

## *ASAIK Conference to be held in Tampa in November*

On November 17-20, the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity and Kinship is holding a conference that will bring forty-three scholars, filmmakers, writers, artists, and activists to speak at the University of Tampa on Adoption and Culture. Organized by a planning committee consisting of Emily Hipchen, Marianne Novy, and Carol Singley, with special help from Jill Deans, the conference has received financial support from the University of Tampa, the University of Pittsburgh, Rutgers University-Camden, and the Florida Humanities Council.

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Speakers will come from as far away as Sweden and (finances permitting) India, and events will include films, papers on literature, history, sociology, philosophy, and film, readings of memoirs, poems, and fiction (three pre-scheduled and one open mike event), a panel of directors of adoption research and education centers, and a discussion of the future of adoption culture studies. Thanks to the Florida Humanities Council sponsorship, the films, the keynote panel of Ellen Herman and Barbara Katz Rothman, and the panel on adoption in British literature and culture are open without charge to the public.

To register, visit the conference website at [utweb.ut.edu/Faculty/Ehipchen](http://utweb.ut.edu/Faculty/Ehipchen). The conference rate of \$109/night at the Tampa Riverwalk Hotel, half a mile from the conference site, is available only through October 15. Please contact the hotel at (813) 223-2222 for conference accommodations.

# Teaching the Conflicts of Adoption Literature

Marianne Novy  
University of Pittsburgh

Teaching a course in the literature of adoption confronts a class with intellectual issues that for many may be inextricably connected with emotional issues based on their own experience. Adoption literature always deals to some extent with the question of how parenthood is most importantly defined—by biology or nurture. An intellectually honest syllabus should represent a range of views on this question.

When I taught Adoption Literature to undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh, I began with two influential texts that give opposite definitions of parenthood: Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* and George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. *The Winter's Tale* includes the plot of many fairy tales and folklore: a daughter has been separated from her parents and is reunited with them at the end. The parents she was born to are assumed to be her real parents; the man she thought of as her father is revealed to be just a substitute and is forgotten at the end (the woman she thought of as her mother has died long before). On the other hand, *Silas Marner* presents the man who provides the nurture as deserving to be called father and to keep the affection of his daughter, displacing the genetic father. I then followed up with Barbara Kingsolver's two adoption novels, *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*, because they

present such a striking contrast of perspective in spite of having been written by the same author. *The Bean Trees*, like *Silas Marner*, makes a point of using nurture to define parenthood—affirming that Taylor, the adoptive mother of a Cherokee child, is her real mother—and associating adoptive parenthood with nature. On the other hand, *Pigs in Heaven* gives more weight to genetics, ancestry, and Cherokee culture, and ends up by giving Taylor joint custody with the genetic grandfather.

After four works with happy endings of various kinds—two happy reunions and two happy confirmations of beneficent adoption—I included two autobiographical works that present more dysfunctional adoptive families, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* and Edward Albee's play *The American Dream*. I deliberately did not put them first because I did not want to risk implying that adoptive families are necessarily unhappy; on the other hand, I did not want the viewpoint of Winterson's protagonist or of Albee's play dismissed as without relation to the institution of adoption.

It became clear fairly early in the course that some students arrived in the course with opposite emotional reactions to adoption. The extremes included some who came from or had friends who came from unhappy  
(Continued on page 6)

## ASAIK Adoption and Culture Conference to Feature Ellen Herman as Keynote Speaker

Noted adoption historian Ellen Herman will deliver the Adoption and Culture Conference's keynote address, "Modern Culture and the Many Meanings of Adoption," at the University of Tampa this November.

Professor of History at the University of Oregon, Herman is the author of the website *The Adoption History Project*, an outstanding resource for scholars and teachers of adoption studies, adoption professionals, and individuals with a personal interest in the history of child adoption in the United States. *The Adoption History Project* makes one hundred and fifty years of adoption-related documents electronically available and features dozens of short articles—all written by Herman—on people, organizations, and issues related to adoption.

Herman's current work in progress is a study of adoption during the twentieth century, *Kinship by Design: Child Adoption in Modern America*. She is also the author of *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and *Psychiatry, Psychology, and Homosexuality* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995).

