Singley, Carol J. Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature.

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Carol S. Singley’s *Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature* focuses on literary representations of adoption in selected canonical and non-canonical texts from the Puritan era to the early 20th century, to show the ways in which adoption as a trope or narrative event highlights the historical evolution of American nationhood, family ideology, identity, and citizenship. Singley interprets adoption broadly to refer to the “care of children by non-biological parents through practices such as placing out, indentured service, foster parenting, and guardianship.” Employing insights from the burgeoning fields of childhood studies and adoption studies, Singley’s examination of adoption as metaphor and plot element hinges upon the concept of the child as a site of meaning that “absorbs and helps disseminate the divergent ideologies that typify particular historical periods.”

In her introduction, Singley points out that adoption constitutes a notable narrative feature in major American literary texts, in a way that is “strikingly absent in other national literatures.” Even though the trope or narrative event of adoption appears in a number of European texts, it is especially prominent in American literature, “which is persistently shaped around constructions of childhood and images of youthfulness.” Associating adoption narratives with the New England tradition of Calvinism, with the American migratory experience (America’s separation from mother England and coming into its own as a young nation), as well as with shifting patterns of social organization in
the 19th and early 20th centuries, this study presents adoption fiction as a literary form “aligned with the development of a new nation.” However, American authors’ dramatization of an evolving American character and nationhood through the adoption motif is more often than not fraught with ambivalence, Singley argues. Close analysis of adoption fiction shows expression of pride in American roots running concurrently with a celebration of American hybridity; it also reveals tensions between birthright and belonging, individual and national identity, origins and new beginnings, past and present. But this only adds value to the study of American literature through the lens of adoption, Singley claims, for “the rhetoric of adoption is double-edged, and for that reason alone it is a fertile site of inquiry. Adoption draws lines of inclusion and exclusion, entails independence for some characters and dependence for others, and applauds fresh starts while expressing regret over lost origins.”

3 Singley’s treatment of literary adoption begins with an examination of Puritan texts by such authors as John Winthrop, Samuel Sewall, Cotton Mather, and others. Here the adoption trope is shown to be related with the Puritans’ view of themselves as abandoned children who have been separated from their mother land. Praying for adoption by their Heavenly father in order to counteract their sense of displacement and orphanhood, Puritans “created a dynamic that is visible in literary representations of adoption through the 19th century, and even today.” In Puritan writings adoption constitutes a form of salvation, as by extending adoption to others the Puritan hopes for election by God. At the same time, however, Puritans prioritize genealogy, thus “creating ambivalence and on-going tensions between inherited and constructed forms of identity.”

4 The study continues with texts from the Revolutionary era, in which political independence is articulated through a “mythology of fresh starts afforded by a genealogical break with the birth country.” And yet, adoption is again treated with significant ambivalence, as texts display irresolution in their treatment of adoptive versus biological kinship. In Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography, Singley finds an unresolved struggle to reconcile “birth and adoptive identities;” in Ann Sargent Gage’s adoption story she discovers the “importance of class and gender in helping to shape national narrative.”

5 Singley devotes most of her attention, however, on 19th century adoption fiction which flourished as a result of dramatic social change. Expressing collective hope as well as anxiety, adoption fiction “contributed to an on-going narrative of nation-building and set the terms upon which a white middle-class would develop.” Singley offers a new reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter through the lens of adoption, to conclude that the text reflects Hawthorne’s “ambivalence about roots and fresh starts.” She then focuses on domestic fiction of the Jacksonian era to argue that adoption in domestic novels serves to express anxieties as well as hopes produced by social change. In a little known novel, Maria Browne’s Laura Huntley, Singley traces narrative representations of “national anxiety about immigration and urbanization,” as well as a concurrent sense that the nation’s elastic boundaries can absorb new individuals and ideas. The relationship between literary adoption and changing definitions of family and gender Singley treats in her analysis of Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World, and Susanna Maria Cummins’s The Lamplighter, in which literary adoption is represented as a female experience, as “adoption’s goal—a home—was a domain increasingly shaped and occupied by women.”
The literary representation of the limits of adoption becomes the focus of the final chapters of the study. Singley's reading of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* emphasizes the text's implicit agenda that for African American children literary adoption cannot signify redemption, as race has doomed them to exclusion “from literary genres that are aligned with the white, middle-class experience.” Singley finds in Louisa May Alcott’s fiction another version of the limits of adoption, through which Alcott “signals a failure of bourgeois ideals to address a complex, late 19th century society.” Finally, in Edith Wharton's *Summer*, Singley identifies a narrative representation of the death of romantic myths of adoption and nation-building, as by the end of the century, adoption narratives come to “portray adoption as a matter of individual rather than national identity.”

Carol J. Singley’s *Adopting America* is extremely well-informed and provides fresh perspectives on a broad number of literary texts, both canonical and less known. The author's transdisciplinary approach combines literary scholarship with historical and sociological research to contribute new dimensions to the study of American family and national consciousness; it also engages in fertile dialogue with growing scholarship on children and childhood.