

Volume 4

Fall 2002

Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship



Saffian and Storage to Read at MLA

At the 2002 Modern Language Association Convention, the Alliance will hold a reading of poetry and prose about adoption, with Sarah Saffian and Patricia Storage, in the New York Room of the New York Hilton, from 5:15 to 6:30pm on Sunday, December 29. The reading will be preceded by a short business meeting, beginning at 5:00pm in the same room.

Patricia Storage is the author of *Heredity*, in which some poems are about the condition of being adopted, and of the travel book, *Dinner with Persephone*, which deals with adoption as well as Greece. Sarah Saffian's memoir, *Ithaka*, is built

around the story of her relationship with the birth parents who have been searching for her.

[Ithaka is an] unsparingly honest memoir... [I] intriguing insights into the nature of family, of loyalty, of inheritance, of what we're born with and what we're given along the way by those who love us most.
-- Francine Prose

Saffian has written for such publications as the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mirabella*, *US Weekly*, and *Rosie*, where she contributes a regular column about foster children as well as features about adoption and other subjects. She has spoken on adoption at many events, and taught an on-line course about identity through Harvard Law

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"A MULTILAYERED NOVEL THAT PROVES PROFOUND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY ... SAFFIAN EXPLORES THIS COMPLICATED MATERIAL IN BEAUTIFULLY SEARCHED PROSE ... CREATE A BOOK THAT GROWS RICHER PAGE BY PAGE."
--The New York Times Book Review

A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR OF
BEING FOUND
SARAH SAFFIAN

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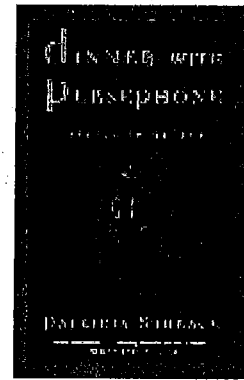
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School. Andrea Cooper, in a *New York Times* review of *Ithaka*, says that it “probes profound questions of identity [...] Saffian explores this complicated material in beautifully nuanced prose to create a book that grows richer page by page.”

Storace is the winner of a prize for poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Author Mary Gordon writes, “Patricia Storace’s poetry is a rare combination of the formal and the personal, the rigorously observed and deeply felt. A pleasure equally to the senses and to mind.”

Her *Dinner with Persephone* was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and her essays have appeared in *The New York Review of Books* and *Conde Nast Traveler*. This spring she will publish her first children’s book, a fairy tale set on a Caribbean sugar island. She is now working on her first adult novel.

The reading is classified by the MLA as a special event and will be open to the public. For more information, contact Alliance co-chair, Marianne Novy (mnovy+@pitt.edu).

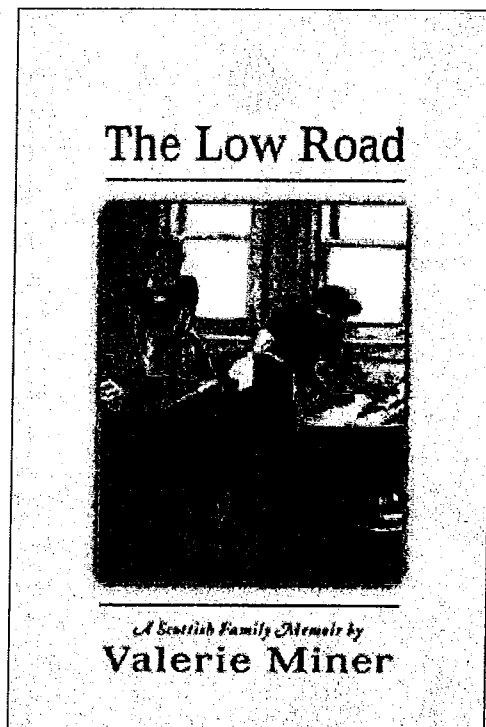


[Dinner with Persephone] succeeds brilliantly in conveying the tension between past and present, East and West – a haunting sense of continuity that is at the same time a poignant feeling of change and loss.

– Barry Umsworth, *NYTBR*

Valerie Miner, *The Low Road: A Scottish Family Memoir* (Michigan State UP, 2001)

Reviewed by Ned Balbo



Valerie Miner's *The Low Road* is an impressive account of family ties lost, concealed, and imperfectly renewed from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first. A novelist and journalist with ten books to her credit, Miner's mastery of both crafts proves essential to her project: the re-discovery and re-imagining of her Scottish forebears' lives, in particular the love affair between grandparents Mae and Daniel who left their respective spouses to pursue a life together.