Herman will deliver "Modern Culture and the Many Meanings of Adoption" at 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, November 19<sup>th</sup> in the Reeves Theater on the second floor of the Vaughn Center. Serving as respondent will be Barbara Katz Rothman, Professor of Sociology at City University of New York and author of *Weaving a Family: Untangling Race and Adoption* (Boston: Beacon, 2005).

## New Book by ASAIK Keynote Respondent

In *Weaving a Family: Untangling Race and Adoption* (Beacon, 2005), Barbara Katz Rothman, a noted sociologist who has explored motherhood in four previous books, focuses on race and family. Weaving together the sociological, the historical, and the personal, she looks at the contemporary American family through the lens of race, race through the lens of adoption, and all—race, family, and adoption—within the context of the changing meanings of motherhood in this blend of personal memoir and sociological autoethnography.

Drawing on her own experience as the white mother of a black child, on historical research on white people raising black children from slavery to contemporary times, and pulling together work on race, adoption, and consumption, she offers new insights



for understanding the way that race and family are shaped in the U.S. today. This book is compelling reading, not only for those interested in family and society, but for anyone grappling with the myriad issues around raising a child of a different race--an estimated seven million American families in 2005.

Professor of Sociology at Baruch College, City University of New York, Katz Rothman has received the Jesse Bernard Award of the American Sociological Association, the mentoring award of Sociologists for Women in Society, and the Award for the Promotion of Human Welfare of the Southern Sociological Society. She was a Fulbright Scholar in the Netherlands and has served as the President of Sociologists for Women in Society and of the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

At the ASAIK Conference on Adoption and Culture in Tampa, Katz Rothman will serve as the respondent for Ellen Herman's keynote address on Saturday morning.

## *Two Adoption Panels at 2005 MLA*

### Scholarly Session on Adoption Memoirs

One of the three panels sponsored by the Division on Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing at this December's annual convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in Washington, DC will focus on adoption issues in contemporary art and writing.

Jill R. Deans, Assistant Professor in Residence at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, will present a paper entitled "Envisioning Adoption: The Search Narrative in Autobiographical Art," examining the visual expression of the adopted life through the work of installation artists and adoptees Ann Fessler and Carol Flax, whose autobiographical projects focus on issues of secrecy and search in adoption. Well known to ASAIK members, Deans has been writing about adoption themes in literature for ten years and is now focusing her energies on adoption life writing.

In her paper, "The Ethics of Naming in Search Narratives," Emily Hipchen will discuss how search narratives superficially avoid while simultaneously subverting the ethics of privacy and commodification, as described by Tom Couser in *Vulnerable Subjects*; her presentation will focus in particular on Florence Fisher's *The Search for Anna Fisher* and Debra Levi Holtz's *Of Unknown Origins*. One of the chief organizers of the ASAIK conference in November, Hipchen is an assistant professor of English at the University of West Georgia, a Visiting Associate Professor of English and Writing at the University of Tampa, and an editor of *alb: Auto/Biography Studies*. *Coming Apart Together: Fragments from an Adoption*, her memoir describing the experiences of an adoptee in reunion with her biological parents, was published in July 2005 and is available through The Literate Chigger Press at

www.tlcpres.com. She is currently working on a book about adoption life writing that focuses on the role of the body in those texts.

In "Queering the Adoption Memoir: Dan Savage's *The Kid: What Happened When My Boyfriend and I Decided to Go Get Pregnant*," Cynthia A. Callahan will describe how Savage invokes the narrative expectations of the adoptive parent autobiography—the acceptance of infertility, the "quest" for a baby, and the proclamation of the value of adoptive kinship—but situates them specifically in the context of gay relationships to challenge readerly perceptions of adoptive families. Currently at work on a manuscript that examines the relationship among race, kinship, and national identity in late nineteenth and twentieth century American literature, Callahan is Assistant Professor of English at the Ohio State University at Mansfield, teaching American and African American literature.

Chaired by Mary Jean Corbett of Miami University, the session on "Adoption Memoirs" is scheduled for Wednesday, December 28, from 3:30-4:45 p.m. in the Coolidge Room at the Marriott Wardman Park.

### Homes and Laskas to Read from Adoption Memoirs at MLA

At the 2005 MLA convention in Washington, D. C., from 5:15 to 6:30 p.m. in the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, novelist A.M. Homes and journalist Jeanne Marie Laskas will read from their forthcoming adoption memoirs.

