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Alison Larkin: The English American Speaks Her Truth About Adoption

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Interview by Mirah Riben

*The English American* (Simon & Shuster, 2008), is a novel by Alison Larkin about Pippa Dunn who was born in the USA and adopted by a British family and raised there. Never quite fitting in, Pippa embarks on a journey to find her American roots. It is fiction based on truth. How much is true and how much not? And what does the author Alison have to say about adoption? Quite a lot! Alison begins by saying: “It is very much is fiction, Mirah, but there is truth at the heart of it.”

**MR:** Your alter ego in the book, Pippa, has a sister who is the biological child of your adoptive parents. Was this true for you?

**AL:** [Chuckles.] No. I wrote I had a biological sister in the novel because I wanted to explore what that would be like and the differences which are enormous. I certainly find it now as a mother myself having my own children, the differences between being the parent of a child who is adopted and the parent of a child who comes from one’s own DNA. So, no that is not true in real life but it was very interesting for me as an adoptee to explore that through the fiction.

**MR:** Were you raised as an only child?

**AL:** No. I have two siblings. They’d rather I really didn’t talk about it. They were also adopted and they’re private and they have not felt the need to find their birth parents, so I respect their privacy.

Even in an adopted family when you’ve got several adopted siblings, sometimes some of those siblings are more like the adoptive parents than others. And I was certainly extremely different from my adoptive parent.

**MR:** Can you talk about in what ways you felt different?

**AL:** Well, I was very untidy. I was very creative; expressive. I had a huge amount of energy, and my parents also have a lot of energy but they are very tidy, they’re very organized, they value...um...a different... I guess that we talk about left brain and right brain thinking. You’ve got the difference between someone who is used to being good at math and accounting and my father was a financial analyst and I couldn’t add up. So, there were many, many difference in that respect.

I am extremely conscious of what a crap shoot adoption is. And on line two of the *English American*, and I’m not quoting myself directly because I haven’t got the book in front of me, but I do say the whole adoption agency thing is a bit of a lottery. You never know who you’re going to get as parents or what will happen as a result of it. I got lucky. Then again if I’d been adopted by Mia Farrow, today I could be married to Woody Allen.
It's chilling because there but for the grace of God or whatever, I could have been one of the children who has been so horrifically abused or – horrifically treated. When I met my own birthmother, in my case, I was one of the few where it really was the only option for her and it was what she wanted. Many birth mothers were coerced. She was not. And I was very fortunate in the family I got, but I look at what a crap shoot it is and what a business it is....

MR: How was it then that you were born where you were born and wound up where you wound up?

AL: I was born in DC and I wound up where I wound up because my parents in England were working in the United States and at the time the rule said that in order to adopt in England you had to be registered in England for six months and my father was working in international aid in Washington DC and he came across somebody who said we actually have the phrase I believe that was used was "we do have babies in America, you know." And so I was adopted from the United States and when my parents moved to England and Africa and I went with them. But I came from the United States, so I am an international adoptee, but the other way around.

MR: So were you the first child that they adopted?

AL: Yes I was.

MR: And your siblings…where were they born? [Note: Ms. Larkin did not want to provide any additional information about her sibling(s) and that request was honored]

AL: The UK.

MR: When did your birth mom find out that you were taken out of the country?

AL: She found out the first time she inquired about me. She found that out and she had no problem with it. All that she had requested was that it be a loving family and in my case, there but for the grace of…you know…who knows if I had gotten the next parents on the list. And when I met her, she was so relieved to hear that I was one of the lucky ones. But in my case that was the case. And when I met her she was so relieved to hear that I was one of the lucky ones. And I cannot imagine what it would be like to be a birth mother and find out that your daughter or your son had not had a fantasy life or the life that you hoped they would have. And I'm not saying mine was perfect by any stretch of the imagination. I'm just profoundly troubled by what happens to so many children who are adopted and/or in foster care.

