

Lost Boys, Wicked Stepmothers, and Hatching Eggs

A Look at Adoption in Children's Literature

The November 1991 issue of **Adopted Child**, Lois Melina's monthly newsletter, was devoted to the subject of "Adopt-a----" programs and the confusion they cause adopted children. That got me wondering. Have you ever stopped to think where almost everyone acquires their first concept of adoption? Certainly not from the children's literature on adoption (such as is found on page 12 of this issue of **Thursday's Child** and readily known only to the adoption community), No, the concept of adoption in one form or another appears first to children in the books that are read to them at bedtime. Favorite stories like the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, Aesop, Hans Christian Andersen, and J. M. Barrie which were popularized by Walt Disney, the classic books of Dr. Seuss, and even Bible stories are sources for learning about adoption. So, because I thought it would be interesting (and also because I had space to fill for this newsletter), let's take a look and see what the books we read our kids teach about adoption.

Moses, adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter after she found him among the reeds by the river bank, is certainly the best known adoptee in the **Bible**. The Pharaoh, of course, was responsible for Moses being abandoned in the first place, since he issued the edict that every son born to the Israelites should be cast in the river. And the daughter hired Moses' real mother to nurse him until he was old enough not to be any trouble to raise. Hardly exemplary examples of adoptive parents and grandparents.

"All children, except one, grow up", and that one, **Peter Pan**, had a rather raucous band of followers called the "lost boys".

The "lost boys" were children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way. If they are not claimed in seven days they are sent far away to the Neverland to defray expenses. As all fans of J. M. Barrie know, these orphans shot the Wendy bird. (I never forgave them for that, even though they were inspired by a jealous Tinker Bell.)

Wicked stepmothers abound in fairy tales. On the other hand, I don't recall any wicked stepfathers. Sexism ... the stories were all written by men, no doubt. The line between a stepparent and an adoptive parent is

hazy in some of these stories. One television version of the **Cinderella** saga had the stepmother saying that since she was now "legally her daughter" (after the father's death), she would have to do all the menial and disgusting tasks assigned to her and there was nothing she could do about it. And **Snow White**, of course, had the meanest stepmother of all, who in rapid succession tried to strangle her with a blue satin ribbon, and kill her with a poisoned comb and apple.

There are some stories that provide both negative and positive images of adoption. The **Jungle Book** relates the story of a baby boy, who is abandoned in the jungle and adopted by a wolf family. He lives with the wolves for ten years and then must "return to his own kind" (the man village) because of the threat of Shere Khan, the tiger, even though Mowgli wants to remain in the jungle. Adoptive parent figures (the wolves, Bagheera the panther, Baloo the bear) are all treated with dignity and care in the book, but Mowgli is bounced around like an unwanted child in the foster care system.

What about **Dumbo** the flying elephant? He was delivered to Mrs. Jumbo by a stork (about as close to the arrival of an adopted child as you can get) and looked nothing like her with his huge ears. He is ridiculed by his mother's friends because of his appearance. His mother loves him despite all the problems and she ends up in solitary confinement for protecting him. But in the end, he becomes the star of the circus. And how about **Pinocchio**?

There is no better example of the wishes, devotion, and love of an adoptive parent than Gepetto the woodcarver, who more than anything else wanted a son.

But my favorite of all, from the late and beloved Dr. Seuss, is Horton the elephant. After Horton sits on the egg of "that old good-for-nothing bird, runaway Mayzie" for 51 weeks, she returns to find the egg hatching and demands HER egg back. But the egg bursts apart to reveal a bird with ears, and a tail, and a trunk just like Hortons. And, in the immortal words of Dr. Seuss:

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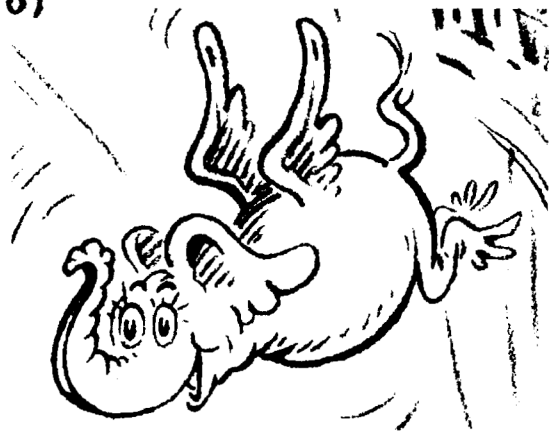


Moses is found in the reeds by the river bank.

(The Golden Bible, Illustrated by Feodor Rojankovsky)

Adoption in the Children's Literature (continued from page 18)

*And the people came shouting, "What's all this about ...?"
They looked! And they stared with their eyes popping out!
Then they cheered and they cheered and they CHEERED more and more.
They'd never seen anything like it before!
"My goodness! My gracious!" they shouted. "MY WORD!"
It's something brand new! IT'S AN ELEPHANT -BIRD"
And it should be, it should be, it SHOULD be like that!
Because Horton was faithful! He sat and he sat!
He meant what he said and he said what he meant
And they sent him home happy, one hundred per cent!"*



Baby Horton, from *Horton Hatches the Egg*
by Dr. Seuss, Random House, NY

What a wonderful book and story!! Interpretation? I'll leave that for you. But I think **Horton Hatches the Egg** is where, as a child, I got my early concepts of adoption. Yes, it isn't always, but it should be, it should be, it SHOULD be like that!

Mike Epstein