Tara **Moore**

No Longer an Orphan:

Narratives of Adoption in Young Adult Fantasy and Science Fiction

Young adult literature is rife with adoption narratives. Although they are often categorized as orphan stories, these tales nearly always include an element of adoption. The adoption in the story may be official or it may be an informal arrangement, but it has long been a trope in books for and about children. Consider the importance of adoption in the popular, sentimental "orphan" tales of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tales that have been shown to exhibit the indispensable orphan girl who uses "affective discipline" to lead her adoptive family to redemption and wellness (Sanders 2011). Here and elsewhere authors appropriate the orphan story because the orphan represents a universal pain of isolation, a pain with which readers can readily empathize (Kimball, 1999).

Young adult literature has seen another boom in adoption tales since the mid-twentieth century, largely due to the orphan quest narrative. These orphan/adoption narratives rarely cast the adopted child in a healthy family setting. In fact, in fantasy novels, adopted children imbued with special powers must use their abilities to free themselves from some unpleasant situation, and this plot arrangement can mean that the adoptive family is vilified as part of the problem rather than the solution for the child.

While contemporary texts continue to sensationalize the orphan, some recent fantasy novels offer a more cultivated appreciation for adoptive families. By re-centering these orphan narratives as adoption narratives, educators can take the opportunity to sensitize readers to adoption issues and advocate for children in adoptive families. This article looks at examples of respectful adoption language and adoption microaggressions to initiate a spectrum of adoption sensitivity across young adult novels.

Providing Context and Defining Terms to Ground the Analysis

Contemplating the adoption narrative solicits questions around how the long-term vilification of adoptive families affects readers who themselves identify as part of an adoptive family. Adoption actively influences a large number of households. In 2002, 64% of Americans reported that they had a connection—either a friend or family member—who had been adopted (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002). According to the 2010 census, 1.5 million American children and young adults, or 2.4% of those under the age of 18, are adopted (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Numbers not represented here are the siblings, parents, and birth parents of adopted young people—readers who might also see themselves caricatured in an adoption narrative. Adults who were adopted do not figure into that census data.

Controversy exists over the language that should be used to discuss people involved in adoption. The term "biological parents" has been used and more recently cast aside as unworthy of the very real tie that exists between the family of origin and the child. Since the 1970s, a large segment of the adoption community has lobbied for the acceptance of respectful or positive adoption language, such as "birth mother" and "birth father." More recently, the term "first parents" has been championed "to more fully recognize

the primacy of the relationship that these parents have in the lives of their children"; however, this term has not been fully embraced by the adoption community (Baden, 2016, p. 2). The adopting parents are termed simply "parents." If called upon to do so, parents might explain that they have one "biological daughter" and one who "was adopted." Social workers use the term "adoption triad" to recognize that the child, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents are all always present in the equation of adoption.

While the adoptive community may not be regarded as a maligned group, it is a minority community that can suffer emotionally from mainstream culture's uninformed assumptions about adoptive identity and priorities.

While some advocates believe recent language choices belittle the role of the birth parents, this is generally the language used by social workers and those involved with adoption. For the purposes of this paper, biological parents will be called "birth parents," parents will be called "adoptive parents," and the child might be referred to as the "adopted child" to clarify this element of identity. However, this stressing of the adoptive relationship is discouraged in conversations about adoption in general.

Without respectful language training, there is little clear semantic recourse available to young people faced with the devaluing question, "Who are your real parents?" That question in general raises the issue of "adoptism," a term now being used in some limited adoption circles to describe prejudice against families formed by adoption because they are not seen as inherently authentic families. Baden (2016) has repurposed the term "microaggressions," taken from conversations about racism, for the world of adoption. Adoption microaggressions can be subtle and possibly unconscious, but they are inherently detrimental to the adoption kinship network. Microaggressions can include the microinsults of positing young people as commodities, expecting young people to be grateful for their adoption, and emphasizing an external expectation that young people need to find their birth parents to be complete (Baden, 2016).