MR: Are both your birth mother and father in your life?
AL: Yes, they are. Although, you know, they live in different states and you know, all relationships. They’re busy with their own families and their own lives but certainly we have a great deal of contact. It’s been very good for all of us and that is why I *passionately* believe, as you know, in the need and the right of all adopted people to have contact with their natural parents. In my case it proved to be life saving.

MR: *How so?*

AL: Well, when I was pregnant with my son the doctor asked me if there was anything that I could tell him about my own birth and my birth mothers’ pregnancy. And because I had found her and was in touch with her I was able to pick up the phone and ask her if there was anything I needed to know. And she said, “Well, I’m so glad you asked, honey, because there was a form of hemophilia in the family.” After my son was born my doctor pulled me aside and said if we had not had that information there is a strong chance that neither you or your son would not have made it.

Again the chances and the luck that I had in finding my birth parents. How many people are being prevented from getting this information and I luckily had it. If I had not, it’s not just my life, it’s my son’s life, and my daughter’s because she would not have existed because I’d be dead.

MR: *How many natural siblings do you have from your mom and your dad?*

AL: Four as far as I know. My mother had a son. And on my birth father’s side I have three siblings: Two half sisters and a half brother. I’m very close to my half brother who comes and visits and stays quite frequently and to one of my sisters. The other sister lives a long way away and we haven’t met yet. I’m looking for her. I think it can be hard for people to suddenly show in your life. Which is why I think it is so important there are trained counselors to help people on all sides of this venture who are going through reunion. There’s such a lack of understanding about it.

I remember, when I was having a tricky time with my birth mother at one point, because of all kinds of complicated emotions that neither of us could possibly understand, a so-called therapist who knew nothing about adoption told me to imagine myself at my birth mother’s funeral and bury her in my mind! So what stupid advise is that?

It wasn’t until I met Annette Baran and heard about the adoption community and met people who had been through what I’d been through that I began to really fully understand the importance and the value of connecting with other people who’d actually been through the experience and with counselors who actually were talking about it. And actually there was one point when I didn’t even dare do
my one woman show because I was so concerned about hurting about everybody’s feelings.

If I told my truth would I hurt my adoptive parents? Would I hurt my birth mother? Would I upset people, and it was pointed out to me that everybody has a right to their own story. And to tell it in the way they wish, and so I did it through humor. But I think there was an emotional truth at the heart of it that seemed to resonate with a lot of people. Not everyone liked it but it was my story and I had a right to tell it and I did. And so in the novel I chose to tell it in a way that…I mean I don’t have an attention span anymore now. I wanted it to be a fast-paced type novel, otherwise you know I felt who was going to read it because I don’t have the concentration to read anything that doesn’t sort of have some jokes in it. That’s not strictly true, but it’s almost true.

**MR:** So you worried what your adoptive parents would think of what you are doing. How do they take it all?

**AL:** [Chuckle.] Oh God. I don’t know. I do know that had I been able in real life, had I been able to talk to my real life adoptive parents, or indeed my real life birth parents about how the reunion had been for me, I wouldn’t have written the book because I wouldn’t have needed to write it. But because it was so impossible to articulate any of it, the only outlet I had was the jokes of the one-woman show and then the novel that came out of it. It was the only way I could express any of it. However, I mean my birth mother is so proud. She said: “Well, you had to have the character like that! I just love it.” And she goes on and talks about it to lots of people and tells them to buy the book. And my adoptive…my parents in England, I think since their friends have read it and I think they have an understanding of why I had needed to find my natural parents but they had not understood before. But they’re English, you know, so. The English, it’s a different culture. And, you know, we don’t really talk about it in huge amounts but we can speak openly about it now if we want to. And they did not reject me and neither did my birth parents. After writing the book certainly, it did change our relationship. I think it deepened it because they understood that perhaps it hadn’t been a piece of cake for me to go through the whole experience.

**MR:** You said you are an international adoptee even though contrary to most international adoptions. Are you aware that approximately 500 American babies are adopted out of the U.S. per year? How do you feel about that?