Miner's quest to arrive at truth requires multiple perspectives: some chapters interrogate the author's very wish to uncover the past, others follow her travels and research, while still others depict her family with a novelist's ease and empathy. Whatever a given chapter's focus, loss takes a central place. The illicit love between Mae and Daniel brings grief to

both their households, as each abandons spouse and children despite efforts to bridge the gap. In "Mae, Edinburgh, 1916," for example, she visits the children left behind only to find that their father has taught them, "We have no mother." Loss lies ahead as well; though Daniel and Mae are together the parents of three—including the writer's mother, Mary (another Mae)—Miner's ancestor dies young, at only thirty-seven, victim of the botched abortion that her poverty compels.

The Low Road's focus falls mainly on both Maes, grandmother and mother, each of whom casts a revealing light on gender and identity. If Mae the elder's lack of health care typifies her times and class, so, too, is she remarkably independent, casting aside respectability for love and personal freedom. Mae the younger is equally a model of her times. An emigrant vividly imagined as "On Her Way" in 1930, forging friendships with other expatriate women on an Atlantic crossing, she is affectionately recalled in "My Life With the Windsors" both as a mother in the U.S. reluctant to cut all ties with Britain, and the old woman of Miner's adulthood who, at times, revises the past. One of that past's worst tragedies is the loss of a sister, Peggy. By 1920 a widower afflicted with TB, Daniel consents to give up his daughter Mae. A former neighbor, Mrs. MacGregor, will surely offer a better life, "comfortable" as she is compared to Daniel's straits, but Mae undermines this adoption, reluctant to leave her father helpless and eager to help the sister who, ultimately, takes Mae's place in the arrangement.

Miner admits in the introduction that, despite painstaking research, "I still weigh everything against memory [...] Yes, this is the story I have been writing for my whole life. This is the story I will never know well enough to write." This delicate balance of impulses—to disclose and to hold back, to imagine and then to question, to look back with love and grief, but, also, to look forward—beautifully guides this "concert of voices" that, in the absence of Miner's efforts, would have vanished into history's dislocations. Ultimately, *The Low Road* is extraordinary for its compassion and also for the historical rigor to which Miner submits her family's lives.

Nancy Newman, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Avon, 2002)

Reviewed by Martha Satz



Sarah Bridges, the protagonist of Nancy Newman's novel, *Disturbing the Peace*, often sees herself as a heroine in a Nancy Drew adventure. Unfortunately, this device is perhaps more apropos than the author would like. This novel, ostensibly written for adults, explores motivation, develops character, and elaborates plot on a level more characteristic of novels written for young adults, at that, the lighter kind -- mysteries such as Nancy Drew.

Sara teaches ESL, English as a Second Language, and passionately devotes herself to making her adult students' lives better. However, this enterprise comprises all of her passion. Her romantic life is lackluster and superficial. At thirty-five, she has one failed marriage and a superficial relationship. No wonder, since she engages with her studly boyfriend in

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such dialogues as the following. When he asks, "So how've you been? Who are you getting it on with these days?" she responds in her inimitable, witty fashion, "My right hand, but it's a terrible conversationalist. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

All of this changes when she meets the romantic, brilliant millionaire Alex to whom, in a rash moment, she confesses her secret: she does not know the identity of her biological mother. This exchange precipitates a quasi-nervous breakdown and a frantic search for her birth mother, during which she meets the usual obstacles: hostile lawyers and record keepers. However, with surprisingly little effort and a series of coincidences, again reminiscent of Nancy Drew, she finds her birth mother. Their reunion is rocky, not the storybook ending that Sarah had envisioned. Gradually, they forge a relationship. This reunion between mother and daughter frees Sarah to confess her love to Alex and to right misunderstandings with students, clarifying former mistakes with such comments as: "You see, your loneliness reminded me of my own loneliness -- which was something I was trying to ignore. The truth is, I'm a terrible coward. I've been a coward my whole life."

Newman herself is not a member of the adoption triangle. However, the psychological steps she portrays in an adoptee's search follow the stages often captured in search narratives. The problem with this novel is not psychological but phenomenological inaccuracy. Sara is a two-dimensional figure with conventional and stereotypical motivations. As readers, we do not understand her motives for pursuing her mother except for such conventional explanations as, "You can't have any kind of authentic future if you don't understand the past[...]."

