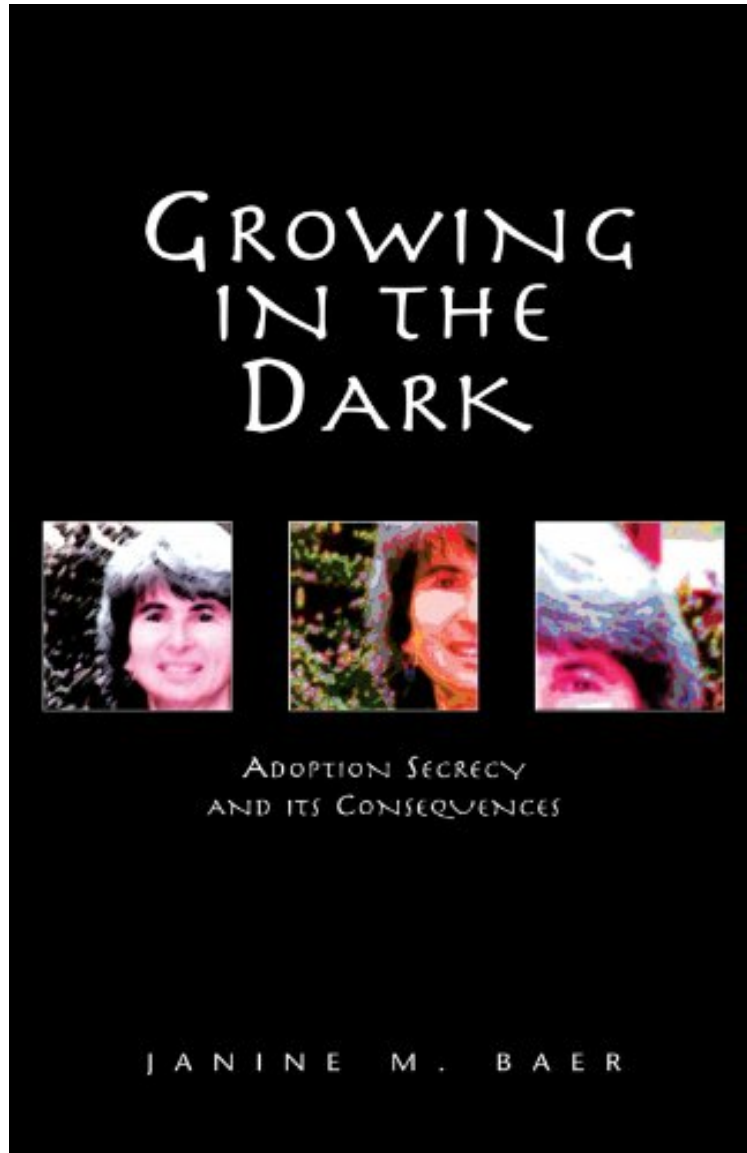


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Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and Its Consequences

Janine M Baer

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Janine M Baer : Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and Its Consequences before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and Its Consequences:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The Sealing of ShameBy Mirah RibenAdoptee Janine Baer provides those interested in the adoption with definitive documentation on the history of the sealing and falsification of birth