**AL:** I’m beginning to learn more. I don’t believe that children should be adopted far from their people unless it is the only way or unless as a last resort. Having said that, in my case, I did luck out. I’ve enjoyed living in different countries. It’s so hard for me to even imagine what it would have been like to have been adopted domestically. I mean if I had been adopted domestically and then been put into a home where I was abused or badly treated or wasn’t allowed to become the person I am now then I would rather be adopted internationally by
the parents I had. So I don’t think it’s necessarily...I don’t know enough about it and I’m interested obviously, but my gut is it depends on the people. A last resort for any adoption: international, national or whatever! Only if it’s in the best interest of that child to be adopted and it is the only option for that child. Then OK. But the rest of the time I believe that children, that we have a responsibility to do everything we can to keep children with their natural families.

Unless I’m wrong here, my take on the reason American families adopt internationally is because many of the adoptive mother are threatened and feel threatened by the idea of any contact with the birth mother. And a lot of them go to China or wherever so that that’s an impossibility. And I think that one of the reasons I wrote my novel the way I wrote my novel was because I wanted to say to everybody, especially adoptive parents that if your child feels a strong need to connect with the birth family, this is about their identity, their need for personal and cultural identity. And this is not a threat to your relationship, which will be whatever it is anyway. I mean either it will be good or bad with the child you adopted. But that child needing to connect with their natural family or their culture of origin is not taking anything away. As my birth mother says: “Love doesn’t come in amounts.” And it doesn’t. And so I think that that is the true reason. It’s a fear based thing. And a lot of the time that they are frightened of that and I think it’s very interesting. And I just think it can be about fear and that’s what I’m doing out there. I talk about this all very openly because I think it’s a taboo subject that has not been spoken...is often not spoken about...

I mean you and I we go to ACC conference and EBD events and we talk to each other and we agree with each other. We all agree there is a huge need for adoption reform and there’s a huge need to educate people. But we’re talking to each other. We all agree. I feel a pull to go and talk to the people who cannot hear this, who are frightened and say: look this is the reality of my reality that finding my family was absolutely essential for my personal development and for my medical history and for the health of my children and this is a human rights issue, it’s a civil rights issue but it is not a reflection on the adoptive parents. It’s a human need. My job is to tell my truth, which is what I really know and it’s not always popular with everybody but it’s my truth and that’s what I have to say.

Born in the United States, adopted by a British family and raised in England, as an adult Larkin sought out her American roots. A comedian, Larkin tells her semi-autobiographical, truth-based fictional story of mixed heritage in her hilarious one-woman show which later became a very successful novel and is currently being turned into a motion picture. In this second half of this in depth and heartfelt interview Larkin opens up about her real life struggles with adoption and reunion and shares her passion about adoption education and adoptee rights.

**MR:** You were internationally adopted – have you thought of the international adoptees who face language barriers in reconnected?
AL: I have had the privilege to speak with and meet many families and children and teenager and adults now who have been adopted from other countries and I hear from them all the time through my website because they’re relating to Pippa Dunn whether they’ve been adopted from Vietnam or Korea or wherever, they are relating to an adoptee who is having real problem with her relationships. She is convinced that whatever man she is with is going to leave her even though she’s absolutely gorgeous. And on that level, there’s a universal language. As far as adoptees I know very well and I have a lot of adopted friends who have been adopted from other countries, absolutely! I mean not only a huge cultural difference which actually there is between England and America, but a huger one is extremely traumatic and difficult and I actually believe that all adoptees are heroes and for these kids, now adults, to go through what they need to go through in order to find themselves, which is what they are doing when they go back to the country of origins and often they can’t find the parents who gave them birth. It’s a very, very frightening traumatic thing to have to do and so yes, I mean, yes. It is traumatic and difficult. And from this that when you are adopting a child from China or whatever that you are doing the child a huge favor is I think exploding now. I think there are some people who still believe that, but the more of us speak out and say, “Well. Actually, what you are doing when you take a child and adopt it to a new culture and a new family is that child very well may need to go and connect with the country of origin and the family of origin in order to become a whole person.” In order to know who they are, and as I say in the DNA song:

