

**You Do Not Know My Family:  
The Ethics of Adoption Writing and Press Coverage**

by

**Martha Nichols\***

**Abstract:**

*Recent press coverage of failed adoptions highlights the conflict between secrecy and the need for truth telling. Adoption used to be considered a dirty little secret, one best kept within the walls of the immediate family. The zeitgeist has since changed with the open-adoption movement and other social trends. On the one hand, this is a good thing, helping to dispel myths about adoption; the call for more openness resonates with those who believe in the therapeutic catharsis offered by personal storytelling. On the other hand, the author argues that the barrage of online media stories about adoption cross ethical lines that have long been considered problematic in memoir writing. Through a personal exploration of such recent stories, she raises questions about privacy vs. secrecy in adoption today—and what the limits to truth telling in the public sphere may be.*

When my husband and I adopted a baby son in Vietnam in 2002, I never imagined I'd have to explain to our little boy eight years later that another adoptive mother had returned a child. I'm still trying to explain, as are the many horrified spectators to the saga of young Artyom Savelyev, who in early April 2010 was put on an airplane alone by his American adoptive grandmother and flown back to Moscow. He was accompanied only by a note written by his adoptive mother Torry Hansen, a single nurse in Shelbyville, Tennessee. In the note, she wrote that she'd been lied to in Russia about the

---

\* © Martha Nichols 2010. This draft (April 26, 2010) can only be reprinted with the author's permission.

boy's difficulties and that "[a]fter giving my best to this child, I am sorry to say that for the safety of my family, friends, and myself, I no longer wish to parent this child."<sup>i</sup>

The *why* of a news story like this will always hook us. But as an adoptive parent and writer, I've found myself in a much more intimate ethical struggle that directly relates to my family. More important, the misleading press coverage and spin of the Artyom story are not unique. Rather, they are emblematic of the flashpoint adoption has become in the public imagination, especially stoked by a 24/7 online news cycle.

Within days, I had written an Artyom commentary that appeared on the cover of *Salon.com*.<sup>ii</sup> My focus was on the sensationalized news coverage, including a *Nightline* report about "the inside stories of adoptions that go horribly wrong." However, as the week of Artyom stories roared on, other adoptive parents began confessing their difficulties with problem adoptees, often in specific detail and splashed all over NPR, national TV, and the Internet.

In this piece, I will return to that old conundrum of memoir writing: What right does an author have to reveal private details about the lives of other family members? In particular, I will explore whether the long history of secrecy in adoption ever justifies a public airing that violates a child's right to privacy.

This is not a rhetorical question; the answer will differ in specific circumstances. Yet in public discussions of children, parents do have a special responsibility. When that responsibility appears to go by the wayside in favor of therapeutic catharsis or under the aegis of helping other adoptive parents, this ethical breach illustrates unconscious attitudes about who has a right to tell the family story.

### **Breaking Down Secrecy: A "Summer Romance" with a Birth Son**

Since the 1970s, many historians, adoption professionals, and adult adoptees have challenged the secrecy surrounding adoption in earlier decades of the twentieth century.<sup>iii</sup> These challenges, especially in the realm of domestic adoption, have led to the open-

adoption movement, growing activism to release sealed birth records to adoptees, and a new *zeitgeist* in which, at the very least, adoptive parents are encouraged to talk openly about the facts of an adoption with adoptees from a very young age.

In the bad old days of American adoption, current thinking goes, illegitimate children birthed by fallen women (dirty secret #1) were adopted by infertile couples (dirty secret #2), and were brought up in a new home as if they were biological offspring even though they weren't (dirty secret #3). In some cases, adoptees grew up never realizing they had been adopted until well into adulthood; in others, in which an international adoptee clearly was of a different race than his or her parents, that racial difference was simply ignored, making it dirty secret #4—a kind of lying in plain sight.<sup>iv</sup>

To many of us in the adoption community now, the notion of adoptees growing up with no knowledge of their origins and without a right to ask may seem as absurd as Harry Potter's nasty Muggle relations, who reluctantly took Harry in after the baby wizard's parents were killed. Early on, his aunt lies to him, saying his parents died in a "car crash." Harry learns "the first rule for a quiet life": "*Don't ask questions.*"<sup>v</sup>

Harry was not strictly an adoptee in his Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's house; he's the poor orphan, fostered by his remaining biological relations. Yet as sharp as J.K. Rowling's satire was when the Harry Potter juggernaut took off in the late 1990s, the idea of adoptees in American homes with no idea where they come from still lingers.