Novelistic portrayals of adoption can enrich our understandings of the interplay of emotions involved. We think of such novels as P. D. James' *Innocent Blood*. Nancy Newman's novel does not do so, not because she does not understand adoption, but because her novelistic aspirations are so low.

Membership News



Ned Balbo published an adoption-centered long poem, "Vertigo" in *Crab Orchard Review* (Summer 2002). The essay, "Walt Whitman's Finches: Of Discretion and Disclosure in Autobiography and Adoption" won *Crab Orchard Review's* John Gunyon Literary Nonfiction Prize and will appear in the Fall/Winter, 2002 issue of the journal. *Galileo's Banquet*, a poetry collection that in part explores adoptive issues, appeared from Washington Writers' Publishing House in 1998 and won that year's Towson University Prize for Literature given to a book by a Maryland writer under 40. This summer, Loyola College funded Ned's reading project on adoption.

Karen Balcom published, "Scandal and Social Policy: The Ideal Maternity Home and the Evolution of Social Policy in Nova Scotia, 1940-1951" in *Acadiensis* 31.2 (Spring 2002): 3-37. She defended her dissertation, *The Traffic in Babies: Cross-Border Adoption, Baby-Selling and the Development of Child Welfare Systems in Canada and the United States, 1930-1960* last October, 2001 at Rutgers University. In January, 2002, she gave birth to her daughter, Caroline.

Cynthia Callahan published, "The Confounding Problem of Race: Passing and Adoption in Charles Chesnutt's *The Quarry*" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.2 (2002): 314-40. Last spring she taught a course on adoption and literature at Trinity College in Hartford. She is completing her dissertation on fictional representations of transracial adoption, *Birth Writes: Adoptive Identities in American Literature*.

Jill R. Deans presented "Killing Off the Birth Mother: Cultural Implications in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee and Linda Hogan," at the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) conference in October, 2001. Her article, "The Roots of Contemporary Adoption Autobiography: Florence Fisher and Betty Jean Lifton" will appear in an upcoming special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* on adoption autobiography that she is co-editing with Emily Hipchen. In April, 2003, she will give a paper on adoption in children's literature at the annual Popular Culture Association conference. She recently moved to Haverford, PA and is expecting her second child any day now.

Marley Elizabeth Greiner delivered a paper on the National Council for Adoption (NCFCA) at the Bastard Nation conference in New Orleans in May, 2002. She is currently working on a research piece on fundamental Christianity and adoption. Marley is Executive Chair of Bastard Nation, Acting Chair of the BN Great Lakes Region, and Director of BN-Ohio.

Emily Hipchen is co-editing a special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* on adoption autobiography with Jill Deans. She recently moved to Florida where she is finishing up her dissertation for the University of Wisconsin.

Claudia Nelson's book *Little Strangers: Perceptions of Adoption Before the Great Depression* is forthcoming from Indiana University Press in 2003.

Marianne Novy presented, "Adoptive Mothering in George Eliot and Barbara Kingsolver," at the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) conference in October, 2001. She also presented, "Adoption in Contemporary Theater" at the American Adoption Congress (AAC) convention in April, 2002. She organized this year's special event at the Modern Language Association (M.L.A.) convention and continues to work on a book project, *Fictions of Adoption*.

Martha Satz presented, "Bad Mothering and Othering One's Child: Monstrous Children in Three Recent Narratives by Doris Lessing, Ann Kimble Loux, and Michael Dorris" at the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) conference in October, 2001. She also presented, "Finding Oneself: Images of Adoption in Children's Literature" at the 2002 South Central Modern Language Association (SCMLA) conference.