“To solve your inner mystery, it helps to know your history.
Every child born today, deserves to know their DNA.
They say the genes count for a lot, and I’m not meaning Levi’s
From can you curl your tongue? To can you roll your eyes?
To will you be a diabetic? Will you have a stroke?
When medicine can save a life, it stops being a joke.”
<http://www.youtube.com/alisonlarkin>

So, not only do these kids have all of that, but they also have the language barrier, too. No, it’s a huge thing and I think the more adoptive parents are aware of all of that, the more adoptees speak out and tell their stories, the better. But, you know, there are many big questions that I am asking as we all are asking about adoption as a whole. And I do come back to the feeling that unless it is the last resort, and the only option, every other alternative should be explored and I think keeping children in their own countries is preferable. But having said that, here I am in this odd position of having been taken from my country to another country... and this is not denial. I’ve lived this for twenty years. I’ve thought it through for 20 years. I would rather have the parents I had and been taken to England and having the trauma of having to come back to the United States, than, you know, somebody who lived in the same state as me who shoved in the cupboard when I wasn’t behaving well.....
This is why I became a comedian. Because I did not belong. I’m American and yet I’m not American. I’m English and yet I’m not English. So I became a comedian because what do we do at comics? We look at our culture from the outside. So I have this whole culture conflict which completely addresses this. It’s a comedy song: “When I’m English, I apologize for things I didn’t do but when I’m an American I blame it all on you.” It’s about, you know…and I have been invited to speak to the Korean adoption community in Washington DC which I’m doing on April 16 and I’m doing this because …it’s Holt and I’m going to sing my DNA song there and I’m going to talk about how important it was for me to connect with country of origins and how absolutely key it was for me to find my own natural parents. And I’m going to be saying this to people some whom will never have heard that before.

**MR:** *What do you hope to accomplish with all of your work?*

**AL:** What I hope to accomplish is to go to the places, to build, to tell my truth through humor, to people who otherwise couldn’t hear it. There are many adoptive parents who will not listen to some kinds of message because they feel totally threatened by it. That’s my role. That’s what I hope through the jokes, through the stories. I’m an entertainer. It’s what I do. I entertain not just in the adoption community. I did my show in the West End in London and it’s about England and America and it’s exactly what you put your finger on it. It’s about culture conflict and about being an outsider in both countries and because of my adoption I am in this position in which I have this unusual identity and as an artist your responsibility is to…you have to get it out there as you see it and so that’s what I hope to do is to tell my truth in an entertaining way if I can so that people can hear it and also to encourage others. I encourage adoptees, birth mothers everybody to tell their stories. And the more of us do and the more we hear, the better.

My approach annoys people, too. I get constantly in trouble because I have an adoption that wasn’t a nightmare, and people who had a terrible experience don’t believe me. They think I’m in denial or something. You can’t please everybody. All you can do is tell your truth as you know it.

**MR:** *Speaking about all approaches, I’m wondering how you feel about the reviewers who have called your book “chick-lit.”*

**AL:** [Great billowing laughter!] Are you kidding? Well, you know, I had to put some sex scenes in there because I had to keep it entertaining. I don’t mind it. I actually kind of like it. I actually saw someone reading it (The English American) on an airplane. It was an 18-year-old girl and she was reading it because it’s got these two men in it: one who the soul mate, who she feels totally connected to and one who’s this other guy and she was reading it purely for the love story and actually I know, OK, I should be offended by it but actually I’m not at all. I kind of like it. And some people see it that way and some people …there’ve been a lot of
reviews that have said that there’s a very serious heart behind it and the Library Journal said it was essential reading for libraries because of its essential coverage of adoptee rights and so if there’s a few chicks around who now know about adoptee rights, they yeah!