Studies have shown that young adult literature is effective in increasing empathy around a host of social issues and communities, including teen pregnancy, people with disabilities, the LGBT community, and undocumented migrants (Cummins, 2013; Hayn, Clemmons, & Olvey, 2016; Hill, 2009; Malo-Juvera, 2015). While the adoptive community may not be regarded as a maligned group, it is a minority community that can suffer emotionally from mainstream culture's uninformed assumptions about adoptive identity and priorities.

Problematic Representations of Adoption in Literature

There is a subset of adoption-related books marketed to help very young adopted children process this element of their identity. Picturebooks about adoption tend to remove power from the birth parents in favor of honoring the adoptive parents. Jerome and Sweeney (2013) reviewed 104 picturebooks about adoption and found that "birth parents are often represented as failing to be 'good' parents" (p. 698). So even within children's literature created for the adoptive community, the portrayal of actors differs from the way those actors are discussed in the contemporary professional language.

From a review of the middle grade and young adult literature, it seems that novelists are typically even less intentional about portraying adoptive families in respectful, realistic ways. Authors of young adult fantasy novels that include adoption interact with a vulnerable community at odds with mainstream perceptions. For example, Michelle Lovric's *The Undrowned Child* (2009) is set in 1899 and tells the story of how young Teodora Stampara teams up with the mermaids of Venice to stop an evil threatening the city. While the story is set in the past, the narrative has a modern feel and modern sensibilities. Teodora was born in Venice, but lived most of her life in Naples with a nurturing adoptive family. When the family travels to Venice, Teodora becomes involved with saving the city from an evil influence. In the process, she discovers the identity of her birth family. At times, the novel emphasizes her birth identity in

a less thoughtful way: "[I]t felt strangely beautiful to say the words 'my family' to describe her real parents, Marta and Daniele Gasperin" (p. 292). Teodora longs to stay in Venice "[w]here my real family is buried" (p. 420). While connecting with her birth heritage is certainly a powerful benefit to Teodora, the language used to describe her birth family applies less thoughtful, mainstream terms to her situation and, in a sense, disrespects her very real relationship with her adoptive parents.

Narratives can mishandle either the language of adoption or the depiction of it, or both. Haddix's *Children of Exile* (2016), the first book in a new series, can be faulted on both scores. The actual plot point of adoption ends up being vilified; it is associated with child-trafficking, and it undercuts the adoptive family relationship. In the story, a town full of children ages 12 and younger have been raised with nonviolent principles by the Freds, the term given to their caregivers. These pacifist "Fred-mamas" and "Fred-daddies" have maintained a clear distinction as the not-parents: "'Fred-mama,' she corrected me [. . .] 'I'm only your Fred-mama. Your real mama is waiting for you at home'" (p. 17). Haddix's language here subverts positive adoption language by forcing the children to stay focused on their inaccessible birth families as the "real" family and using a linguistic marker to reinforce the Fred-parents' lesser status.

The children are suddenly returned to their birth parents in a traumatic process, only to find that their birth parents, maimed survivors of a race war, lack the virtues the children have been raised to embody. Twelve-year-old Rosi grapples with the transition from utopia to ghetto, but she also questions the situation. In the end, she learns that an alien consortium has been removing all human newborns to raise them to appreciate nonviolence in an attempt to reboot the human species. While the human parents are eager to have their children back after 12 years of alien oppression, these adult survivors are physically and emotionally damaged. Rosi's birth parents cannot give her the emotional nurturing she received from her Fred-parents, but the human parents do recognize that their children have been raised to be pure and good. The adults realize that keeping the children in the ghetto will destroy the children's humanity, as it has done to the adults. The closing scene shows Rosi and two younger children making their way out of the war-ravaged ghetto in a tableau reminiscent of *The Giver*'s (Lowry, 2003) uncertain conclusion.

