

*Who am I?
Experiences of
Donor
Conception* By Alexina McWhinnie ed., (Idreos Education Trust,
Leamington Spa, 2006). ISBN: 0-9554-0310-3. Pp. vi
+ 66. Pbk. US\$12.95.

This little book is very impressive and likely to leave one with a lasting – not to say indelible – impression. It is of particular interest to bioethicists, but its appeal is much broader than that, as it contributes to formulate aspects of the question of identity which might only have been dimly apperceived by previous generations. It explores the importance of biological descent for our image and understanding of ourselves.

The authors—Joanna Rose, Christine Whipp and Louise Jamieson—share the experience of being conceived by donor insemination. They all recount experiences of half-knowing something was not as it was presented to be, an experience which is followed by confusion, disturbance, mistrust, anger and quest for personal identity beyond the pretence. They come across as having laboured long to name the experience, and their passion, honesty, consideration of others (including their families) and common sense makes the book an absorbing read, a true page-turner, apart from it being a heart-wrencher. The sense of necessity which informs every page makes it stick in the mind like a well shot arrow.

The little book consists of three lengthy essays. Alexina McWhinnie, who has for many years researched and written on issues pertaining to children conceived by anonymous parents, provides a structure by contributing a foreword, an afterword and a bibliography. This makes the book handy as both a teaching aid and for anyone with an interest in identity issues.

Joanna Rose's contribution names the difficulties she experienced while growing up as 'genetic bewilderment', a term that covers the discrepancies experienced between one's own physical and psychological endowment and those of the people who are supposedly one's parents. Looks and character, talents and illnesses; all these things that run in families and are sources of pride, irritation, solidarity and—perhaps most importantly—understanding. If one is cut off from knowledge about these, by being cut off from seeing how they are played out in other family members, a sense of loss results. This loss is all the greater as it contributes to a marked difficulty in settling the existential question: 'who am I?' We seem to need an answer of some sort to this question for the world to make sense—whenever it is settled we worry less about other things, as we have found a place in the world and can give our address, so to speak. The need to trace one's relatives serves for many as a vehicle for making sense of the world from birth to old age. But if we are prevented from the start from tracing relatives by a secret, we feel not only bereft but also choked and vulnerable as we realise that others may think they have an interest in preventing us from knowing who we are.

Rose deplors the double standards prevailing in our society which allow us to justify the practice of IVF by the need to conceive a genetically related child while at the same time denying children conceived from donor gametes the right to be genetically related to their parents. Her landmark high court case against the UK Secretary of State for Health and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, which she won for the benefit of many, established donor-offspring's right to information about their identities. The case reveals both the violent energy of utterly focused determination behind a quest like Rose's and also the likelihood of others pursuing their quest in the same direction.

Christine Whipp illustrates in her contribution how concealed truths about genetic inheritance may seriously maim family relations and ultimately occasion a total break. She recalls her bewilderment at the fact that her mother did not encourage her to mourn for her father – one of these at first imperceptible signs that things were not as she had been led to believe. Such signs led to a state which the author calls 'impending happentude': she recalls living in a state of expecting something she knew not what, leaving her permanently unsettled. 'It, My Mother, Me, Life, all of these things and none of them were clouded and tainted, but by what, I could not exactly define ... it felt as if my life was misplaced and that I was out of kilter with my surroundings' (p. 16). Inevitably, the tension found an outlet. One day at a family gathering, her mother accusingly addressed her: 'There is something about your past which you don't know'. When the mother at a later occasion said she would reveal the secret in a letter after she died, the relationship broke, leaving Christine with an unhelpful amount of guesswork. In this period she went over facts that pointed in the direction of her paternity being in question—her father's different complexion, the fact that he had had mumps during his teenage years, and the underlying impression of being different from him. When the revelation came she was 'walking through middle age with a face I had never met' and with parents who had never known each other in either the personal or the biblical sense. She started thinking about the half siblings she was likely to have if sperm from the same donor had been used in the clinic for several 'procedures'.

As it turned out what was written on her birth certificate was only a half truth and the other half was a lie, in which several institutions had colluded. Christine's contribution goes on to address the responsibility of doctors and administrators who facilitate such withholding or withdrawal of information. It also comments on the fact that problems resulting for the children might well have to be addressed by psycho-analysts, psychologists and psychiatrists, whom she urges to be aware of the special predicament of donor conceived children.

Louise Jamieson compares the issues faced by the donor-child to those that are likely to arise from being the result of other forms of surrogacy and cloning. She feels she bears a responsibility to warn of the long term impact these choices have for the children and the children's children for generations. She sounds a warning bell: 'The babies who "solve" today's infertility problems

will have their own, long lives to lead. I foresee a correlation between the tangling of their family lines, and later confusion, pain and dysfunction, not necessarily during childhood, adolescence or even early adulthood, but almost certainly in later life. As part of the first “wave” of assisted conception, I feel I bear a responsibility to speak for those who are the products of newer techniques, and to urge greater circumspection on the part of the fertility industry and policy makers’ (p. 38).

The consistency of the three testimonies is striking. They all testify to a definite bewilderment, whether or not there has been openness about the donor’s involvement. Confusion and insecurity about something they cannot pinpoint and the urgency of the search for who they really are also characterises them. Will these symptoms be less palpable in characters with less ability to listen to their own experience and stand by it? Perhaps, but they will hardly be non-existent, except of course at the price of complete denial of the identity-question’s importance. It looks as if a generation is now growing up who has another point of view on the different practices of medically assisted conception than their parents had. To know what we do when we use or fund the fertility industry we should listen to them. This little book provides a unique opportunity for such listening.

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