The genesis of current adoption practices in the American Progressive Era indicates why the belief in a clean slate, in a child's "bad" origins being wiped away in a "good" Protestant home, persists, despite changes in the adoption community. Such beliefs are especially problematic at a time when the media industry is undergoing a huge transformation. In many online venues, ethical safeguards for protecting the privacy of children and other ordinary citizens have either dropped away or are highly contested. As Barbara Melosh writes in her 2002 history of American adoption, *Strangers and Kin*:

The demand for openness in adoption is a telling barometer of the ambivalence surrounding contemporary adoption. Its repudiation of secrecy is, in one way, an extension of the affirmation of adoption that characterized the postwar mandate.... At its limit, though, the demand for full disclosure in adoption is also an indicator of the renewed stigma attached to contemporary adoption. The assault on secrecy strikes a familiar and resonant chord in American political rhetoric, and therefore it can seem self-evident that secrecy is bad and openness desirable. On closer examination, though, this rhetoric is susceptible to challenge.<sup>vi</sup>

Today's 24/7 news cycles and blogosphere outpourings now mean that all hot-button topics are subject to crowdsourcing. News stories about families and children have always sparked chatter around the proverbial water cooler. But as Melosh points out, adoption has become more of a hot button than ever because it reflects larger family trends. "Many people experience contemporary life as fragmented and atomistic; as families, too, falter and fail, we seem to have no secure place," she writes. "Adoption confronts us with the realities of loss and limitation that attend every human life."<sup>vii</sup>

It almost goes without saying that contemporary American culture emphasizes the therapeutic over the circumspect, but the problem here isn't just the rise of Oprah and other TV talk-show hosts who encourage guests to spill the dirt. Whatever you think of tearful celebrities revealing their struggles, the subjects of these confessions are adults. They are allowed to tell their own stories, even if those stories are highly edited.

The trouble comes when the story involves children and the only ones speaking for them are adult caregivers or clinical professionals. It's compounded when a news story about a child like Artyom breaks and, within hours, thousands of opinions about what happened are swirling all over the Internet. It's as if all that gossip over backyard fences of old or around the cooler was transcribed and broadcast. Like so much gossip, the perpetrator can hide behind "Anonymous"; yet unlike the spoken word, online text, attached to everything from personal blogs to those of the *New York Times*, lives on.

Try googling "Aimee Louise Sword," for example. As of this writing, one of the top hits will be a seven-month-old story from the *Huffington Post*, complete with an embedded Fox News video: "Aimee Louise Sword Raped Son She Gave Up For Adoption."<sup>viii</sup> Another hit of the same vintage from ABC News opens this way: "A

Michigan mother is facing a trial after being accused of having a summer romance with the teenage son she gave up for adoption.”<sup>ix</sup>

Unusual and disturbing as this story was when it broke in September 2009, there’s a big leap between rape and summer romance. Sword, in her mid-thirties and very attractive, became both a pariah who had supposedly broken the worst of taboos and an object of prurient interest (a “MILF” or “mother I’d like to fuck,” a parlance that suggests at least the prevalence of male fantasy). Her MySpace photos, including some taken with her birth son, still appear all over the Internet.<sup>x</sup>

More to the point, the original news story from a community site in the Detroit area, the *Oakland Press*, isn’t a top hit with search engines like Google.<sup>xi</sup> While the first news report hewed to standard journalistic practices of attribution and verification, almost none of the subsequent commentaries paused to question why Sword might have done what she did. In fact, the site *You Can’t Make This Up* did stick up for her, noting that the son was 15 at the time (not 10 as some online stories trumpeted) and that a social worker representing his adoptive family “asked his permission to find her, because he was getting unmanageable at home....” In this version, he’s a “gangbanger” who may have coerced his birth mother into having sex. She supposedly complied “partly due to guilt, partly out of fear of losing contact with her son forever and last but not least, partly because she was asked by his adoptive parents...[to help].”<sup>xii</sup>

The facts are still at issue. In this case, neither of two very troubled family members has been given a voice. We are left with all the scary stereotypes about what happens to adoptees: the son is either a victim raped by a depraved, sexually loose birth mother or an irredeemable gangbanger—and the story floats on, courtesy of Google.