A.M. Homes will read a section of her memoir forthcoming from Viking, a portion of which was published in the December 2004 *New Yorker* as "The Mistress's Daughter." The book describes her experience growing up adopted, and tells what happened and what followed when her birth mother and father unexpectedly made contact with her over ten years ago. It reflects on her birth mother's life, the nature of family, how we form attachments, and our sense of self.

Jeanne Marie Laskas will read from her memoir forthcoming from Bantam under the title *Growing Girls*. This book relates her experience raising two young daughters adopted from China, with special attention to issues of international adoption, such as problems of language learning in children who spent infancy in a non-English speaking environment.

A.M. Homes is the author of the forthcoming novel *This Book Will Save Your Life*, and of eight other books of fiction, including *The Safety of Objects* and *In the Country of Mothers*. Her work has been translated into twelve languages and appears frequently in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *Granta*, and other influential periodicals. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim, the NEA, the New York Public Library, and other organizations, and is active in PEN and part of the advisory council for *Poets and Writers*. She was born and spent her early years in Washington, D. C.

Jeanne Marie Laskas has published four other books of memoirs, including *Forty Acres and a Poodle* and *The Exact Same Moon: Forty Acres and a Family*. She is a Writer-at Large for

GQ and a contributing editor for *Esquire*, and has also written for *Life*, *Glamour*, *Mirabella*, and *Redbook*, among others. Her magazine work has been selected for several anthologies, including *Best American Writing 2000*, and she has won Golden Quill Awards for Excellent Journalism and the Elle Readers' Prize of 2003.

## Teaching the Conflicts (cont. from page 2)

adoptive families, and others who hoped to adopt some day or had friends who were adoptive parents. Such biases very much affected their reactions to the readings: for example, while *The Bean Trees* presents Taylor as naïve but eagerly and affectionately learning how to care for the child she names Turtle, one of my students focused on things Taylor seemed to be doing wrong and felt she was emotionally distant. Taylor is indeed an inexperienced caregiver, and there is a short section of the novel in which she is distant, but this student, suspicious of adoption, saw distance elsewhere where I saw understatement.

More than in many courses, I found it important to talk with students outside of class and to encourage them to discuss some of the personal implications the topic of adoption had for them, at least with me privately. Of course, with such personal issues some were understandably reticent. One student told me on the last day of class that she was a birth mother. Nevertheless, many did find it possible to talk both with me and in the classroom about the life experiences that had led them

to the reading approaches they had. Such discussions could lead them to be more self-conscious about their biases, able to appreciate some literature that represented experiences very different from their own. With this awareness of diverse experiences, some wrote final papers in which they explicitly used the literature we had read to make sense of their own lives in a larger context.

Partly because some did talk about their experiences living as adoptees in class, and others talked about adoptees they knew, I had to talk to some extent about my own experiences as an adoptee, although in most courses I make hardly any autobiographical remarks. I always wanted to emphasize that adoption experiences are extremely diverse, and I did not want to make my own a paradigm for what adoption is necessarily like; on the other hand, students are so eager for first-hand reports of experience that I sometimes felt I needed to present a contrasting point of view to the personal story someone else had given. I could tell, for example, that it was possible to meet one's birth mother, not find her as similar as in many traditional plots

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and some recent narratives, and still continue the relationship. I could point out the problems of growing up in a culture where adoption was kept secret and contrast it to the dominant current atmosphere.

Theoretically, someone could teach a whole syllabus of works in which adoption is the happy ending and adoptive parents are portrayed as always generous and understanding;

or one could teach a whole syllabus of works in which adoptive families are unhappy. Either of these approaches would be too simple, just as it would be too simple to present birth parents as always loving or always rejecting, or adoptees as always grateful or always bitter. So, in addition to the juxtapositions I have already discussed, my syllabus combined

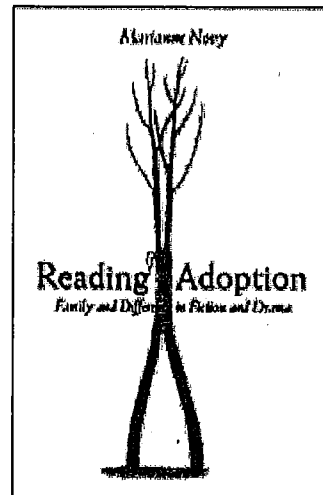
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## *New Book by ASAIK Founding Executive Committee Member*