Since the alien plot only becomes apparent in the last 1% of the novel, it does not overshadow the identity conflict that Rosi faces as a child reunited with birth parents she has never known. In this new setting, she faces the uncertainty of being in a new place and being treated with derision and physical threats. While she finds her identity in her adopted family's teaching, she slowly comes to empathize with her birth parents' struggles. Once again, language conveys the subtleties of a child's feelings about her family. Rosi talks about her emotionally distant, abusive birth parents as "the mother" and "the father." In the final pages, when she recognizes their attempt to protect her, Rosi slips naturally into calling them "my mother" and "my father" (p. 255).

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Rosi, like many adopted young people, chooses to reconnect with her birth parents, but the narrative arranges it so that she must also entirely separate from her adoptive/Fred parents. This is problematic, as is the underlying premise of kidnapping or child-trafficking required to broker the peace between the humans and the aliens. As it explores the fantasy about why a child no longer resides with her birth parents, this text highlights a sense of fictive peace conferred through the knowledge. Rosi's eventual understanding of the larger politics allows her to finally bond with her birth parents, bringing a sense of peace to that relationship and within herself. Ironically, it also plays through an extreme fantasy of rights and responsibility: aliens stole her away.

Some orphan/adoption narratives revel in fantasies of poverty, a set up for the later payoff of wealth and security. There is also a cultural respect for individualism present in the orphan fantasy; however, the orphan must work toward finding a home to avoid being a "perpetual orphan" outcast (Mattson, 1997). Peters (2001) has identified these as "orphan adventure narratives" and has found that they tend to emphasize the heroism of the orphan who, though

detached from a basic family structure, seeks to secure the safety of the larger "family," namely the empire or society (p. 62).

Just such a messianic orphan plays the lead role in *Sabriel* (1995), the opening novel of Garth Nix's Old Kingdom trilogy. In the novel's opening backstory, Sabriel's mother dies giving birth, and her caring father guides her in the ways of his Abhorsen magic, a necromancy that lays to rest spirits that break out of Death and threaten the living in his magical kingdom. The main plot begins when Sabriel's father dies just as she graduates from high school. As a result, she gives up her plan to continue on to a mundane university. Instead, she claims her father's magical tools and crosses the border back into the Old Kingdom, finding her father's home and his servant and taking up both his quest and his role as the one and only powerful Abhorsen. Sabriel's mentor, a cat spirit named Mogget, continues her training in the ways of Old Kingdom magic as she fights to reach her goal. The novel's conflict is only resolved when Sabriel and her companions work together to allow her to vanquish Kerrigor, the dead spirit that seeks to destroy both the Old Kingdom and the mundane neighboring country of Ancelstierre. Her victory restores order and begins the restoration of magic in the Old Kingdom. As the only Abhorsen and the only one who could stop this danger, Sabriel serves as the messianic orphan who saves two kingdoms while growing in her own independent power. Questing orphans like Sabriel may meet mentors who challenge, inform, and direct them, but these mentors do not serve officially as parents. They may be paternal or maternal, but they are not fathers and mothers. They do not attach with the child; instead, they tutor the child in his or her role as independent magical entity, apart from a family.

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Adult mentors frequently fail Harry Potter in Rowling's novels (1997–2007). All seven Harry Potter novels depict a fraught family relationship in which adoptive parents are emotionally abusive, yet which is tolerated, if not fully endorsed, by Harry's magical world. In keeping with the less sensitive approach, the adopted young person is burdened by his or her adoption. The plot hinges on how the young person can escape that situation and reconnect with the birth family, either by adapting to the wizarding world or literally speaking with the spelled vestiges of his birth parents. Meanwhile, the Dursleys insult Harry's birth parents and underfeed him.

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* the Dursleys physically threaten him: "[Aunt Petunia] aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan" (p. 10). According to Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the adoptive parents emotionally abuse Harry: "You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands" (p. 55). The wizarding adults force the infant Harry Potter upon unsuitable adoptive parents for the sake of the remnant of protection his birth mother transferred magically to his aunt's blood. This text then allows for a voyeuristic thrill in observing the evil adoptive family. Rowling's scenes of a neglected teen harken back to the abusive adults who take guardianship roles in novels intended for younger readers: evil Miss Minchin in *A Little Princess* (Burdett, 1905), the abusive Calormene father whom Shasta flees in C. S. Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy* (1954), and the aunts in *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961).