records, making this book invaluable. Most of the historical research was done between 1992 and 1995, while Baer was social science M.A. student at San Francisco State University. Baer digs deeply and provides documented insight into conflicting opinions regarding the stated reasons for perpetrating secrecy in adoption practices, including attitudes toward illegitimacy and the financial responsibility of raising orphans, abandoned children, and those of the indigent. While the book focuses primarily on her home state of California and clearly each state has its own timeline and varying means of handling adoption records access, the attitudes underlying the policies are fairly common. First, The U.S. Children's Bureau sought to enact laws to record births, which led to problems regarding naming of a father. So, records were initially sealed from the public to protect against the stigma of illegitimacy. Rather than to "protect" mothers from shame, as became the argument in the 1990's (p 82), Baer notes that "[s]ecrecy punished women by preventing birthmothers from learning anything about their children as time went by" (p 25). "At the least," she notes, "sealing reassured couples who might otherwise have been reluctant to adopt a child that the birthparents could not find them" (p 90), their invisibility legalized. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) never advocated for original birth records to be sealed or hidden from adoptees. "The only confidentiality the organization recommended in the 1930s was to protect adoptive families from being contacted by birth families..." (per CWLA's "Minimum Safeguards in Adoption" 1938, Baer, p 12). The 1933 California statutes appear to have followed this guideline of disallowing only public access in providing that vital statistics (including birth records) "shall not be accessible to any one except upon request of the child or his foster or natural parents upon order of a court" (p48). "Some agencies sought to protect the reputations of birthmothers at a time when unmarried parenthood could result in social ostracism" Baer states (p 15). Yet, this seems to be the one speculation the author makes that is unsubstantiated. Her research, in fact, verified that it was not a consideration in sealing the records from all parties in California in 1935 (p 20). In fact, California passed sealed records laws in 1935 to protect adoptive parents from being blackmailed -- allegedly in deference to their not wanting their children to know they were adopted (p 14, 19-20). "The rationale by the 1935 bill's sponsor in California was protection of the adoptive family from interference by others on the sensitive topic of a child's adoptive status" (p 23). In 1938, The CWLA's Minimum Standards divided concerns and safeguards into three categories: the child, the adopting family, and the state (p 57). The first safeguard mentions preserving "kinship ties" with biological families if possible. Yet the document also "encouraged adoption agencies to keep the names of adopting families confidential from birthparent" (p 72) while in 1847 it was clear that in California--as in many other states--those adopting "had the option to obtain birthparent names just before an adoption was finalized" and "birthparents did not have a similar privilege" (p 74). This practice remains true today in many states, undermining claims that secrecy in adoption serves to "protect" parents who lose their children to adoption. A 1936 book entitled *The Adopted Child* adamantly professed the reverse practices, advocating protecting secrecy and lies by both adopters and agencies when adoptees might return with questions. Quite astonishingly, it appears the advice written by this lay volunteer was held in higher regard and adhered to over that of the professionals, because it provided what adopters and agencies wanted to hear. Another early proponent of secrecy was John B. Watson (*Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, 1928) who also advised parents to "[n]ever hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap." Both of these books validated adopters' desire to hide their secrets, and against the advice of adoption and child welfare professionals, "[s]ealed records policies provided a cover under which people who committed the crime of baby selling were able to do so knowing that their practices could not easily be discovered" (p 82). Baer's research leads her to conclude that by the 1950s, as "telling children they were adopted was becoming more common...their access to original birth records became less common" (p 76). By 1988, the CWLA revised standards "noted that confidentiality could not be guaranteed to birthparents because of changing laws, court orders to open records, and successful searches by adoptees and their families" (p 78), yet more fuel to oppose NCFCA claims. The CWLA 2000 Standards of Excellence in for Adoption Services repeats an admonition on promising confidentiality to parents whose rights had been terminated, and calls for agencies to allow adoptees access to identifying information (p 79). If you work or live with adoption, you cannot afford to skip this book. Everyone seeking to reverse outdated sealed records laws should also provide a copy of the slim paperback to their legislatures. Mirah Riben, member of the Board of Directors, Origins-USA, *The Stork Market: America's Multi-Billion Dollar Unregulated Adoption Industry* author "*The Dark Side of Adoption*" and "*The Stork Market: America's Multi-Billion Dollar Unregulated Adoption Industry*" 10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. *How Adoption's Past Informs the Present* By S. F. Pace Beautiful things don't grow in the dark, they grow in the light, so we should all be very grateful that adoption is finally emerging from the shadows. Baer assists us with this book, which is thoroughly researched and meticulously documented. Adopted people have been searching for their families much, much longer than current adoption stories would have us believe. Baer's work is centred in California, the state in which she lives. She documents searches in the 1920s and the sympathetic portrayal by the Child Welfare League of these searches. She documents the lack of birth certificates at the time due to shoddy social work practice which prevented individuals from ever travelling abroad as one example of the difficulties those adopted faced. Baer examines official records, newspaper accounts and literature to find that in California, social workers and their organizations had never argued for closed adoption records between 1925 and 1945. The only confidentiality mentioned was confidentiality for adoptive families, to prevent them from being contacted by the