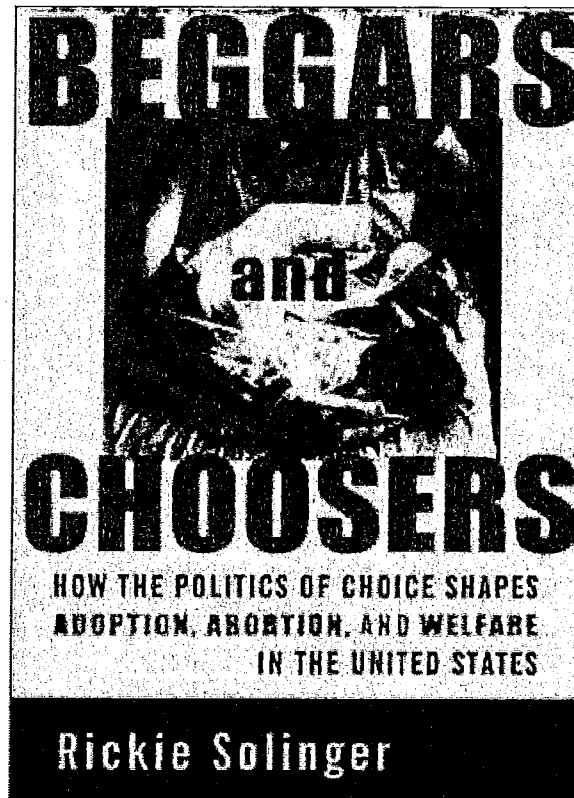
Carol J. Singley edited with Caroline Levander an anthology of critical essays, *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, forthcoming from Rutgers University Press in 2003. One essay, she notes, by Catherine Ceniza Choy and Gregory Paul Choy, specifically addresses adoption: "Assuming Identities: Korean American Adoptees and the Social Constructions of an American Childhood." Carol also presented a paper, "Narratives of Salvation (and Damnation?): Birth Mothers in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Fiction" at the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) conference in October, 2001.

Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare* (Hill & Wang/FSG 2001)

Reviewed by Carol J. Singley

In her 1992 book, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade*, Rickie Solinger champions the cause of birth mothers who, in the 1950s and 1960s, were pressured to place their babies for adoption. In *The Abortionist: A Woman Against the Law* (1994), she exposes injustices to women pre-Roe v. Wade. *Beggars and Choosers* extends these arguments, showing how political and social forces conspire to create an environment hostile to poor, young, unmarried women involved with abortion, adoption, and welfare. Central to Solinger's argument is the meaning of the terms "rights" and "choice" as they have developed over the past thirty years. She maintains that the concept of reproductive rights for women, marked by the Supreme Court's 1973 decision granting women the right to legal abortion, has degraded into a rhetoric of choice, a term laden with consumerism and myths of "free choice." Choice, Solinger persuasively shows, does not exist for many women (21).

Using *Roe v. Wade* as a starting point, Solinger notes that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, advocates of legalized abortion used the term "rights." However, in response to anti-abortion pressure, they accepted a semantic substitution whereby the *right* to legal abortion became construed as a *choice*. This view of women as choice-makers, while ostensibly praising individual autonomy, became a tool by which women – especially those marginalized by age, race, or earnings – were labeled bad choice-makers and targeted for political, economic, or social sanction. Reproductive freedom, Solinger maintains, is not so much a choice as a benefit that privileged women enjoy, frequently at the expense of those less privileged.



Solinger first focuses on a pervasive, terrifying image associated with pre-abortion rights days: the Back Alley Butcher. This powerful icon was often engaged by those arguing for the guarantee of women's reproductive rights. Yet Solinger notes problems with the image. It deflects attention away from the true source of danger to women: the law. A lack of reproductive rights led women to self-abort, often with dire consequences, or to accept sterilization or humiliating diagnoses of psychiatric incapacity. Moreover, the image of the Back Alley Butcher, with its focus on protection rather than rights, presents women as powerless victims rather than agents capable of winning the battle for reproductive rights. One happy outcome, Solinger notes, is that women did prevail in gaining the right to abortion despite the negative power of this image.

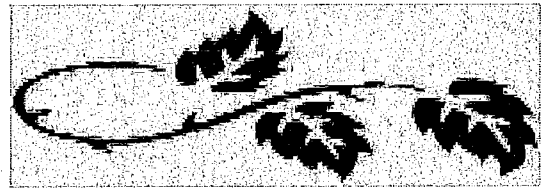
Discussing adoption next, Solinger challenges the assumptions of the media, adoption agencies, and adoptive parents that adoption works for all concerned. Since *Roe v. Wade*, the stigma of single motherhood has lessened and

fewer U.S. babies have been placed for adoption; however, Solinger links past and present by explaining that inter-country adoptions are increasingly the avenue by which infertile middle-class couples realize their dreams of having children. The high fees that U.S. couples are able to pay for adoptions in less affluent third-world countries set a price for adoption that families within those countries cannot afford. The flow of children, within the U.S. and without, is from poor women, families, and countries to those better off. Noting that "some women's choices depend on exploiting the relative choicelessness of other women" (22), Solinger asks why the right to motherhood should be contingent upon economic status. Why, she continues, doesn't current legislation aimed at subsidizing middle-class adoptive couples also help low-income, single, or uneducated women to keep and raise their babies? She cites the success of some advocacy groups such as Concerned United Birthmothers (CUB) in shaping policies that support birth mothers.