Orphan-hood has served as a trope in the typical fantasy equation. Homans (2006) has called adoption a "fiction-generating machine" because it highlights how unknowable one's origins really are (p. 5). Literature also emphasizes the freeing nature of orphan-hood. The orphan may mourn the birth parents, but the young person is also free to complete dangerous quests and run risks that living parents would not allow. Thus, living outside the bounds of parental authority and protection, orphans must find their way through fantasy worlds with only their wits, their abilities, and the occasional benefit of a mentor's counsel. Additional texts that fall into this category include Lloyd Alexander's *The Book of Three* (1964) and

the Chronicles of Prydain series, Tamora Pierce's *Wild Magic* (1992), Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* (2003), Ann Aguirre's *Enclave* (2011), and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Drowned Cities* (2012).

(More) Positive Adoption Language and Portrayals in Young Adult Literature

Instead of reading these orphan plots as the isolated orphan on a quest for acceptance and belonging, it behooves the world of young adult fiction to read how these narratives accumulate in the genre and how they can be re-centered and read in the light of the adoption narrative. While there is nothing inherently hurtful in the questing orphan narrative, it does belie the fact that maturing within a stable family structure is usually a required element of an emotionally healthy childhood.

Some socially responsible portrayals of the adoptive family do exist in children's literature. Prolific children's author Margaret Peterson Haddix repeatedly develops plots based on her protagonists' adopted status. Unlike her novel *Children of Exile* (2016), two of her earlier tales include a tentative thoughtfulness in their treatment of adoption; however, these novels also capitalize on titillating adoption vulnerabilities in the interest of spectacular plot twists. Haddix's *Escape from Memory* (2003) brings in the adoption plot very early. Fifteen-year-old Kira begins to have strange memories after being hypnotized. Shortly after that, her quiet, steely mother disappears, and a stranger convinces Kira that the woman who raised her is not her birth mother. The not-mother is being held captive, and Kira needs to free her. This leads Kira to a Soviet enclave in California that prizes the memory above all things, and she must thread her way through the politics and lies while uncovering the truth about her identity.

Kira's awareness of her adopted status explains a niggling feeling that has existed below her consciousness. When a strange woman appears in Kira's house and tells her that "Sophia . . . is not your mother," Kira realizes that she has known this truth for a long time but never acknowledged it: "I loved her, I guess. But there had always been something at the back of my mind, I thought now, some inkling" (pp. 45–46). For readers, the threat of that "inkling" paints adoption with a "wrongness," as if children feel a greater belonging when they reside with birth parents. Kira learns that the woman she thought of as her mother was, in fact, her biological aunt, Aunt Sophia, who became her guardian when Kira's birth parents were killed in a political struggle. Adoption literature recommends full disclosure of adoption facts. Since Aunt Sophia chooses to deceive Kira, she has removed the child's ability to have agency over her own narrative; the adult has taken license with the truth of Kira's life.

As narrator, Kira carries the reader through both the plot and her struggle to come to terms with her adopted status. Shortly after learning a skewed version of the facts, Kira thinks, "I was willing to believe that [Sophia] wasn't my real mother" (p. 55). In ensuing scenes, Kira forces herself to talk about her adoptive mother as "Sophia." For instance, when she wants to know about her adoptive mother's safety, she asks, "'And my—I mean, Sophia?' I whispered" (p. 73). With such language, it is as if the term "mom" no longer applies. Here Haddix appropriates mainstream language that presents adoption as a less "real" relationship, but this is partly due to the fact that the young narrator has absolutely no reliable adult to mentor her through this process. The novel's antagonist, Rona, shows her inhumanity by emphasizing the perceived wrongness of the relationship at every turn. She refers to Sophia as "your so-called mother" (p. 134). Rona has evil designs to obtain the memory-downloading machine that Kira's birth parents were working on before they were killed.

