

Rosenbaum, Linda. (2014). *Not Exactly as Planned: A Memoir of Adoption, Secrets and Abiding Love.* Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press.

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In “Not Exactly as Planned”, Linda Rosenbaum tells the story of her family. The book mainly centers on her son, Michael, who they discover later on, has fetal alcohol syndrome. Rosenbaum also recalls her own life, leading up to the adoption, and later the diagnosis of Michael. She shares pieces of her own story that are essential in understanding her reactions and how she reflects on Michael. Rosenbaum discusses her relationship with her parents, husband, children, and herself. The reader is really able to understand Rosenbaum’s life thanks to her deep reflections of many events and situations. Many themes appear throughout her story, such as patterns of familial secrets, being failed by doctors and school boards, and feelings of shame and self-doubt. Rosenbaum shares personal ups and downs as a way to reflect, and so others can understand her story, whether they have gone through similar experiences or not.

Rosenbaum tells her story in order of events, starting right from her youth when she discovered a key family secret. She learned that her grandmother has been hidden away at a mental hospital after receiving a phone call that she has passed away. Her whole life, she had not even known her grandmother was alive, because her mom hid her away. After this discovery, she promised, “No secrets. No Lies. I will hide nothing and no one from the people I love” (p. 5). This is a crucial event in her life, and is something she reflects on quite often in the book. Due to that

first family secret, she grew up with a slight disconnect from her mother. A person's relationship with their parents affects a large part of their life, even after they are gone. As she got older, Rosenbaum found herself keeping a few family secrets herself, which is something that weighed on her due to her promise. A significant secret in the book is when she could not tell her son Michael who his birth mother was. Her name was Kira, and she was the daughter of one of Rosenbaum's friends. It was difficult hiding Kira's identity, because her parents lived just down the street. As Michael grew up, he actually became close friends with Kira's other son who she did not put up for adoption. So, Michael's best friend was really his biological brother, and he had no idea. Finally, when Michael was older, they told him the secret. After telling him, Rosenbaum said, "Michael, I want you to know there aren't any more secrets. This was the only one. I promise you" (p. 186). It is clear that it is an important thing to Rosenbaum to not hide secrets from her family due to the secret that her mother kept from her. She doesn't enjoy holding onto secrets, and keeping things from her children, the way her own mother did. It seems as though this book itself is a way for Rosenbaum to share her story with her children as openly as possible. One day, Michael and his sister can read the story to understand their family. Rosenbaum would not want to leave them with questions forever unanswered.

At the end of the book, when her children are grown, Rosenbaum finally researches her grandmother's stay at a mental hospital. Her own mother had since then passed away, and Rosenbaum never got the chance to ask these questions. She was only able to uncover so much information about her grandmother. She finds out that she was "declared insane" (p. 236) and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Back in those days, mental health research was lacking

and “psychiatry was in the dark ages” (p. 237). Over time it has improved, but even during Michael’s youth, there was still a great lack of understanding in psychiatry. There is an ongoing pattern of medical and educational professionals failing Rosenbaum and her family due to this lack of knowledge at the time. One of the first instances is when Rosenbaum sees a psychiatrist after facing trauma from being raped in her young adult years. This was a horrible event that affected Rosenbaum’s ability to connect to people long after. The psychiatrist said to her, “You’re fine. The experience wasn’t that significant” (p. 43). The lack of understanding on the psychiatrist’s end really failed Rosenbaum, causing her to suppress these emotions for years, and experience anxiety. When Michael was born and adopted by Rosenbaum, doctors repeatedly failed her again. When Michael was a baby, he repeatedly kept crying and could not settle. He was a difficult baby and a difficult child. Doctors at the time told Rosenbaum that Michael had colic, which essentially meant that he cried a lot. The doctor did not think to look any further into this, or think about psychological problems. Rosenbaum then attempted her own research on colic, and read something from a doctor who said “babies develop colic to get the attention of their otherwise distracted mothers” (p. 8). This is the first example of Rosenbaum questioning her parenting, and experiencing guilt.

Continuously, Rosenbaum recalls guilt surrounding Michael, as if she was doing something wrong in raising him. When Michael grew and attended school, he continued to be a difficult child. The author sensed something was different about her child, and tried getting him into a class for children with disabilities. There was no diagnosis for Michael at the time, so he was struggling with a class not meant for him. Rosenbaum stressed because he needed a diagnosis

to get into the disability program, but she had “never heard the public school teacher or principal mention the possibility that Michael might have a learning disability and berated (herself) for not knowing to ask that he be tested” (p. 138). The actions, or lack thereof, of doctors and people in the education system, correlated with Rosenbaum questioning her ability to care for her son.

The turning point in the book is when Michael receives his diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome. It wasn't until 1993, when Michael was six years old. Rosenbaum reflects on the guilt she and her husband felt when they struggled with Michael. At the time, fetal alcohol syndrome was only gaining understanding. The doctor who diagnosed Michael was one of the few in Canada who could give the diagnosis. He remained undiagnosed for all those years because doctors had not even heard of the disorder. Finally, Rosenbaum had answers and felt relief to have an explanation for Michael's struggles. From this point forward in the book, things seem to go upwards. It then became less about Rosenbaum's past, and more on her current family. “I feel hopeful” (p. 156), she said after Michael was diagnosed. She finally recognized it was not her fault her son was “difficult.”

Whether she is reflecting on times of depression due to her own trauma, or difficult times with her son, she has a rather optimistic outlook on life. Throughout the book, she talks about her father's pessimism and bitterness after his own trauma. Then, even though her mother's secret stayed with her for a long time, she recognized their similarities, writing, “life threw us each a curveball” (p. 240). She understood that they both were just trying to do what was best for their children. Though she can reflect on her parent's flaws, she still showed love towards them. She recognized that life can “throw curveballs” to everyone, but what really mattered is how she

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reacted afterwards. She did not want to be bitter, like her father. She instead reflects on her past with an optimistic and loving tone.

Rosenbaum's story is full of depth and emotional moments. Her experience with Michael is a beneficial read for educators, psychologists, sociologists, or parents of a child with an intellectual disability. The awareness of psychological problems such as fetal alcohol syndrome is important. Awareness can bring understanding to people with these issues, and their family's experiences. Although this book may bring awareness, it is not a perfect source for understanding fetal alcohol syndrome. Not every parent of a child with this condition will go through the same experience as Rosenbaum. It is especially important to realize the events surrounding Michael's diagnosis took place in the nineties and are not accurate for today's day and age. Still, her book was a pleasure to read and brought up lots of emotions. Even though the medical experiences may not be the same, Rosenbaum shares stories that can be relatable in many other ways, and make people feel less alone.