### **Adoptive Parents Confess: Anita Tedaldi, Sorrowful Madonna**

In the hands of a skillful writer, shocking revelations about family life add to the problem of Internet immortality. Before Artyom (and Sword) came Anita Tedaldi, who in

August 2009 wrote a personal account about why, after eighteen months, she could no longer parent a small child she had adopted internationally. Her story, "My Adopted Son," appeared in *Motherlode*, under the imprimatur of the *New York Times* and Lisa Belkin, the well-known journalist and contributing writer at the *Times* who runs the blog.

Tedaldi's piece is beautifully written. Many commenters raged against a mother who would give up her child, but others found her admissions about the difficulties of caring for a special-needs boy to be brave. That was my first response, although at the time I was also troubled by what she didn't say. For example, Tedaldi writes:

[W]hile it was easy, and reassuring, to talk to all these experts about D.'s issues, it was terrifying to look at my own. I had never once considered the possibility that I'd view an adopted child differently than my biological children. The realization that I didn't feel for D. the same way I felt for my own flesh and blood shook the foundations of who I thought I was.<sup>xiii</sup>

This appears quite self-revealing; given these circumstances, Tedaldi is probably right that this child has gone to a better home. Yet does she really believe it's easier for a mother to attach to a biological child? Or is it just her? She skirts a hard answer, which leaves this complex question in readers' minds without illumination.<sup>xiv</sup>

Tedaldi's account is framed as a sorrowful confessional that she makes in order to help other adoptive parents. She changes some of the details and calls her son by an initial, all acceptable practices for protecting privacy in literary memoir writing. Yet because she had previously written about the adoption in a far happier frame of mind on her own blog and elsewhere, other bloggers were able to unearth details about her child and spread them virally around the Internet. Subsequently, Belkin was outraged that such personal details had been exposed, prompting her to post "Protecting Your Child's Privacy" on *Motherlode*. Yet Belkin's discussion about the ethics of parental memoirs has far less bite than an e-mail comment she included from one reader:

"In light of the post by Anita Tedaldi I have a suggestion for a future topic: parental blogging and how it might affect the kids. What's going to happen in 5 or 10 years (depending on the age of the kids) when they learn how to use Google and find what their parents have been posting about them for the entire world to read?"<sup>xv</sup>

Now that so many parental bloggers are broadcasting personal details, this is the real question. In another post, Belkin argues that she ran “My Adopted Son” on her blog because “I fiercely believe that sunlight is almost always better than darkness, and that shining a spotlight on all corners of a topic is the only way to understand it.”<sup>xvi</sup>

But adoption ups the stakes. There are always at least three sides to this story—birth parent, adoptee, and adoptive parent—but all sides don’t have equal access to the press. In most news accounts and memoirs, the voice of adoptive parents dominates.<sup>xvii</sup> And by the time adult adoptees are doing their own blogging and getting book contracts, parent writers have long made their mark and done their own spin.

Personal spin is the province of all memoir writing, and questions about point of view and bias have been with us since Thucydides. Recent memoirs by biological parents detailing the troubles of difficult children have also sparked concerns about invasion of privacy. In an excellent 2009 survey in the *New York Times*, “A Mother’s Memoir, a Son’s Anguish, Patricia Cohen writes that “Americans have excelled in the fine art of exposing themselves and their loved ones. Writers have revealed addictions, incest, betrayal, madness, pedophilia, abuse, criminality, violence and more in the name of truth, catharsis, social responsibility and art.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Cohen was responding to the furor over British writer Juliet Myerson’s *The Lost Child: A Mother’s Story*, in which Myerson vividly describes the drug addiction of her teen son. “In some sense all family stories have a Rashomon quality,” Cohen concludes.