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Within just a day of learning about her adoption, Kira struggles to redefine her relationship with her dead birth parents and her adoptive mother: "They were the ones I belonged to. Not Mom. But my mind was a traitor: Suddenly all I could think about was

how Mom had taken care of me for the last thirteen years. She'd cleaned up my vomit when I'd gotten sick. She'd cut up my meat for me when I was too little to handle knives" (p. 88). By the time she reunites with Sophia, Kira easily calls her "Mom" again. In a sci-fi plot twist, Kira learns that the woman who has raised her has the memories and implanted identity of her aunt but the physical body of her birth mother. At the story's conclusion, Kira herself has the power to rebuild the machine that will give her aunt/mother the chance to choose which identity she would like for herself. Kira concludes the novel as an empowered character, taking control of her future but also able to relinquish her aunt/mother's identity choice to the person most directly affected by it. The novel's complicated sci-fi/political conflict has served as a background for Kira's fully informed acceptance of her adoptive mother.

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Haddix employs positive adoption language in *Found* (2008), the first book of her *New York Times* best-selling series, The Missing. Protagonist Jonah's parents supplied him with "all the kid-approved 'isn't-adoption-wonderful!' books," and Jonah has also read adult books about the subject: "*Raising the Well-Adjusted Adopted Child, What to Tell Your Adopted and Foster Children, Adoption without Secrets*" (p. 32). These books, like the real ones they are meant to represent, set forth carefully worded positive adoption language that has not yet been accepted by mainstream American society.

Jonah also models positive adoption language choices. He corrects his friend Chip, who has just discovered that he, too, was adopted, when Chip wonders about his unknown "real parents":

> "'Birth parents . . . They're called birth parents . . . Those are the correct terms. Birth parents are the people who gave birth to you. Real parents are the ones who change your diapers and get up in the middle of the night when you're a baby and show you how to ride a bike without training wheels and, and, ...' He stopped because he thought maybe he was quoting directly from *What to Tell Your Adopted and Foster Children*" (p. 33).

Jonah self-censors because, while he believes in the message of the adoption-support books, he also perceives a level of calculated concept control in their teaching. Scenes like this at times undercut the relevance of modern, politically correct adoption terminology. In this scene, Jonah uses terminology self-consciously; he cannot help but analyze his use and assess its sincerity. Is he parroting a book, or is he using language he feels is the real expression of his situation?

Using adoption terminology is counter-cultural. More people would understand "real parents" to mean birth parents, when in fact the adoption terminology stresses that "real parents" are the adoptive parents. Jonah may indeed be quoting the book, or he may simply *feel* that he is quoting the book; either way, he feels that his response to his friend is scripted rather than sincere. The failure of the terminology in this scene damages the novel's overall attempt to train its readers in positive adoption language. At the same time, it succeeds in showing the uphill battle adoptive families have in using vocabulary that respects their family structure.

The novel uses Jonah's well-read adoptive education as a foil against Chip's untutored, politically incorrect use of mainstream language about the topic. The contrast is made even more significant because Chip learns from a source other than his parents that he was adopted; he realizes they have been hiding the fact of his adoption from him—a parental choice that is not recommended in modern adoption literature. In fact, when Chip uses the old fashioned, potentially hurtful language about adopted families, he is applying the only language he knows to his own situation: "Why did my real parents give me up?" (p. 34). In this scene, Jonah mentally edits Chip's untutored language: "*You mean, your birth mother set up an adoption plan . . .*" (p. 34). This textbook phrasing is intended to offer respect to the birth parents by avoiding language that is inherently derogatory about their choice or their feelings for their biological child. Even though she offers both types of language, the mainstream and the politically correct, Haddix reinforces the more appropriate terminology by letting Jonah have the final word.