ASAIK founding Executive Committee member Marianne Novy's uniquely personal study *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* is new this year from The University of Michigan Press. *Reading Adoption* explores the ways in which novels and plays portray adoption, probing the cultural fictions that these literary representations have perpetuated. Through careful readings of works by Sophocles, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Barbara Kingsolver, Edward Albee and others, Novy reveals how fiction has contributed to general perceptions of adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth parents. She observes how these works address the question of what makes a parent, as she scrutinizes basic themes that repeat throughout, such as the difference between adoptive parents and children, the mirroring between adoptees and their birth parents, and the romanticization of the theme of lost family and recovered identity. Engagingly written from Novy's dual perspectives as critic and adult adoptee, the book artfully combines the techniques of literary and feminist scholarship with memoir, and in doing so it sheds new light on familiar texts.

Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, Novy is the author and editor of numerous books on Shakespeare and women writers. Her previous critical study of adoption in literature is *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (U of Michigan, 2001), and her pedagogical article "Teaching the Conflicts of Adoption Literature" is featured in this issue of the ASAIK newsletter.

For further information about *Reading Adoption* and to order, go to [www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=98747](http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=98747).



# 2005 ASAIK Conference Program



Adoption and Culture Conference, November 17-20, 2005, University of Tampa

## Thursday, November 17:

4:00-5:30

Grand Salon:

8:00

*Unlocking the Heart of Adoption* with filmmaker Sheila Ganz.

Reeves Theater: Writers at the University Series Talk with Catherine McKinley, author of *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts*, coeditor of *Afrekete*

## Friday, November 18:

9:00

Music Room:

9:30

Music Room:

Coffee and Doughnuts

### PANEL 1

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL AND TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Margaret Homans, English, Yale University  
"Representations of Origins Searches in China Adoption."

Kim Park Gregg, American Studies, University of Minnesota

"Loss is More than Sadness: Trauma, Racial Melancholy, and the Melodrama of Transracial Adoption in *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural*."

Tobias Hubinette, Oriental Languages, Stockholm University (Sweden)

"Representations of Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture."

11:00

Music Room:

### PANEL 2

#### HISTORY OF TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Karen Balcom, History, McMaster University, Canada  
"Adoptions Across Borders: Adoption Exchanges and the Placement of Native Children in White Homes in Canada and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s."

Karen Dubinsky, History, Queen's (Canada)

"International Adoption and the Hybrid Baby in 1960s Canada."



Laura Briggs, Women's Studies, University of Arizona  
"Communities Resisting Transracial Adoption: The  
Indian Child Welfare Act and the NABSWA Statement  
of 1972."

LUNCH

Friday, November 18:  
2:15  
Music Room:

PANEL 3

ADOPTION AND RACE IN THE U.S.

Dianne Creagh, History, State University of New York at  
Stony Brook, "Treading the Margins of Whiteness:  
Substitute Parents and Standards of Fitness During the  
Great Depression."

Cynthia Callaghan, English, James Madison University  
"Orphanage, Adoption, and the Burden of Racial  
Ambiguity in William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932)."

Kevin Mailliard, Law, Syracuse University  
"Anything But African: Racial Hierarchies in  
International Adoption."

Martha Satz, English, Southern Methodist University  
"A Woman of No Particular Color: Memoirs of White  
Mothers of African American Children."

3:45  
Music Room:

Deann Borshay Liem, History, Berkeley  
Film and discussion: *First Person Plural*

RECEPTION

DINNER

8:30  
Reeves Theater:

Ann Fessler, Visual Studies, Rhode Island School of  
Design

Saturday, November 19:

9:00  
Board Room:  
9:30  
Board Room:

Coffee and Doughnuts

Ellen Herman, History, University of Oregon, author of  
*The American Romance of Psychology* and *Kinship by Design*  
(in progress); creator of The Adoption History Website  
Project, University of Oregon

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Saturday, November 19:

4:00

Board Room:

**PANEL 6A**

**ADOPTEES' SELF-CONCEPTS AND THEIR CULTURE**

Respondent: Betty Jean Lifton

Vinita Bhargava, Child Development, University of Delhi

"Autobiographical Narratives of Adopted Children in India."

Frances Latchford, Philosophy, York University

"Blood Lust: The Meanings of Genetic Sexual Attraction."