The nature of truth is squishy here. The hyper-reality of good memoir and feature writing can illuminate our understanding of life. But such writing by parents can easily become self-congratulatory, too, and it can shove aside the messier accounts of children, who are not necessarily the grateful, well-adjusted narrators we want them to be.

What took the Tedaldi story over the ethical edge—and perhaps inspired other bloggers to dig into and expose her old files—was her evident desire to defend herself. She even appeared on the *Today* show on October 1, 2009. Belkin was also a guest, along

with Adam Pertman, who heads the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and is another adoptive parent. There were no adult adoptees on hand to weigh in on host Matt Lauer's leading questions. Tedaldi played her long-suffering part: pretty Modigliani face, tear-choked voice, cleavage showing.<sup>xix</sup>

A number of commentators, including myself, have lambasted her for turning a personal story into a media circus, one in which she presented herself as a truth-teller. In "Anita Tedaldi and Guilt & Privilege" on the blog *Racialicious*, deputy editor Thea Lim emphasized what seemed to her a lack of remorse. Lim quotes a comment of Tedaldi's on the blog *AdoptionTalk* in which she tries to explain herself: "I chose to share the inconsistencies and the human contradictions in my own life in a public forum precisely because I believe we are all made up of good and bad." Lim's unvarnished response could be thrown at all literary memoir writers who get too much airtime:

When faced with her own horrible mistake, instead of examining her actions, Tedaldi starts waxing philosophical. Hey, it's not that she messed up by taking in D. when she had no business doing so, it's that the whole world is messed up! It's that adoption is just so complicated! It's that human nature is just so frail!

Bullshit.

In the material that I read about Tedaldi and D., there is no mention of race anywhere, or that this was a transracial adoption. Yet to me there is something here—if not particularly of white privilege—then of massive gargantuan privilege of some kind. Because the more privilege you have, the less likely you are to feel guilt.<sup>xx</sup>

### **The Artyom Response: "I Did Not Love My Adopted Child"**

When the disturbing story of Artyom first came off the AP wires this April, Belkin again leapt into the public debate. In *Motherlode* on April 9, she threw down a gauntlet to readers, still defending Tedaldi's account of months before:

Tedaldi sought counseling and advice before she made her decision, and then she found the boy a family where the mother was a social worker trained in helping children with attachment disorders. Even so, most of you excoriated her, calling her selfish and cruel. I can only imagine what you think of a woman who puts a 7-year-old on an 4,858 mile, 11-hour international flight alone.<sup>xxi</sup>

Responses poured in, many calling Artyom's adoptive family "despicable" or "inhuman," on her blog and others. In asking for instant responses, Belkin followed one



of the blogosphere's conventions: posing a question, and letting the fur fly. More reasoned and in-depth features about why adoptive parents might feel desperate enough to return a troubled adoptee followed later in print. Sarah Kershaw's long feature in the *New York Times*, "In Some Adoptions, Love Doesn't Conquer All," provided a more nuanced view but appeared a week after the initial blog salvos.<sup>xxii</sup> By then, the basic spin on the story had been set by TV news magazines and online sites like *Slate*.

There's much to be said for the role blogging plays in sparking a lively public discourse, especially in an era when mainstream media can and should be challenged. But in popular blog venues like *Motherlode*—not to mention rapidly reported news articles—when writers do no more than pose questions, they are stirring the pot of conventional wisdom rather than providing the interpretation of a good journalistic feature.

When print journalists can't move fast enough to answer the *why* of a story like Artyom's, commentators of all stripes leap into the gap. It's easy to dismiss the Muggles who know nothing about international adoption. But as with the Tedaldi story, adoptive parents began to fill this fact gap with their own stories, offering sympathy for adoptive mother Hansen (who has yet to speak on the public record about what happened).

