home'. But in my view this book is entitled to present stories where the authors – or people presenting their stories – find a way even in sadness, adversity and yes even in death to help others. Each story in this book might well be the candle in the dark for an adoptee searching for connections.

Will it find a home on the shelves of adoptive parents and adoption professionals? Parents should find the book illuminating, poignant, perhaps hard to take, and a tool that should encourage them to listen to their adopted teens... but watch out for the advice of contributor Melanie Recoy in her '**A Bored Game**' – a spoofed take on how kids can 'help' parents NOT listen. Most enjoyable! Professionals should certainly be able to use the book with adopted clients and family, and agencies should have the book as a resource for adoption education. The book has an associated Guide for professionals, which may be ordered separately (priced separately also) from EMK Press (www.emkpress.com).

Is the book satisfying on the eye and indeed ear (there are links to music)? The art work (contributed by adoptees) is of high quality; the layout mostly pleasing. Finally, the title. The title words, Pieces of Me, chosen by contributor Angel Coldiron, an outstanding contributor to the book, are exactly right, and the front cover illustrates this beautifully. Yet, 'Pieces of Me' perhaps isn't so much a puzzle – it may be thought of as a route planner. It may help adopted teens (and their families) negotiate the maze in which they find themselves when they hit their teens... the narratives in the book are signposts. Teens and indeed older adoptees may find these narratives familiar and comforting. Families – and professional workers - need then hear the narratives, from the book and from sons/daughters/siblings and clients, with newly attuned ears – attuned by this book.

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Sheena Macrae was involved in bringing together some of the contributors for this book, particularly the UK contributors, in her role as an Editor for EMK Press