original families of the children they raised. Social workers also wanted to be able to ensure their clients (mostly middle class, white prospective adoptive parents) that they were getting white children who were not feeble-minded, to use the terminology of the time. Because of the shame of unmarried motherhood, adoption practice seemed to choose between hiding babies or hiding records. That is, until every child was recorded on a birth certificate, it was easy to transfer children with no one the wiser. Bills to seal records then appeared from the 1930s to the 1990s in the US. Newspaper articles of the time make clear that legislators enacted these laws in some cases to prevent 'unscrupulous persons' from obtaining 'access to the adoption records' and blackmailing 'the adopted parents by threatening to tell the child it was adopted.' (p. 19) Thus, sealing adoption records was a way to ensure adoptive parents could lie to the children they raise with impunity. Baer also documents how sealed adoption records allowed 'baby farmers' like Georgia Tann in Tennessee, Gertrude Pitkanen in Montana, and William and Lila Young in Nova Scotia to operate with impunity. In some cases, more babies died in their hands than were adopted. Baby selling and baby stealing operate more easily under closed adoption records: how can one track what happened 20 or more years later without any records? Indeed, Georgia Tann could possibly have been one of the people to support closing records in California. If someone of her ilk thought closed records are a good thing, then one has certainly to ask why. She certainly made money from her baby farming operations. How can the current push for 'Safe Havens' not lead to the same thing that these operations did: babies taken from mothers and 'given' to a safe haven to allow adoption without strings and without possibility of reunion, and large 'legal' and agency fees to those making arrangements? Clearly, closed adoption records and the secrecy they generate do not benefit those adopted or the mothers, fathers, and family members who have lost them. Those who benefit are the baby brokers and agencies, and they benefit financially. This should tell us something about the inherent immorality of this practice and those who support it.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Adoption and Sealed Record Laws By Jane Edwards

Growing in the Dark is a capsule of adoption history from 1851 when Massachusetts passed the first adoption law to 2000 when Oregon's Measure 58 came into effect. It's chock full of information and very readable. Janine Baer, who was adopted in California, focuses on the California law enacted in 1935 sealing original birth certificates. Contrary to the popular perception, the intent of this law was not to protect the privacy of birthmothers. Rather, these records were sealed to protect children from the stigma of illegitimacy, to protect adoptive parents from intrusions by birthparents, to allow adoptive parents to keep the child's adoptive status a secret, to create the illusion that the birthparents did not exist, and to prevent adoptees from finding their birthfamilies. Sealed records laws also helped unscrupulous adoption officials cover their crimes. One of the proponents of sealed records was Georgia Tann operator of the infamous Tennessee Children's Home. Ironically, these laws damaged those they were intended to protect. Sealed records became the remaining vestige of their illegitimate status, setting them apart from other people by uniquely forbidding them from knowing their origins. This is an excellent book for birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive parents who want to know how we got to where we are.

Generations of adults who were adopted as children have been kept in the dark about their original identities. The law sealing birth records forever, even to the adopted person, passed in 1935 in California, sweeping adoptions emotional complexities under the rug and making it possible to keep an adoption itself a secret. *Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and Its Consequences* takes you through California's early adoption laws, highlighting the passage of the original law that sealed records, and discusses the various consequences of this policy as they unfolded throughout the 20th century. To this day in California as in most states, adoptees are still unable to obtain their original birth certificates. Psychological theories, baby sellers, society's harsh view of out-of-wedlock births, and the views of child welfare advocates in the early 20th century are all part of the story. The book ends with the successful ballot initiative in Oregon in 1998 that reversed the sealed records law in that state. The book's title refers to the frequent experience of adoptees, including those of the baby boomer generation like the author, who grew up "in the dark" about what being adopted meant, in a society that was equally in the dark in its understanding of the harm of secrecy and the importance of both nature and nurture. As the book concludes: "Scientists have discovered what adoptees instinctively know: nature and nurture -- genetic traits and life experiences -- work together in an individual and not in opposition ... in adoptees as in everyone else. It is time for laws and social mores governing adoption to catch up with that reality."

"...full of fascinating information...you won't be able to put it down." - Anita Field, *Bastard Nation*

"*Growing in the Dark*, by virtue of its modest length and accessibility, can be used to educate people both within and outside of the adoption reform movement about the effects of sealed records and the faulty premises used to support them." - Barbara Busharis, American Adoption Congress "Decree"