KJ Dell'Antonia's "I Did Not Love My Adopted Child" in *Slate* exemplifies the spin given this stream of adoptive-parent testimonials. Either in features in which they told their stories to reporters, or in confessional blog posts, adoptive parents rushed to admit their own travails with older international adoptees. Dell'Antonia writes:

[W]ithout taking away anything from what her adopted son was suffering, I understand, deep in my bones, what Hansen must have been going through when she bypassed all other emergency options and put that child on a plane. In the same way that women who've experienced post-partum depression understand mothers who kill themselves and their infants, I get it. There, but for [fill in saving grace here], go I.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Her piece is, in fact, a restrained account of the difficulties she first had bonding with her three-year-old daughter from China; she makes clear she loves her child now. But the misleading headline will have the longest life and biggest impact on the Internet. The media focus has turned to exposing more of adoption's dirty secrets so that other

parents don't make the same mistake. Dell'Antonia was interviewed later in the week by NPR's Neal Conan on *Talk of the Nation*, and he asked her "Very briefly, are you worried that your daughter will one day read this piece, 'I Did Not Love My Adopted Child?'" Dell'Antonia answered, "I certainly, absolutely have thought about that."<sup>xxiv</sup>

To the extent that any of this leads to a necessary public discussion about how society cares for abandoned children—whether in Russia, the United States, or any other country—such personal exposure may justify itself. But when I was writing another post about the Artyom story, my son accidentally spotted "I Did Not Love My Adopted Child" on my computer screen. Here's what I later published on my blog:

We then spent a half hour snuggling on the couch, him fighting back tears, me saying I would never leave him, that what happened here was wrong.

When I asked him what he thought I should write about that headline, he snapped right back: "Say it's creepy and scary."<sup>xxv</sup>

So we are back to Rashomon: adoptive parent, adoptee, birth parent. There's at least a bit of truth in every personal telling. Some believe everyone should have their say. Yet assuming there's a free market in personal stories, as many do in the blogosphere, ignores who has the power and means to speak. As Melosh notes, there are good social reasons for secrecy. "Secrets define the boundaries of intimacy," she writes:

Even as Americans have assaulted secrecy as conspiracy—a threat to democratic institutions—we have also long defended privacy as fundamental to maintaining those institutions. Without privacy, there is no freedom: relentless scrutiny is the hallmark of totalitarian states... As adoption rights activists argued, secrecy does have the power to destroy; what they did not acknowledge is that secrecy is indispensable to social life.<sup>xxvi</sup>

*You do not know my family*, I can imagine my son thinking, as we try to process a story that still frightens him. *You do not have a right to know*, I would add, no matter how many online sites and TV hosts and experts claim that this form of outing is good for our collective souls. What most disturbs me in the aftermath of Artyom is the way so many journalists and adoptive-parent writers ended up crossing ethical boundaries when publicly discussing children in trouble, particularly their own children.

As a parent-writer myself, I know these aren't easy boundaries to maintain or police. But while the subtitle to Dell'Antonia's piece is "The Painful Truth About Adoption," I believe the truth about any complex set of human relationships isn't monolithic. Far too many commentators seem to have forgotten that adults aren't the only filters for children's experience. We can and should be filters for our own. But when what we have to say may influence how a child later tells his own story—or actively hurts him—we parents have lost sight of the high ground.

---

<sup>i</sup> Kristin Hall, "Grandmother: Boy Terrified Adoptive Kin," *Seattle Times*, April 10, 2010. (This is just one example of the many news stories based on the initial Associated Press report.)

<sup>ii</sup> Martha Nichols, "Adoption Fearmongers Take Over," *Salon*, April 12, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> The shift in attitudes towards adoption secrecy is well documented in books such as Julie Berebitsky's *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood: 1851-1950* (University of Kansas, 2000), Adam Pertman's *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming America* (Basic Books, 2000), and Barbara Melosh's *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* (Harvard University Press, 2002); more information can be found on the websites of adoptee-rights organizations like Bastard Nation.

<sup>iv</sup> For an array of perspectives about growing up as an international and/or transracial adoptee, see the anthology *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, edited by Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Sin (South End Press, 2006).

