



Doing More Harm Than Good: Misguided Salvation in The Evangelical Adoption Movement

A Review of

The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption

by Kathryn Joyce

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Adoption is a profound event in the lives of those it touches, with universal themes of loss, abandonment, sexuality, and parenthood. It is a social arrangement with far-reaching psychological, political, and cultural implications set at the intersection of three parties—the birth or relinquishing parents, the adopting parents, and a child, around whose care the entire institution is built. If Kathryn Joyce’s book is anything to go by, we can add God to the list of major players in the field of adoption.

The theme of Joyce’s *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption* is clear: U.S. families, urged on by zealous Christian organizations, wanting to adopt children whom the parents relentlessly perceive to be orphaned, abandoned, or just plain needy. Divided into eight chapters, which guide the reader in a somewhat chronological journey through key events in the evangelical adoption movement, the book paints a sobering picture of God-fearing people hell-bent on saving children—at all costs. To use a phrase taken from Joyce, this book is quite simply about *benevolent child trafficking*.

With God on Their Side

Led by the urging of their evangelical faith, countless would-be-adopters circumvent national and international laws and policies in the drive to save the children—laws and policies enacted to ensure that children are not brokered for sale, to ensure that the children’s need for families is real, and to ensure that the children are legitimately adoptable.

Although the Christian families may be adopting children with the best of intentions, the consequence of their often-naïve actions is a full-scale undermining of initiatives like the

Hague Convention (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 1993). If challenged directly, most parents would, no doubt, fail to see the harm they are causing as they inadvertently open doors for more nefarious persons motivated not by God's will but by greed.

Illustrating the power imbalance and Western imperialism that underpin the problems and debates, Joyce highlights the complexities of these issues, describing some of the characters that look, at the same time, to be both humanitarian in their motives and egomaniacal. As the result of a clever feat of literary juxtaposition, one feels sorry for the victims while simultaneously wondering how they (i.e., the birth parents) could make such fatal mistakes in "accidentally" signing away their parental rights as they send their children overseas for adoption.

Joyce details how ostensibly good people, with seemingly good intentions, can be making such bad decisions. All the while, the Christian organizations allegedly doing God's work claim with fervent duplicity to be doing anything BUT adopting, as they enter overseas countries under the guise of cultural exchange programs, educational initiatives, mission work, or (taking another phrase from Joyce's book) *volunteerism vacations*. Once they're in the country, however, these well-funded groups will stop at nothing to bring the children "home," no doubt believing that the ends justify the means.

Manifest Orphanhood

Joyce also shows us how the Christian adoption movement is confounded with more than a hint of elitist, colonialist ideals, as hoards of American families descend on unwitting third-world nations to "save" their not-always-orphaned children. "Saving" the children is also intertwined with ideals of Christian conversion, as it is implicit that these children not be just physically saved, but also spiritually saved.

In truth, many of the adoptees described in the book are not actually adoptable, and yet the families and religious organizations in *The Child Catchers* continue to label children as "orphans" even when a child has a parent—and possibly even both parents. The pious belief that a child was divinely destined to be "found" enables would-be adopters to unwittingly contribute to the child's "orphan" status by overlooking the child's true parents or relatives who might otherwise be found to care for the child.

Beyond the Adopters

Despite the adoptive parent position being the leading subject of discourse in the book, one of the chapters in *The Child Catchers* opens with what will be recognized in the adoption community as an archetypal tale of relinquishment from the birth mother's perspective. From family pressures, youthful naïveté, and seemingly helpful adults who are, in truth, more invested in the birth mother relinquishing her baby than in truly helping the young woman make an informed decision; to the postdelivery, drug-induced signing away of parental rights and a birth father kept away until it is too late, this is a tale all too familiar in the adoption field (Brodzinsky, 1990; Jones, 1993).

Joyce expertly illustrates how the Christian adoption movement perpetuates a “classic rescue narrative” (Dubinsky, 2008, p. 339) that also manages, like the *Chosen Baby* story (Wasson, 1977), to involve the procurement of children without ever acknowledging the parents who gave them life. She also shows how, on the rare occasions when adopters expressly acknowledge the birth mothers, it is either in a paternalistic, coercive manner, with the birth parents’ negative circumstances preyed upon, or in a derogatory manner, portraying the birth mothers as drug-addicted, sexually promiscuous young women who don’t deserve to keep and parent their children. In contrast, Joyce gives periodic voice to the birth mothers throughout the book—voices that are often coming from a place of disempowerment but, in the final chapter of the book, reflect strength and a feminist determination to better their lives.

