

AMERICAN ADOPTION CONGRESS



DECREEE

Adopted writer/comedienne Alison Larkin talks about her new novel *The English American* with film-maker Jean Strauss

In her first novel, coming from Simon and Schuster on March 4th 2008, author/comedienne Alison Larkin draws from her experiences as a British adoptee who found her birth parents in the United States and weaves them into a compulsively readable work of fiction.

Here she sits down over a nice hot cup of tea, and talks with fellow adoptee, author and award-winning film maker Jean Strauss.

D: Your hilarious, poignant one woman show, from which the novel springs, has been and continues to be wildly successful. How did you first come to write it?

People who knew my story kept asking me “what was it like meeting your ‘real’ parents?” And “Why would someone from a happy adoptive family want to *do* something like that?” My one woman show was my answer to both these questions – as well as an excuse to crack lots of jokes about the differences between English and American culture.

D: You have young children and a busy career, how and why did you write a 350 page novel?

There’s only so much you can do in seventy-five minutes on stage, and the show only skimmed the surface of the bigger, deeper, funnier story I knew I had to tell one day.

People have no idea of the huge internal and external obstacles that face adopted people who decide to try to find their birth parents. Instead of being seen as the heroes they truly are, in today’s culture they tend to be portrayed as eternally damaged at best or serial killers at worst. Or they’re just presented as rather blah – like the adoptee in Mike Leigh’s otherwise excellent film *Secrets and Lies*, which told the birthmother’s story authentically and sympathetically – and presented the adoptee as completely together and unaffected by what I knew to be an intense, life-changing experience for myself, and other adopted people I know.

I wrote the book because I was fed up with what seemed to me to be a lack of empathy and understanding for what the adoption and reunion journey might be like for the adopted person themselves. I had a growing sense that if I could create an appealing, funny, authentic, vulnerable adopted heroine/narrator – and take the reader with her on her journey in an entertaining, accessible way – people might start to really ‘get’ what it might be like, from an adopted person’s point of view. I started with the premise of the show and jumped off into fiction from there. Instead of presenting the adoptee as yet another victim, I wanted to create an authentic, accessible adopted heroine at the centre of the kind of book I like to read.

D: And what kind is that?

The kind that keeps you up at night because you *have* to know what’s going to happen next! I don’t have time to read much now I have kids. When I do read I’m either on a plane or about to go to sleep, so a book has to totally grip me from page one if I’m going to have a chance of finishing it. It also has to have short chapters!

D: Chapters of the book almost feel like movie scenes. Any chance the book will become a film?

It’s early days yet, but we have already had film interest, which is really exciting.

D: What are some of the 'myths' out there about adoption or adult adoptee issues that you hope might be dispelled by *The English American*?

That making the decision to find your birth parents is something selfish adoptees do out of idle curiosity. That adopting a child is exactly the same as having one of your own. That adopted people who need time and space away from their birth or adoptive parents during reunion are 'acting out' rather than undergoing the huge task of trying to integrate what they have learned into their sense of their identity. That adopted people are to be pitied and patronized because they were damaged irreparably when they're relinquished by their birth mother and can therefore never be truly happy, wise, strong or whole.

D: What were your biggest concerns as you wrote the book?

I empathized so strongly with the birth and adoptive mother's feelings that I started writing the novel in several different voices. Thankfully my now agent, who has nothing to do with adoption, read the early chapters and said "Why on earth are you writing from everybody's point of view when this is so clearly the adoptee's story?" The moment she said this I felt like I'd been let out of jail and I finally allowed my adopted heroine to speak her truth.

Then my biggest concerns became normal ones. i.e. how was I going to write the book I felt driven to write and maintain a busy voice and comedy career, give speeches, feed my family, drive the kids to and from pre-school, clean the house, maintain close friendships, respond to email and keep the house clean. Something was going to have to give. It may come as no surprise to you to learn that it was the housework.

D: Three major publishers wanted your book, which sold within a week. You're going on a national book tour. It's going to be in the spring book round-up in the January edition of *Vogue*. How does all this feel?

I keep waiting for someone to turn round and say "Only kidding!"

D: In what way are you and the main character, Pippa Dunn, similar? And in what way are you different?

Pippa has long red hair, and is achingly beautiful. I have mid-length blonde hair and can look quite cute on a good day. Neither Pippa nor I care about what we're wearing and we are both impulsive and chronically untidy. Like Pippa I was adopted by tidy, practical English parents.

Like Pippa, at the time of my reunion, even though no boyfriend had ever left me for someone else, I was convinced that even the most devoted of men would be making a date with the waitress if I so much as went to the loo. It was not wanting to live – or love - like this for the rest of my life that finally made me seek out my birth mother. As Pippa says in the book, "Maybe if I found out that my mother gave me up for adoption because she had to – and not because she took one look at me and went "yuck" – I'd no longer have a fear of rejection. And then I might finally be able to all in love totally, absolutely – maybe even honestly, without the panic that sets in. Like normal people."

Like Pippa, when I found my birth parents – who are free-spirited, energetic Americans – I also found myself. However, unlike Pippa I'm not a cabaret singer, my birth mother doesn't run a company called "Art Buddies", she doesn't live in Georgia and my birth father isn't a neo-conservative, enigmatic, politically involved business man. The mysterious Nick, who seduces Pippa via email, didn't exist in my life – although he may have existed in my dreams. My Dad isn't Scottish, my Mum isn't blonde, I don't have a non-adopted sister, a dog called Boris or a penchant for fig newtons. The list goes on and on. In other words, it's fiction.

D: What's your favorite scene in the book - and why?

I think the final scene. But if I told you why it would spoil it, would it not?

D: With all the momentum in the 'adoptee records access' movement, what kind of impact do you think *The English American* will have on helping people who are not part of the triad understand the need to end secrecy?

Early readers who have nothing to do with the adoption community have been shocked to learn that the part about birth records being closed to most adopted people in the United States is true. I have always had a sense that if we can get the general public to see and understand this stuff at a gut level, a heart level, the laws which are hurting the brave, wonderful, vulnerable people they should have been designed to protect will have to crumble. Once the soccer Moms become aware of the injustice of this, watch out!