<sup>v</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 1997 (U.S. paperback edition: Scholastic, 1998), p.20.

<sup>vi</sup> Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*, p.285

<sup>vii</sup> Melosh, p.291

<sup>viii</sup> Nick Graham, "Aimee Louise Sword Raped Son She Gave Up For Adoption." *Huffington Post*, September 13, 2009.

<sup>ix</sup> Sarah Netter, "Michigan Mom Aimee Louise Sword Faces Trial for Incest With Son She Gave Up for Adoption," ABC News (abcnews.go.com), September 11, 2009.

<sup>x</sup> Sword was arrested at the end of April 2009 in Waterford Township, Michigan, on one count of third-degree criminal sexual assault. As of this writing, she is now out on bail and awaiting trial. (See 2009 and 2010 reports from the *Oakland Press*, an online community news site.) Some of the material in these paragraphs is adapted from my piece "Birth Mothers Lose Again: The Media Storm over Aimee Louise Sword" on the blog *Adopt-a-tude* (Martha Nichols, September 12, 2009).

<sup>xi</sup> Shaun Byron, "Woman Accused of Having Sex with Long-Lost Son," *Oakland Press*, September 10, 2009.

<sup>xii</sup> "Aimee Louise Sword Did Not Rape Her '10 Year Old Son,'" *You Can't Make This Up (unfictional.com)*, September 12, 2009.

<sup>xiii</sup> Anita Tedaldi, “My Adopted Son” (posted by Lisa Belkin on her *Motherlode* blog under “Terminating an Adoption), *New York Times*, August 26, 2009.

<sup>xiv</sup> Some of the material in this section is adapted from my post on *Open Salon* titled “Uh-Oh, Mom’s a Writer: The Ethics of Memoirs About Kids” (Martha Nichols, September 4, 2009).

<sup>xv</sup> Lisa Belkin, “Protecting Your Child’s Privacy,” *New York Times* (*Motherlode* blog), August 31, 2009.

<sup>xvi</sup> Lisa Belkin, “The Mother Who Gave Back Her Adopted Son,” *New York Times* (*Motherlode* blog), October 1, 2009.

<sup>xvii</sup> In the last ten years, for example, an increasing number of memoirs by white adoptive parents about adopting internationally have appeared, including investigative reporter Jeff Gammage’s *China Ghosts*. A smaller number of memoirs by adult Asian adoptees (such as Jane Jeong Trenka’s *The Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions*) counter such parental visions with more complicated identity struggles. As for international birth parents, their side of the story is rarely heard.

<sup>xviii</sup> Patricia Cohen, “A Mother’s Memoir, a Son’s Anguish,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2009.

<sup>xix</sup> Some of the material in this section is adapted from my post on *Open Salon* titled “An Adoption Mess Gets the Today Show Treatment” (Martha Nichols, October 8, 2009). See that post for more details.

<sup>xx</sup> Thea Lim, *Racialicious*, October 15, 2009.

<sup>xxi</sup> Lisa Belkin, “Shipping an Adopted Son Back to Russia,” *New York Times* (*Motherlode* blog), April 9, 2010.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sarah Kershaw, “In Some Adoptions, Love Doesn’t Conquer All,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2010.

<sup>xxiii</sup> KJ Dell’Antonia, “I Did Not Love My Adopted Child,” *Slate*, April 13, 2010.

<sup>xxiv</sup> “Mom Confesses She Did Not Love Adopted Daughter,” *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, April 15, 2010.

<sup>xxv</sup> Martha Nichols, “Adoption ‘Truths’: Be Careful What You Say in Print,” *Athena’s Head* ([athenashead.com](http://athenashead.com)), April 19, 2010.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*, p.285.

**Martha Nichols** is a freelance writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *Harvard Business Review*, *Utne Reader*, *Adoptive Families*, *Brain, Child, Salon*, and other publications. She is a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School, and a contributing editor and blog manager at *Women’s Review of Books*. She also blogs at *Athena’s Head* and *Adopt-a-tude*.