In the climax of the novel, the children learn that they are part of an inter-time adoption/child-trafficking ring, a plot point that actually detracts from the

text's adoption sensitivity. A company from the future has been traveling to the past to "rescue" famous missing children—those whose destinies and/or lives were cut short by the whims of history—and then morphing them back into infants and transporting their historically relevant DNA in baby form to rich parents in a future century. The company sponsoring the historic rescues has become the purveyor of "prestigious names from history for wealthy idiots who want to brag at their cocktail parties, 'Oh yes, my little Henry comes from a line of British kings'" (p. 283). One shipment of children accidently crash-lands in the twenty-first century, only to be adopted by regular parents, thus thwarting the wealthy would-be parents waiting several centuries in the future.

With this knowledge comes a destabilized identity for the adopted children. They learn that they have been victims of child-trafficking. The children move from identifying as legally adopted children to seeing themselves as adoptable commodities. Ironically, the trafficking has saved their lives and redeemed them from a fifteenth-century death. This plot point strikes a jarring chord. The idea of the child as commodity is a fraught one in the world of adoption. Young people must come to terms with their transition through the adoption triad and the fees that necessarily change hands during this process. Of course, tragic tales of child-trafficking do exist in modern adoption, so it is a fair point to consider. Certainly, some anti-adoption advocates emphasize this aspect of adoption. Nonetheless, such texts may raise haunting questions for readers who are becoming aware of the many facets that contribute to their identity.

In subsequent books in the series, Jonah and his tiny band reject the option to be commodified and reclaim their agency by traveling through time and engaging in time-convoluting quests. Knowing that their existence in an earlier century means both a premature death and a danger of interfering with the existing historical timeline, the young people work to reunite with their twenty-first-century adoptive families and their own chosen twenty-first-century identities. *Found* brings twenty-first-century adoption language to the common orphan plot, but, of course, Jonah is not an orphan. He has been adopted and loved by his family. Moreover, his parents model sensitive parenting by being supportive of his desire to learn more about his birth family. *Found* offers recurring lessons on how to talk about adoption, even though the conversations can be difficult. This perspective sets it apart.

These Haddix novels wrestle with the adopted child's security in his or her identity with varying levels of sympathy. *Found* is the most intentionally supportive of adoptive family priorities, but even it has some threads of darkness. Such is not the case with an even more masterful handling of this trope: Kate Milford's award-winning *Greenglass House* (2014). The novel sits on the border of science fiction; it has a ghostly element and seems to take place in the present time but in a slightly different dimension. Twelve-year-old Milo and his friend Meddy create a role-playing game in which they set out to solve the mysteries surrounding them while they are snowed in with the curious customers staying in the inn run by Milo's parents. Like *Found's* Jonah, Milo feels empowered by his knowledge of positive adoption language and corrects people, even adults, when they misrepresent the adopted family bond. One guest tells a story in which an adopted girl "had never been able to learn anything about her family"; Milo quickly interrupts: "'Her birth parents,' Milo corrected her instinctively. 'The people who adopted her would still have been her family'" (p. 205).

Milo's self-exploration coincides with the mystery story, and this narrative recognizes the adopted child's need to daydream about the birth family.

While Milo's adopted status is central to his character, it never becomes the crux of the mystery. He empathizes with other adopted characters, and he explores his own feelings about his identity, but Milo reaches the conclusion of the novel without discovering his birth parents. This is perhaps the power of the adoption narrative in this novel: the character was adopted, and he is now a part of a loving family. Milo toys with the fantasy of "orphan magic," an idea that arises from a fantasy story he reads, but he knows that he is an orphan no longer. He later comes to the conclusion that, while he had no control over his origins, "he got to choose who and what he was going to be from now on" (p. 344).