The children, on the other hand, whose care is at the heart of *The Child Catchers*, have only a minor voice in Joyce’s book. Reflecting back on what it was like to go from their birth families and native countries, to live with Christian American adopters, the narratives of a few grown adoptees are poignant and heart-felt. Given how central they are to the book, I would have liked to see more of the adoptee perspectives, thereby reflecting the three angles of the “adoption triangle” within the book. Joyce even ventures briefly into the taboo topic of abuse at the hands of the adopters, but this is only a minor element set within the larger themes of the book.

Something for Everyone

The Child Catchers is a book for anyone either personally or professionally involved in the field of adoption. It is an indictment of American religiosity and therefore should serve as a warning not only to would-be adopters, but also to any person who has ever given even a passing thought to the possibility of relinquishing a child, as it repeatedly describes birth-parent tales of regret and remorse. Researchers and professionals from within the field of adoption will read this book with a knowing nod, as Joyce discovers what they already know about adoption history, different adoption practices, and the experiences of the members of the adoption triangle.

For the novice to the field, however, the book will be a powerful introduction to what is clearly seen as the darker side of adoption. Yet, for this audience, *The Child Catchers* is not sufficient as a stand-alone source of knowledge about international adoption, as it focuses on the most negative practices and outcomes. (See Gibbons & Rotabi, 2012, for a current and comprehensive look at intercountry adoption.) For every bad experience described herein, I trust that there will be positive experiences chronicled elsewhere. Furthermore, although Joyce acknowledges the Hague Convention in parts, the book lacks a fuller understanding of this fundamental document and the principles on which it was based (Duncan, 2000)—principles that are central to the care and protection of children, but which are being undermined in this evangelical adoption movement.

I also wondered about the reach of this Christian movement beyond the American context, in terms of other “receiving” nations. Is there evidence of similar evangelical adoption movements in other Western countries? *The Child Catchers* seems to be a book very much about—and for—an American audience. Finally, although much of the focus of the book is (rightfully) on international adoptions, Joyce does describe some domestic adoptions taking place within the evangelical adoption movement. However, there is no mention of how, for

instance, the Safe Haven laws that many states now have factor into the movement. It would stand to reason that such laws, which allow women to abandon their children with no legal repercussions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2003), would be strongly supported by this Christian movement because the babies who are abandoned would certainly be “orphaned.”

For psychologists, the greatest limitation of the book will likely be the lack of empirical, research-based sources commonly found in journals, as Joyce draws from mostly media-based literature, experiential books, and interviews—all of which may be sound resources for a journalist. To appeal to a more scholarly audience of researchers, academics, or other professionals, the book would have to be enriched with the inclusion of more research-based sources. (See Perry, 2013, for a current study on a similar topic.) This reflects a long-standing dilemma in the field of adoption: whether to write for an academic/professional audience and publish in the scholarly journals, or write for the layperson, and publish a book. As Joyce inadvertently illustrates, it is very difficult to satisfy both audiences, but she has done a fine job, offering endnote sources, rather than in-text citations, and providing the reader with a five-page bibliography of recommended readings.

Knowledge sources aside, *The Child Catchers* is an extremely well researched and gripping tale, with Joyce showing her journalistic nous throughout. One of the book’s strengths for me was in the way that Joyce engaged with the material. After setting the international stage for her readers, early in the book, Joyce joins the players and, in so doing, moves from providing distant, journalistic commentary to becoming a more active observer. She develops relationships with birth parents, adoptive parents, and even some of the adopted persons—as well as with many of the church organizations—all of which give the book a stronger, first-hand, lived experience.

The personal stories woven in amongst the chronologically illustrated sociopolitical events are all compelling, making the book hard to put down. Joyce’s intimate connections with the families and religious groups allow us to get caught up in their lives, as we vacillate between empathy and disgust at what continues to transpire in this movement. It would be easy to condemn the Christian organizations and the parents heeding the call to save the children. Instead, Joyce shows her readers that there are no easy answers to the problems highlighted within the book. Her expert and equitable presentation of the evidence makes it difficult to fully oppose or fully condone the actions and ideals of the Christian families. The answers may lie somewhere in the middle.

In the end, Joyce skillfully brings an important debate to the fore, all the while offering her readers a remarkably fair and balanced look at some extremely emotional and complex issues. Kathryn Joyce’s *The Child Catchers* is a book that will stay with you long after you’ve finished reading it.

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