



**Wills, Jenny Heijun. (2019). Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related.
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.**

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Jenny Heijun Wills' book, "Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related", is in the form of a memoir. The memoir consists of numerous smaller stories illustrating Wills' journey of being adopted. Jenny Heijun Wills is a Korean woman who was adopted by a Canadian family soon following her birth in Korea. Years later, she decides to find her birth family and reunites with them back in Korea. Her birth is due to the result of an affair, therefore she meets her biological mother and sister first, and a few months later, she meets her biological father. They develop a strong relationship and spend time together as a family. The book conveys the impact adoption has on an individual, as well as the importance of kinships. It also discusses the issues of racism.

The process and journey of adoption can be complex in one's life, particularly a cross-cultural adoption, which is the type of adoption Wills undergoes. Being born in Korea and getting adopted by a Canadian family is a difficult experience to go through at such a young age. When Wills decides to find her birth family in her late twenties, she reaches out to the post-adoption services, and they are able to locate her mother. She then plans a trip to Korea to reunite with her family. While the reunion with her family is filled with pain and sadness, it is also filled with comfort and love. It is filled with pain and sadness because Wills realizes the experiences she missed out on while growing up in Canada, especially the lost time she could have had with her

birth family. She missed out on the cultural experiences of Korea, including the language, traditions, clothing, etc. When Wills reunites with her mother and younger sister, her mother “moaned, over and over again, I’m sorry, in the language that had been ripped from my mouth before it had a chance to settle in” (p. 26), symbolizing how she was excluded from learning and practicing Korean culture. On the other hand, it is filled with comfort and love because she is able to reconnect with her birth family and develop a relationship with them. The first time Wills meets her mother is at the adoption agency. “Ummah rushed at me, her lost-then-found daughter. She threw her arms around me and held on” (p. 25). This reveals the relief her mother felt to finally be able to hug her daughter that was sent away so young. When Wills makes the journey back to Korea for the first time, she experiences culture shock. Being raised in Canada did not allow her to obtain or learn Korean culture, therefore, when she returned to Korea, the food, lifestyle, and atmosphere felt unfamiliar to her. When her family celebrated Chuseok, “they’d made songpyeon, sweet rice cake dumplings steamed on pine needles. They’d made many of them. But I was not yet accustomed to the sweetness, to the texture of that food, and so I tried only a little” (p. 42). The practices in Korea are also unfamiliar to her, for example, going to the public baths with her mother (p. 46). Returning home after being raised in a completely different culture can be grueling.

Wills reuniting with her birth family also symbolizes the importance of kinships. When she returns to Korea, she and her family are able to enjoy their lost time together. Wills’ parents are not together when she reunites with them as her birth was due to their affair with each other. She meets her mother first when she arrives in Korea, and months later, her father reaches out through a text message asking to meet her (p. 64). When Wills meets her father, her mother also joins her, and they all spend time together after Wills reunites with her father (p. 68). Throughout the rest of

her trip to Korea, they spend time together as a family and develop a strong relationship. Her birth parents come to her wedding in Canada which conveys their love and affection for their daughter. However, after the wedding, Wills and her father argue and the following day, her parents leave without any notice (pp. 97-98). Years later, she reconnects with her mom again and learns about her father's sickness (p. 192) and decides to fly back to Korea with her sister to spend time with her parents (p. 197). They are all able to redevelop their kinship again after years of disconnection. "The day we arrived, Ummah cooked a family dinner in her home for her two daughters" (p. 203). Her mother's gesture of cooking a family meal signifies her love for her family and her gratefulness that both of her daughters are in Korea again. With her first return to Korea, her mother and father start getting closer to each other again. "It must have happened that Ummah left her boyfriend and my father left his girlfriend - or wife, I was never clear - because all of a sudden they were always together" (p. 74). Their love reappears for each other and "they started to act as though I was the child they'd lost long ago" (p. 68). Her return back to Korea brought her parents, who split up, back in love with each other again. Wills develops a very close connection with her younger sister, Bora. They meet for the first time when Wills meets her biological mother for the first time (pp. 26-27). Wills and Bora spend time together when Wills is in Korea, and once she is settled back in Canada, Bora moves into her apartment in Canada to continue learning English (p. 84). "That time was spent as sisters living together in Montreal" (p. 84). They did cooking together, planning Wills' wedding, meeting Wills' Canadian family, and "holding hands the way we'd done in Seoul" (p. 84). These actions symbolize an important kinship between Wills and Bora.

Another powerful theme throughout the book is racism. During her childhood, Wills faces a lot of racism for being Korean in Canada. When she first arrives in Canada, she is told she "was

crying um-mama” (p. 124), though she later realizes that she was more than likely “calling out ummah” (p. 124). Due to Canadians not knowing the Korean language, they misinterpret the babble of Wills as a baby coming into Canada. Additionally, Wills’ Korean name is made fun of from her Canadian family. Her name is brought up one night when they are having dinner as a family, and they mispronounce it while also singing her name (p. 126). Even though her family probably did not mean to make jokes of her name, she perceives it as “I knew that I was a joke and my name was a joke too” (p. 126). This conveys how racism can be unintentional, nevertheless, it still bothers the individual it is targeted to.

Throughout this book, Wills is ultimately trying to find her identity by reuniting with her biological family while keeping a close relationship with her adoptive family in Canada. She realizes she missed out on several experiences in Korea with her biological family, though she compensates for that lost time by enjoying her time in Korea while continuing to comprehend Korean culture. The importance of kinship is conveyed throughout this book by Wills forgiving her birth parents for letting her go and spending lots of time with them during her trip to Korea. Racism is also illustrated in the book through the struggle of Wills fitting in with others at school and being ridiculed.

This book is both emotional as well as powerful because there were many obstacles along the way for Wills to reunite with her biological family. The lifelong journey of a cross-cultural adoption opens one’s eyes for what they experience and endure while they search and reunite with their biological family. I enjoyed reading this book because it was unique and engaging. I loved reading the smaller stories, however, it was difficult to follow at times when it jumped between her being in Korea and the flashbacks to her childhood in Canada. Nonetheless, it was exhilarating

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when Wills reconnects with her biological family in Korea knowing she can learn about the culture she was born into, but taken away from very early in her life. I would suggest this book to anyone who is interested about the experience of cross-cultural adoption, as well as to students who are studying anthropology and sociology.