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tery story, and this narrative recognizes the adopted child's need to daydream about the birth family. As the only person of Chinese descent in an otherwise non-Asian family, Milo feels conspicuous when he meets new people, and his role-playing character allows him to fantasize about fitting in and connecting with a birth family that looks like him: "[Milo] gave in and pretended to remember looking in the mirror with his famous [. . .] father to see the same nose, same mouth and eyes, same straight black hair as his own" (p. 85). Milo often feels guilty when he daydreams about his birth father, and this is the novel's most sensitive exploration of the adoption narrative. The text encourages readers who were adopted to freely consider their biological family, and at the end of the story, Milo's mother cannily realizes that the resolution of some mysteries may have resonated with Milo's own exploration of his personal mystery. She tells him, "[W]e would never want you to feel guilty about loving your birth parents too, and wanting to think about them" (p. 371). His friend Meddy reminds him, "You're not an orphan, Milo" (p. 329). Milo agrees. This is not an orphan narrative.

This choice is made more poignant because of her adopted status and the way it marks a change in her character.

Set in a much more fantastical environment, Anne Aguirre's post-apocalyptic *Outpost* (2012) depicts a sweet love story between a warrior and her foster family. Once she has escaped from her underground enclave, Deuce and her companions attempt to adapt to the post-Amish society in the topside town called Salvation. The society assigns the new arrivals to foster families with varying degrees of success. Her former hunting partner, Fade, must endure an abusive foster father. The injured Tegan settles in smoothly with the doctor's family. Deuce, who has never before enjoyed a parental relationship, chafes at the responsibilities of family life, but finds herself in a loving, supportive family.

Deuce's former society separated the assigned tasks of birthing and child-rearing, and Breeders, as they were called, rarely lived long enough to know their offspring. As she learns about family relationships, Deuce also thinks about her birth mother, the girl she calls her "dam," in accordance with her old society's vernacular: "I wondered if my dam had been a kind girl" (p. 186). Like Milo, the narrative permits Deuce to ponder her birth parents. Deuce has to trade away her birth mother's one legacy, a metal compact, to survive her escape from the subterranean world. This loss resurfaces at times, suggesting that Deuce feels a broader loss in never knowing her birth mother or the relationship they might have had.

Over the course of the novel, Deuce comes to appreciate the support and love the Oaks, her foster family, can offer her. Adoption language plays a vital role in Deuce's understanding of her new family. Because of her upbringing, she has never heard of the term "adoption." Learning about how a family structure works exhausts Deuce, but she puts in the effort: "Since I'd never had a mother at all, I didn't know what to do with [Momma Oak's] attention" (p. 26). While Deuce resents how dependent she is on these adults, she brings healing to the family through her presence and actions. For example, she reaches out to her foster brother and reconciles him with their parents. Overall, this family exhibits a particularly reciprocal relationship that presents the young person with the power to accept or reject that which is offered.

While Deuce retains a level of independence, her growing love for her family motivates her to protect them from the zombie-like mutants that threaten the walled town of Salvation. Here, then, is another messianic young person who must rescue her society. In this narrative, however, the young person becomes invested in the plan for survival only after she becomes a part of a family. She is messianic, but not a messianic orphan. As an independent, wandering orphan she could have left Salvation to its fate; instead, as a member of the Oaks family, she chooses to preserve her society. This choice is made more poignant because of her adopted status and the way it marks a change in her character. It is, however, the choice of a child of Salvation.

The past decade has produced a host of other adoption narratives available to middle grade and young adult readers. The narrating voice of Death would place Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) on the list of science fiction novels that addresses foster families and adoption with subtlety and feeling. The protagonist's brusque foster mother, Rosa Huber-

mann, does ask Liesel, "What did you call your real mother?" (p. 35). However, it would be anachronistic for a housewife to use the term "birth mother" in 1939 Munich, especially in this gritty work of historical fiction that seeks to capture the trauma of Liesel's experience. The ensuing narrative develops the trust between Liesel and her foster parents while blending in a deep regard for her birth family. The overall picture is respectful and nuanced.