Farnad Darnell, Sociology, Wayne State University

"A Time to Be Reborn." (Memoir)

4:00-6:00

Reeves Theater:

**PANEL 6B**

**CREATIVE WRITERS ON ADOPTION**

Meg Kearney, Creative Writing, Pine Manor College

Lori Askeland, English, Wittenberg University

Allison Whittenberg, English, Drexel University

Susan Schultz, University of Hawaii-Manoa

Penny Partridge, author of *An Adoptee's Dreams*

**DINNER**

8:30

Reeves Theater:

*Casa de Los Babys* and panel — Molly Shanley, Political Science, Vassar

Jill Deans, English, University of Connecticut

Sheila Ganz

Sunday, November 20:

9:00

Board Room:

Coffee and Doughnuts

9:30

Board Room:

**PANEL 7**

**MEN AND ADOPTION**

Veronica Strong-Boag, Women's Studies and Educational Studies, University of British Columbia

"Casual Fornicators, Young Lovers, Deadbeat Dads, and Family Champions: Men in Canadian Adoption Circles in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century."

Ralph Savarese, English, Grinnell College  
from *More: Autism, Adoption, and the Politics of Hope*

Alison Shonkwiler, English, Rutgers University, New  
Brunswick

"The Selfish-Enough Father: Adoption and the New Gay  
Family in Jesse Green's *The Velveteen Father* and Dan  
Savage's *The Kid*."

11:00  
Board Room:

"The Future of Adoption Culture Studies"  
Discussion and business meeting of The Alliance for the  
Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship

LUNCH

## Three Films to be Screened at ASAIK Conference

Three films on adoption will be shown at the conference on Adoption and Culture. All will have discussion afterward—one initiated by a panel and two led by the makers of the films.

On Friday, November 18 at 3:45, filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem will show and discuss her documentary film *First Person Plural*, and, time permitting, give a look ahead at her film in progress, *Precious Objects of Desire*. A film about family, loss, and the reconciling of two identities, *First Person Plural* tells the story of how Liem, adopted from South Korea to California in 1966, discovers her Korean birth mother and arranges a meeting between her birth mother and her adoptive parents.

*First Person Plural* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2000 and won the Grand Jury Prize, Best Bay Area Documentary, from the San Francisco International Film Festival. In 2001 the film received an Emmy nomination for Best Director. It has been broadcast nationally on PBS through P. O. V. as a co-presentation of the Independent Television Service and the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA). Liem's film-in-progress examines the historical, social, and ethical dimensions of Korea's adoption program since the 1950s, which has sent approximately 200,000 children overseas, not only to the US but also to many countries in Europe. Incorporating interviews, archival films, and contemporary footage, the film is supported by a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship and a grant from NAATA.

*Unlocking the Heart of Adoption* interweaves filmmaker Sheila Ganz's journey as a birthmother with the stories of adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents in both same race and transracial adoptions. The film aims to bridge the gap between birth and adoptive families by emphasizing the commonality of the experiences of people involved in adoption from different perspectives. It emphasizes the theme of needing to know the truth.

*Casa de Los Babys* is a film about international adoption by independent filmmaker John Sayles. A study focusing on would-be mothers staying in Mexico while they wait to adopt, it includes memorable performances by Maggie Gyllenhall, Marcia Gay Harden, and others. The ASAIK newsletter of 2004 featured two essays on this film; the author of one of the pieces, Molly Shanley, will speak on a panel following with Jill Deans and Sheila Ganz.

## New Book by ASAIK Conference Organizer

ASAIK co-chair and conference organizer Emily Hipchen's lyrical memoir *Coming Apart Together*, new from The Literate Chigger Press, recounts the stories that are necessarily part of any reunion experience, and meditates upon what those stories mean (or don't mean). It imaginatively explores what it may feel like to adopt a child, to be an adopted child, to give up a child for adoption, what it might be like to be the other mother, to find other relatives, to have a strange adult show up on your doorstep one day, claiming kinship. Though the plot creates interest, the real beauty of the text is in its language and its capacity for conveying to readers the difficult emotional paths of the birth parents, of their own parents and grandparents, of the adoptive mother and father, and of the adopted daughter at parting, in living apart, and in reunion.

