From the Selected Works of Mirah Riben

July, 1991

Book Review: What Lisa Knew

Mirah Riben

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mirah_riben/39/
Because of the public’s fascination with real-life atrocities, Joyce Johnson’s version of the “truth” behind the Steinberg/Nussbaum trial for the murder of their “illegally adopted daughter,” Lisa, has quickly become a best seller.

What Lisa Knew reads easily, though not pleasantly, and is interesting if you are curious as to how two “nice” Jewish, well educated professionals (he an attorney, she an editor of children’s books) fell to the depths of sexually depraved, drug using, fatal abusers. Johnson appears to have done extensive research into their backgrounds to help us put together the jagged and jaded puzzle pieces that combine in just the peculiar way they did to make Joel and Hedda the ultimate slave and master.

In addition to profiling these two extreme and bizarre personalities, Johnson attempts in a limited way to come to the defense of abused children by inserting a page of statistics in an otherwise “based on truth” novel.

Johnson’s primary goal, however, for some unknown reason, is to prove that Hedda Nussbaum was a villain as well as, or instead of, a victim. In direct contrast to the feminists and battered women’s organizations who rallied support in defense of Hedda, Johnson attempts to convince her readers that Nussbaum was not a typical battered housewife but rather a willing participant of sadomasochistic sex.

Because of all of these “higher” priorities of Johnson, she all but ignores the fact that were it not for adoption as an institution, Lisa would not have been placed into the situation which ultimately ended her short life. Odd that a writer and editor with Johnson’s background could have made such an oversight since she edited Betty Jean Lifton’s Twice Born and Lost and Found.

Because of her focus on child abuse, Johnson begins with the position that birth is a lottery. Some babies are winners and some are losers. She neglects to mention that adoption is what is supposed to correct the imbalance, to take babies from incapable parents and place them with capable ones. Not vice versa.

During the weeks after Lisa’s tragic death and all during the trial, fingers of blame were pointed. Why hadn’t Lisa’s teachers noticed and taken any action? One student teacher tried, unsuccessfully. Why hadn’t neighbors done more? Several had called child service agencies numerous times. One neighbor wrongly believed that there had to be a file on the Steinbergs because of all of her calls and one or two follow-up visits by child protection agencies.

Of all of the many institutions and systems which failed Lisa, the adoption system must be held the most culpable. Hedda Nussbaum’s co-workers at Random House had given up on trying to suggest to Hedda that there was help available for battered wives. When she told them she was having trouble conceiving a child they were relieved. When she revealed that she and Joel planned to adopt they were outraged. They contacted Spence Chapin, one of New York’s most formidable adoption agencies, and were told there was nothing that could be done without proof. No effort was made to investigate their claim.

When this notorious case is discussed and written about, we often hear that it had nothing to do with adoption; that it was an abduction or a kidnapping. Most accounts refer to Lisa as Steinberg’s “illegally adopted daughter.” Yet, Steinberg, who practiced law without ever passing the bar exam, is never referred to as an “illegal lawyer.” The only thing irregular about Lisa’s independent adoption is that it was never finalized.
Surely as birthparents, we know both sides of this coin all too well. Are we connected to the children we have not raised by virtue of the relationship developed from conception or because of our curiosity for a child of our genes? Can the two be separated?

Not for me. But Rothman, instead of simply calling for an end to the medical/technical/legal battle over motherhood, as Gena Corea does in Mother Machine, plays right into their game by dissecting the integral parts of motherhood to "prove" which part is greater than any other.

In her attempt to drive home her point that it is the social relationship of the pregnancy and not the genetic connection which makes one a mother or a father, she all but disregards the importance of the latter:

“For myself, I feel that it’s just the physical body that gets passed on - the shape of a nose, body build, tendency toward diabetes, a bad back, strong legs. Other people feel that it is also intelligence, wit, sometimes ‘character.’”

“I cannot imagine that I relate any differently to my almost-grown son than I would have had he been adopted all those years ago.”

I have no disagreement with the fact that money and sperm do not make a father, nor does money and egg make one a mother, no more than intercourse with conception makes one a parent. Parenting is a social interaction and can and does exist, and often quite well, without a biological tie as in step parenting, foster and adoptive parenting. But when it comes down to “the age old question, unanswered through the years, heredity of environment - which are you a product of?” The answer is still, “Both my darling, both.” We need not totally disregard one for the other. Sadly, it is the misguided feminist in Rothman who wins out over the woman and mother. She has bought into the belief that women are narrowed and reduced by our role as childbearer, not broadened by it. That in order to be equal we need to be the same. That mother and father are interchangeable roles.

Rothman has given us a thought-provoking work with some kind words, for a change, about birthmothers. Yet in the end I take exception with her. Motherhood, which created and nurtured each of us and did a darn good job since the dawn of mankind, needs no recreating or redefining or renaming. What motherhood in this country needs is reaffirmation, recognition, respect and perhaps a little reward.