

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

Reviewed by: Jill Beuerlein, MacEwan University

“Not Exactly as Planned” is a memoir of Linda Rosenbaum’s life, outlining the unexpected events which created her family. The book offers a refreshingly honest account of family life and its complexities, and explores topics which are often discouraged from being openly spoken about.

The book begins with Linda’s recollection of a seminal story from her childhood which shapes the remainder of the book. On Yom Kippur in 1958, at the age of ten, Linda and her older sister were notified of their maternal grandmother’s death via a phone call from Eloise Mental Hospital. The news came as a shock to them as, according to their mother, their grandmother had long been dead. Linda angrily confronted her mother and chastised her for keeping such a big secret from her, after which she vowed to herself to never keep secrets from her family – “No secrets. No lies. I will hide nothing and no one from the people I love” (p. 5). As time went on, this promise proved to be more complicated and challenging to uphold than it once seemed. Linda found herself withholding information from her family and understanding her mother’s motivations for doing the same.

As a child, Linda imagined she would follow in her older sister Barbara’s footsteps of marriage and children by the age of twenty. Though she had relationships throughout her younger years, Linda did not marry until she was half way through her thirties. Another thing that went

unaccording to plan was that Linda, who was Jewish, married Robin, who was a Christian (though not practicing). Linda's parents came around to her marrying someone who was not Jewish, though her mother commented on the absurd comedy of his last name, "If you had to marry a non-Jew, couldn't you have at least found one with a name like Smith or Harris? Did it have to be Christmas" (p. 60).

Conceiving children was not an option for Linda and Robin as Linda's diagnosis of polycystic ovarian syndrome rendered her infertile. The couple began the process of adopting a child, which included multiple rounds of interviews and home-visits. Linda remarked on the process, "Anybody can have sex, bring a child into the world and be a lousy parent if so inclined. We, on the other hand, had to bake muffins and go through a long bureaucratic rigmarole to *prove* we would be good parents" (p. 74). When Lynn, a close friend and neighbour of the couple, revealed that Kira, her partner's daughter from a previous marriage, was five months pregnant with an unwanted child, Linda and Robin offered to adopt Kira's baby once it was born. This was Kira's third child; the first two were not in her care either. A few months later, Linda and Robin welcomed baby Michael into their family. Two years later, the family adopted a second baby, Sarah, born on Christmas Day. The family stayed in contact with Sarah's birth mother, Diane, via phone calls and letters. This arrangement differed from Michael's. His adoption was supposed to be closed, meaning that once the baby was handed over, Kira would maintain no contact with the adoptive family. She was not even made aware of *who* the adoptive family was.

Linda figured that it would be relatively easy to keep the secret from Kira since prior to the adoption, they had only met once. Three years after Michael's adoption, Kira and Linda became

reacquainted at Lynn's marriage to Kira's father, Don. Their interaction was outwardly pleasant; Kira even unwittingly remarked to Linda, "I guess this means you're now part of my extended family" (p. 127). The comment angered Linda, but she still managed to keep Kira oblivious to the irony of her remark. This moment introduced the idea that "family" cannot be so easily defined. The family tree became even more twisted as time went on. Kira had fourth child who she named Andrew. While Kira intended on parenting Andrew with her boyfriend, Andrew often found himself in the care of Lynn and Don due to Kira's alcoholism. When Kira was pregnant with her fifth child, she was caught drunkenly wandering the streets with Andrew and Andrew was permanently placed with Lynn and Don. This meant that Michael and Andrew, who were technically brothers, would now be neighbours. Linda, Robin, Lynn, and Don had to navigate the delicate situation of explaining to Michael and Andrew their relation to each other.

Michael and Sarah both expressed interest in meeting their birth mothers. Sarah and Diane got along incredibly well, "We left Denise's all agreeing that Sarah was our shared joy to the world" (245). Michael, was not able to meet Kira as she unexpectedly died shortly before their scheduled reunion.

Michael was difficult. His various *issues* became apparent very soon after Linda and Robin brought him home. Michael was a colicky baby (p. 6). He had problems with his skin, eyes, ears, and breathing (p. 100). Sarah contrasted Michael in every way imaginable. The differences between Michael and Sarah were further emphasized as they grew older. Michael was socially reserved and Sarah was gregarious. Michael was needy and Sarah was independent. Simply put,

Michael was difficult and Sarah was easy. Linda and Robin's marriage saw a strain as a result of Michael.

The seemingly inexplicable source of Michael's ailments was finally discovered when Michael's pediatrician, Dr. Roberts, diagnosed him with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). The news, while shocking and devastating, at least relieved Linda from some of the guilt she had been feeling regarding Michael's development. The book largely focusses on Michael's diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome, which, as Linda explained, "Nobody knew anything about [FAS]. The problems associated with drinking during pregnancy eventually become common knowledge, but very few medical professionals had ever heard of fetal alcohol syndrome at the time of Michael's birth in 1987" (p. 154). Dr. Roberts explained to Linda that Michael would likely never be able to live independently and she shared that many parents of children with FAS opt to send their children to facilities to be taken care of. At the time of diagnosis, Linda was appalled by the idea. However, as time went on, caring for Michael became exhausting. When Michael was sixteen, Linda and Robin had Michael spend a year on a treatment farm. On the time apart, Linda annotated, "The year had been a time of healing. Robin and I barely bickered, had more fun. We travelled together, took Sarah to Paris. We invited people over to our house more often. I had dinner parties again. Sarah relished in all the attention we lavished on her. I got back to reading literary fiction" (p. 234).

The title "Not Exactly as Planned" is perfectly fitting for this book as almost nothing in Linda's family life went according to plan. Linda's path to motherhood was unorthodox with two adopted children and one with a debilitating condition. Throughout the book, the complexities of

family life are explored. From the beginning, Sarah's adoption went as smoothly as imaginable, while Michael's was full of unanticipated moments. A striking element in the book is the revelations Linda makes about her own mother. It was not until Linda experienced the pressure of keeping a family together, that she was fully able to appreciate why she kept secrets from her.

Linda's story is so astonishing is it almost challenging to believe it is not fictitious. Linda even addresses the absurdity of it when she made a smart-mouthed comment to Robin – "I have an idea for a documentary you could make in a few years. It's a little sick but bear with me. We rent a hall, plan a Thanksgiving meal, invite Kira and her babies' fathers, all of her kids, their respective parents, grandparents, partners and siblings. You just put a camera on a tripod and roll film" (p. 129). The ridiculousness of the Rosenbaum-Christmas family makes for an incredibly interesting read. The book caused me to wonder, perhaps what secrets exist within my own family that I am not privy to. "Not Exactly As Planned", while entertaining and appealing to a general audience, also explores various touchy topics such as the definition of family, the intricacies of adoption, and the impact of disability, which may be studied from a sociological perspective. This book is also relevant to psychology, child development, and social work fields.

Though not a pejorative attribute of the book, a complaint I have is that its chapters are not organized chronologically. I found this unconventional format to be unnecessarily confusing and made the book somewhat difficult to follow. While reading the book, the audience should be conscious of the dates which are included at the beginnings of each chapter.