

Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature. By Carol J. Singley. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. x, 224. \$65.00.)

Compared to areas like print culture, early national formation, gender and racial identity, sentimentalism, and slavery, which have dominated American literary studies from the colonial era through the nineteenth century, adoption seems at first to be a narrow or provincial topic for analysis, a relatively minor social practice. Although the figure of the orphan has been established as a crucial vehicle through which American political ideologies and nation formation have functioned, scholars have been slower to investigate adoption as cultural practice and literary representation. In *Adopting America*, Carol Singley examines how the meanings of adoption and adoptive family creation crucially informed and shaped New England literary history from the seventeenth through the early twentieth centuries.

For Singley, the challenge is twofold: to show that the contested meanings of adoption are central to a wide range of cultural practices, literary structures, and national ideologies; and to pay attention to the multiple meanings and practices that circulate within and around “adoption” without losing sight of its historical, legal, and social specificity. This book succeeds admirably on both counts through deep historical contextualization and close literary analysis of theme and form. Eschewing an approach that would focus on the symbolic or iconic figure of the child, Singley provides a rigorous account of material practices of adoption broadly construed, including “placing out, indentured service, foster parenting, and guardianship” (p. 4) in relation to the fictional forms that negotiated their often ambivalent meanings and implications. Singley’s work complements anthropologists’ and historians’ scholarship on the dynamic nature of kinship and the varied practices of family formation by revealing how a nuanced understanding of adoptive family practices provides a lens for re-envisioning canonical and popular novels in fresh ways. In doing so, she shows the tight linkages between cultural practices and representations of adoption, on the one hand, and the formation of national norms around individuality, choice, personal identity, gender, and class, on the other.

Part of the difficulty in covering such a long time span is that the meanings of adoption shift among several registers: religious notions of spiritual adoption; ideas of adoption that emerge from debates about parenting, nurture, and the social good; and legal constructions of adoption that are codified in 1851 but are variously and sometimes

unevenly applied. Singley carefully teases out these different threads by paying attention not just to novels but also to influential sermons and church writings, nonfiction tracts about child rearing such as Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* (1847), biographical evidence, and letters. In chapter 1, for example, she shows how ideas of spiritual adoption were crucial for early colonial Puritan familial and community formation. She demonstrates how these early social mechanisms reflected an expanded sense of kinship at the same time that class-based hierarchies, religious conceptions of "inherited election," and the importance of lineage for one's spiritual health limited and narrowed the acceptance of nonbiologically related children. In chapter 2, Singley contrasts Benjamin Franklin's approval of his illegitimate son with Ann Sargent's repeated struggles to gain recognition, powerfully demonstrating the crucial role that gender played in the processes of determining familial legitimacy and inheritance.

From these two first chapters, Singley moves on to demonstrate how an attention to adoption illuminates crucial nineteenth-century literary texts and traditions. For example, in a wonderful re-reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the lens of adoption necessitates a nuanced understanding of three competing forms of fatherhood—biological, spiritual, and material—working through the two figures of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. In following chapters, Singley examines the tremendous growth in the use of the adoption plot and carefully outlines these plot structures and their implications for the conjunction of religious values, sentimentality, and national norms of individual choice, mobility, and family. Singley employs a powerful contrast between Harriet E. Wilson's autobiographical *Our Nig* and Sarah Schoonmaker Baker's *Bound Out; or, Abby at the Farm* in order to isolate the implications of race and labor for the narrative possibilities and normative expectations for children placed in different social circumstances. Her chapter on Louisa May Alcott explores not only the headiness with which care and nurture were thought to transform children's lives positively but also the limiting assumptions about class and origins. Finally, the book concludes with an analysis of Edith Wharton's *Summer*, a novel that abjures the romantic or sentimental frameworks for a realism that emphasizes the circumstances of adoption as a continual struggle between competing economic needs and patriarchal interests.

Though the study specifically sets out to chart the relation between Puritan imaginings of adoption through New England literary culture, a regional contrast might have sharpened or complicated the

relationship between region and nation. Furthermore, this study often works through making powerful contrasts at the levels of race and gender, but it might have also been illuminating to compare depictions of adoption in New England with those of the U.S. South or even Southwest. Plantation romances such as Caroline Lee Hentz's *Linda; or the Young Pilot of the Belle Creole* (1848), for example, often featured adoptive family formations and contested guardianships, and a consideration of this body of work would potentially demonstrate how questions of adoption differed from region to region, with resulting implications for national norms. Of course, it is a testament to Singley's framework that we can even posit these connections between Hentz and other writers, and one of her many distinctive contributions here is to provide a model for the ways in which a nuanced appreciation of adoptive family formation allows scholars to re-read the contours of American literature and culture. Singley outlines the various ideological roles of adoption stories: they curb the excesses of individualism; they conserve and reaffirm specific social categories and norms; they are at times radical in their desire for mobility and change but also portray this change in socially acceptable ways; and they reflect specific gender roles or racial realities that determine life chances. The meanings of adoption here are shown to be varied and contentious but always of tremendous social and national concern.

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Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927. By Nina Baym. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. Pp. x, 372. \$40.00.)

In *Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927*, Nina Baym has produced an invaluable resource for scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From a vast and varied archive ranging from scholarly essays and monographs to booksellers' catalogs and publishers' book advertisements, Baym has found nearly forty American women who published books about the West from 1833 to 1927. Some are canonical, such as Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which serves as the endpoint for Baym's study. The vast majority of writers, however, have received little to no scholarly