Similarly, Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008) thoughtfully portrays an uncanny adoptive family: the living boy Nobody "Bod" Owens and his ghost parents, who adopt him after an evil order kills Bod's birth family. Bod discusses his murdered family with his parents and his guardian, a vampire named Silas. He is curious about them, like any adopted child, and he also feels a sense of belonging to his adoptive family. In the climax, when he must claim his name, he chooses the name his adoptive ghost family has given him: "And in that moment, Bod understood. Everything slowed. Everything came into focus. 'I know my name,' he said. 'I'm Nobody Owens. That's who I am'" (p. 282). Like Milo, he accepts who he has become.

Implications for Reading and Teaching Adoption in Young Adult Literature

Understanding how the adoption narrative fits into novels like Gaiman's can greatly increase readers' appreciation of the protagonists' developing identities. Teachers and librarians can preface discussion of these novels in such a way that they educate students about respectful adoption language and increase reader engagement with the texts. They should also recognize and address with students that those affected by adoption can experience intense and difficult feelings about their identity during their teen years. When discussing adoption narratives, they can model appropriate adoption language from the outset to socialize students to this vocabulary. It should be noted that families involved in kinship or informal adoptions rarely participate in adoption training. As a result, even young people directly affected by adoption may not have the language to express significant relational distinctions. When any student uses the problematic term "real mother," for example, an educator might subtly rephrase his or her insight using positive adoption language.

If a class text involves adoption, teachers might consider asking students to reflect in writing on what has informed their thoughts about adoption. This allows students to talk about movies, works of fiction, stories from their faith traditions, or personal experiences, depending on what resonates most deeply with them. These reflective responses could be developed into a discussion that invites students to evaluate their experiences and to reflect on how certain popular opinions can inadvertently disrespect adoptive family values. This would be another wonderful opportunity to discuss the benefits of positive adoption language. If an educator is comfortable doing so, he or she might share personal experiences with adoption with the goal of presenting adoption as a familiar, established element of family life.

Representations of adoption in literature are complex, and even respectful depictions can be tinged with conflicting portrayals and microaggressions.

Adopted young people may prefer not to reveal details from their past or even the fact that they were adopted, and they should never be asked to represent "the adopted viewpoint." Nonetheless, many students have a connection to some sort of adoption, either through step-parent adoption, kinship adoption in their extended family, or agency-facilitated adoption. If they are comfortable volunteering details, connecting their lived experience with the text can add richness to class discussions.

Educators and librarians would do well to be aware that mainstream culture rarely acknowledges or embraces the language and priorities of adoptive families. Being able to recognize adoption microaggressions in literature helps sensitize both teachers and students to the way that language can devalue the family relationship (Baden, 2016). Representations of adoption in literature are complex, and even respectful depictions can be tinged with conflicting portrayals and microaggressions.

Traditionally, books for young people posit the orphan as an icon of potential and agency. The twentieth-century trend in fantasy and science fiction texts exchanges the subtleties of a healthy adoptive

family for the conquering orphan's narrative; the young person must be without parental authority to engage in the quests that so often characterize fantasy novels. Nonetheless, conversations about young adult literature will be enhanced by an awareness of where these texts fall on the spectrum of adoption sensitivity. While fantasy typically downplays the semblance of a healthy adoptive relationship, recent texts by Haddix, Milford, Aguirre, Zusak, and Gaiman discussed here do show an awareness of the subtleties of adoption language while experimenting with affirming portrayals of adoption.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Maureen Riley-Behringer, a professor of social work specializing in adoption research, for her willingness to answer questions related to social work practices.

Tara Moore *teaches professional writing and young adult literature at Elizabethtown College, a liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania. She has previously authored two books about Christmas:* Victorian Christmas in Print *and* Christmas: The Sacred to Santa. *Her work has also appeared in* Victorian Periodicals Review, Victorian Literature and Culture, *and* Women's Writing. *She has recently edited a collection of Victorian Christmas ghost stories. Dr. Moore participates with adoption events in her region and advocates for the respectful acceptance of adoptive families. She can be contacted at mooret@etown.edu.*

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