Emily Hipchen holds a PhD in English literature from the University of Georgia, teaches English and writing at the University of Tampa, and will begin teaching at The State University of West Georgia in January 2006. She is co-editor, with Joseph and Rebecca Hogan, of *a/b: Autobiography Studies* and is a member of the Executive Board and the Conference Planning Committee of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity and Kinship whose inaugural conference will take place at the University of Tampa in November 2005.

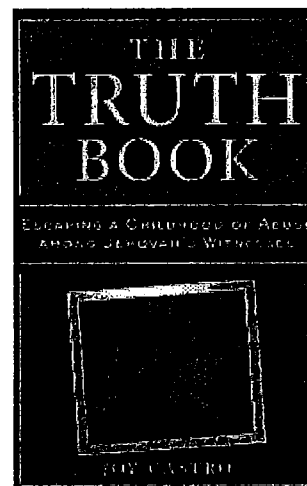
For further information about *Coming Apart Together* and to order, go to [www.tlcpres.com/cat.html](http://www.tlcpres.com/cat.html).



## ASAIK Member to Read from New Book at Conference

"Gorgeous, disturbing, and grippingly alive," says the *Boston Globe* about ASAIK Executive Board member and newsletter editor Joy Castro's new adoption memoir *The Truth Book* (Arcade, 2005), which has been named a Book Sense Notable Book for September by the American Booksellers Association. Adopted at birth by a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, Castro ran away at fourteen and was reunited with her birth family in her twenties. *The Truth Book*, which *Booklist* calls "utterly gripping," has been adopted for use in courses on memoir, religion, women's literature, and psychology.

In a session with memoirist Karen McElmurray, poet



Ned Balbo, and *Origins* editor Mary Ann Cohen, Castro will read from *The Truth Book* at the ASAIK Conference on Adoption and Culture in Tampa on Saturday afternoon.

Associate professor of English at Wabash College in Indiana, Castro publishes scholarship on twentieth-century women writers. Her story "Giving Jewel Away" appears in Ito and Cervin's anthology *A Ghost at Heart's Edge: Stories and Poems of Adoption*.

For further information about *The Truth Book* and to order, go to [www.joycastro.com](http://www.joycastro.com).

## Saturday Lunchtime Panel

The Adoption and Culture conference will include a Saturday lunchtime panel at which administrators of three centers for research and education on adoption will speak: Adam Pertman, Audrey Smolkin, and Joyce Maguire Pavao. They will discuss important adoption issues in relation to the work of their centers.

Adam Pertman is the Executive Director of the New York City-based Donaldson Adoption Institute, and the author of *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America*, which had its foundation in his many years of writing about adoption for the Boston Globe. He is an adoptive parent.

Audrey Smolkin is the Director of Research and Policy Analysis at the Center for Adoption Research of the University of Massachusetts in Worcester. She was involved in the recent study on the life-long impact of experience in foster care.

Joyce Maguire Pavao is the founder and director of the Adoption Research Center (ARC) and the founder and CEO of the Center For Family Connections (CFFC), of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and also a lecturer in psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. The author of *The Family of Adoption*, she is an adoptee.

Lunch and attendance at the panel costs \$10. It begins at 12:45 on Saturday, November 19, and is also open to people from the community who are not attending the whole conference.

## Teaching the Conflicts (cont. from page 7)

Betty Jean Lifton's autobiography, *Twice Born*, in which an adoptee complains about her birth mother's unwillingness to acknowledge her, with *Waiting to Forget*, the autobiography of Margaret Moorman, a birth mother who seems unusually able to see the perspective of her birth son and his adoptive parents. We read

Jackie Kay's poetic sequence *The Adoption Papers*, which shows how a Black adoptee in a white family dealt with racial prejudice, with poems from the viewpoint of the adoptive mother, and birth mother, as well as the adoptee. We read a children's narrative, *Anne of Green Gables*, which portrays adoption as a happy ending;

on the other hand, we read a contemporary play, Jane Anderson's *Baby Dance*, which shows serious defects in both birth parents and potential adoptive parents and, arguably, in the contemporary American institution of adoption. And we finished the course by reading

Susan Ito and Tina Cervin's anthology, *A Ghost at Heart's Edge*, which contains poetry, fiction, and memoir that gives a very large spectrum of adoption experience. One could teach works this varied and still give precedence to defining parenthood by either nurture or birth; I may have tendencies toward the first alternative, but I try to point out when either birth parents or adoptive parents are erased or stereotyped.