MR: And now your hugely successful first novel is being made into a motion picture. Have you thought about who you would like to play you in the movie?

AL: I can’t, you know…every time someone suggests someone, I go: “That would be great.” I know I ought to have an answer to that question but I don’t I really don’t. Who do you think?

MR: Who has been suggested?

AL: Well, Drew Barrymore. Pippa’s only 28. And there’s apparently some very interesting up and coming British actresses. It will probably be another two years before it’s you know, cast. At the moment I just handed my final scripts to the film company in the UK and I’m now moving on to writing a new novel. So there’s’ a way to go. But I sort of said, OK, this is my truth. Here you go! And lets’ hope that it gets made into a movie that’s helpful.

MR: My choice would be Renee Zellweger.

AL: Oh yes! I agree. That would be mine. And in a way, Pippa is a little bit like Bridget.

MR: Or possibly Faith Hill because she’s adopted. What is your new book going to be about?

AL: Good question. It’s not about adoption. My new heroine is a lot older than Pippa and something absolutely terrible happened to her 30 years before in the UK. And she’s very busy in the United States and we find out half what through the book what that was. It will be linked in terms of identity and in terms of loss and love and looking for connection, which I think is probably a theme of mine. I think the longing for connection is what propels many adoptees myself included to find their natural parents in the first place and the longing for connection…the fear of what connects you is what causes many adoptees like Pippa Dunn and myself actually, to be very afraid of falling in love…and part of my journey of Pippa’s journey and the journey of adoptees, you know…and oddly enough the journey of my new heroine is finding the courage to allow the depth, the deep connection and true love to take place without fear. That’s what I would wish for all adoptees. That they come to a place where they no longer allow what happened to them to win. We all have a choice. Which is what one reviewer of the books said, which I didn’t even know I’d written but I think he’s right: How much of us is nature. How much is nurture. And how much individual choice. And we forget, I forget constantly, it’s up to me. And I know of an adoptee who very
sadly committed suicide. And she had just come to realize if it’s going to be, it’s up to me. And she had just that but haven’t quite had the help; she hadn’t had the counseling; she hadn’t had the connection with other adopted people. She didn’t know she wasn’t alone and so that’s why we write and that’s why we express ourselves so we can connect with other people and other people can connect with us. So then hopefully we can get free. Because unless we’re Buddhist who genuinely believe in reincarnation and all that, we’ve only got one life. So I my passion is trying through the writing and through my work to try and believe that we have a choice. And once we realize where it comes from, that’s when we can get free….

It’s the longing to go back to the womb and the warmth and the connection, the longing for that, but it’s so tragic if we can find away to help adopted people, or indeed anyone who is suffering in that deep way to see that it doesn’t have to be that way. That we can say I’m not going to allow what happened to me then to affect me now, then you can really live and be free. We’re trying to let the light win.

The hardest thing for me, even though it seems like fiction was going into in The English American, was speaking deeply for me. Even though it’s comedy, there’s a lot of pain in it and the truth of the next novel too. Someone once said to me, if it doesn’t hurt to write it, it’s not going to be funny. It’s like one of my favorite jokes is the key to dealing with the fear of abandonment is to date people you don’t like so if they do leave you it doesn’t matter.

It’s so important that we all keep shouting and screaming and telling jokes and singing and dancing and telling our truths, not the myths; the truth as we see it. Because the truth is multi-colored, it’s multi-layered and it all needs to be out there. And that’s why the in the DNA song:

“They say the truth will set you free. That certainly was true for me. But unequivocally, every child born today deserves to know their DNA…”

http://www.youtube.com/alisonlarkin

I’m getting hundreds of letters from women who said, “I didn’t get it.” I was thinking about myself. I did not get that if my child needs to find their birth mother they’re going to need all the support they can get. And I used to feel threatened by it and I now do not. And these are not bad people. So for me, that was why I wrote the book. It’s going to support that adopted kid so that adopted kid won’t have to go through what I had to go through.