Solinger concludes her analysis with a focus on the Welfare Queen, a media image that emerged in the late 1960s and expressed public hostility toward welfare generally. Operating from a notion of choice rather than rights, Americans increasingly accepted a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor and made African-American women scapegoats for frustrations that stemmed not from individual abuses of welfare but from larger, more systemic economic causes such as de-industrialization and the lack of economic opportunities for minorities. Solinger's data demonstrates that popular social policies are shaped not just by material facts, but by belief systems often biased against poor, young women and women of color.

Beggars and Choosers is significant because it not only advocates for disenfranchised women but also places abortion, adoption, and welfare practices in fresh historical perspective. Solinger's argument and angle of vision may leave readers enlightened but uncomfortable, for her audience – educated and informed – is

likely of the privileged class that she indicts. Although Solinger does not propose specific programs – aside from recommending support for young, uneducated women to keep their babies – at the heart of her argument is a call for feminist political action that crosses race, gender, and class lines. There are few signs of fervent activism of the kind witnessed in the late 1960s and early 1970s; but still, the first step toward change is awareness, and this Solinger admirably achieves.



Beggars and Choosers: Motherhood is *Not* a Class Privilege in America

Photo Exhibit

Accompanying the publication of Solinger's latest book is a traveling photography exhibit funded by the Open Society Institute and featuring nationally acclaimed photographers such as Eli Reed, Donna Ferrato, Betty Ann Keneally, and Steve Rubin. The exhibit "challenges prevailing ideas that motherhood in America is a class privilege" through complex contemporary images of motherhood.

For more information, visit www.beggarsandchoosers.org on the internet.

Announcements

Annual Business Meeting

The Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship will hold its annual business meeting at the Modern Language Association convention in New York City, December 29, 2002 at 5:00pm in the New York Room of the New York Hilton. Items for business will include: 2003 MLA convention proposal; ASAIK website; voting for new chair and executive board members; funding initiatives. Suggestions for further items may be submitted to co-chairs Marianne Novy (mnovy+@pitt.edu) and Carol J. Singley (singley@camden.rutgers.edu). Immediately following the meeting, the Alliance will host a reading by authors Sarah Saffian and Patricia Storace in the same room (see page 1).

New Listserv Address

The address for the listserv has been simplified. The new address is: adopt_lit@list.smu.edu to post a message. To subscribe to the list, go to the website <list.smu.edu> (note: no "www") and click on "University Lists." Go to adopt_list and follow the subscription procedure. You should receive confirmation if the subscription is successful. If you have questions, contact our list owner, Martha Satz: msatz@mail.smu.edu.

New Monthly Online/Email Newsletter

This summer the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute launched the Adoption Institute (AI) Newsletter to be published on a monthly basis at its website: www.adoptioninstitute.org/newsletter. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute is a national non-for-profit organization devoted to improving adoption policy and practice. The newsletter summarizes current policy and research initiatives, statistics, media response and public opinion and includes links for more information. You may sign up to receive an email version of the newsletter at: www.adoptioninstitute.org/mail.html, or simply view issues online.

CFPs from A.R.M.

The Association for Research on Mothering, based at York University in Toronto, has frequent calls for papers related to issues of adoption, identity, and kinship. Upcoming calls include papers for a conference on Mothering, Religion and Spirituality (October 24-26, 2003), abstracts due March 1, 2003 and papers for a journal issue, "Mothering and Teaching in the Academe" due May 1, 2003. For more information, see the website for the Centre for Research on Mothering: www.yorku.ca/crm.

Adoption Forum Annual Conference

November 23, 2002, Fort Washington Expo Center, Fort Washington, PA. Keynote speaker is Nancy Robinson, author of *Touched by Adoption*. Workshop presenters include Carol Schaefer and Sarah Saffian. For more information, contact: Karen DeLuca: kdeluca@comcast.net