Adoption literature can be considered an identity-based category of literature, because it relates to the ways that adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents are portrayed and how their identities are imagined. But it shows how diverse literature within

an identity-based category can be. With adoption, even more clearly than with other examples, the identity comes from history, not from biology, and it is a history that can be learned by people outside the category. So I would encourage instructors from every position in the triangle, as well as those outside it, to consider teaching such a course. It may be useful not only in engaging students in literature but also in helping them to think about their own lives and those of others, as well as about the various forms of family structures in our society. Students will gain most understanding if a course discusses both painful and triumphant adoption narratives—and those in between.

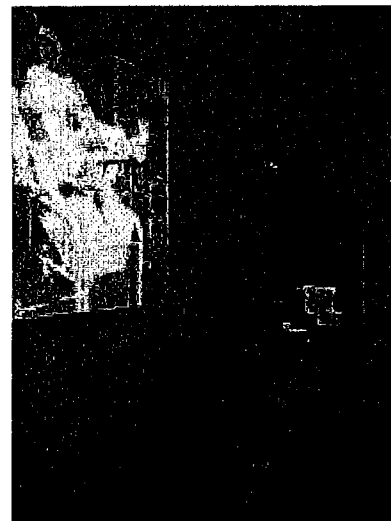
*Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, Marianne Novy is an ASAIK founder and Executive Committee member. Her new book Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama is featured on page 7 of this newsletter.*

## *Ann Fessler: Photographer, Artist, Filmmaker, Writer, Adoptee*

Jill R. Deans  
University of Connecticut

I met Ann Fessler in 2001 at Brown University outside the David Winton Bell Gallery. I was on a hunt for examples of adoption art and her newly installed exhibit, "Close to Home," was billed as a multi-media portrayal of her adoption experience.

Not only did I encounter the layered possibilities of my research topic in her compelling multi-dimensional art, I discovered a perspective I





could relate to both as an adoptee and as a scholar. Fessler's work was probing, pushing boundaries visually and intellectually, but it was also a tribute to hesitation, that life-long wait and wonder that drives adoptees to keep searching, even when, on one level, they've found what they were looking for.

"Close to Home" continued a series of autobiographical depictions of adoption, among many other exhibits, nationally and internationally, which established Fessler in the art world and as Professor of Photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. Juxtaposing stark objects with intimate subject matter, her work to an adoptee studying adoption appeared both edgy and familiar. In this project, Fessler located but hesitated to connect with her biological mother.

In the past four years, Fessler redirected her search and her topic to include the narratives of women who surrendered their children for adoption between 1945-1973. In *Everlasting*, she invited viewers into the memories of relinquishment with endless video projection of babies wheeled by nurses through a hospital doorway, a surround-sound composition of collected stories, and a circle of chairs.

Installed at the Maryland Institute College of Art (2003), then expanded and recast at the Radcliffe Institute, Harvard (2004), *Everlasting* is now the basis for Fessler's latest book (due out this Spring by Penguin) and for her upcoming presentation at the ASAIK conference on adoption and culture this November. During an interview about this project on NPR's "The Connection," Fessler admitted, at this stage, that she was "inching closer" to contacting her birth mother. Her searching would continue, regardless.

When I recently asked Ann for some theoretical influences in her work, she noted that the Civil Rights and Women's Movements of the 1960s and '70s informed her from the start, compelling her to expose cultural myths and give voice where there was undue silence. Her answer was more appropriate than the simple bibliographic reference I had sought, and perhaps signals what she is searching for in her art: a point where the contradictions between cultural and personal narratives rise and fall, where in these contractions, identity is born.

At the ASAIK Conference on Adoption and Culture in Tampa, Ann Fessler will speak about her work on Friday evening after dinner.

*Assistant professor of English at the University of Connecticut, ASAIK co-chair Jill R. Deans earned her doctorate from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with a dissertation on adoption in twentieth-century American literature. She has published numerous articles on adoption and literature.*

*At the ASAIK Conference on Adoption and Culture in Tampa, Deans will serve as a respondent on the Casa de los Babys panel on Saturday night.*

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*Support for the newsletter comes from*  
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For technical support, the editor is grateful to James MacDougall.