The House with the Broken Two: A Birthmother Remembers
by Myrl Coulter

Reviewed by Bev Sandell Greenberg

“... the den mothers at the home and the social worker had told me [it would] be like it never happened ... I didn't yet recognize the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. Birthmothers never forget.”

At eighteen, Myrl Coulter got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. As was the custom at the time, she surrendered her first-born son under the closed adoption system that prevailed. Yet she always yearned to see him again. More than thirty years later, her wish came true.

Winner of the Writers’ Studio First Book Competition, Coulter’s memoir chronicles her life in a frank, spare narrative that is framed within the context of her teenage pregnancy, a life-altering event ever present in her mind. The book explores why Coulter surrendered her child for adoption.

Coulter earned a PhD in English and worked as a professor at the University of Alberta for eight years. In 1995, she won a National Screen Institute Drama Prize for her screenplay. She currently works as a fulltime writer in Edmonton.

Her story begins in Winnipeg in the 1950s, where she grew up as the eldest of five children. When she was aged three to six, the family lived Moncton, New Brunswick, and then moved back to Winnipeg. There they lived in a house with a broken “two” for the next fifteen years; hence the book’s title.

Coulter experienced a happy childhood despite her family’s modest circumstances. She describes some of the pastimes she and her siblings enjoyed, such as skating. Coulter also recounts the routines established in the household. Her mother didn’t like cooking, but often tried out new recipes; her father liked to barbeque. A humorous passage describes the children’s procedure for vetting their mother’s new recipes:

Our standard was simple: it could not look repulsive. If we deemed it visually acceptable, we then placed a token amount into our mouths, but only after making sure the dog was close by in case we needed to dispose of it quickly. (56-7)

Coulter describes her high school days and the events leading up to her pregnancy. She also covers her post-secondary training, jobs and her stay in a home for unwed mothers on the outskirts of Winnipeg. As well, she recounts the ordeal of giving up her baby, her two subsequent marriages, the births of three more children, the pursuit of her PhD and her interest in writing.

One of the most stirring chapters is the first one. When Coulter presents herself as a pregnant teen, we are struck by both her love for her baby and her immaturity.

Other thought-provoking chapters document the history of adoption in Manitoba, including reasons for the development of the closed adoption policy after the Second World War and an explanation of why the phenomenon later waned. Accordingly, Coulter emphasizes the lack of choice she was given in “going away” to have her baby and giving it up for adoption. At the same time, she disparages the prevailing attitudes during the 1960s towards sexuality, birth control and pregnant teenagers.
Coulter wrote this book for her birth son as a way to fill in the gaps between the time she gave him up and when she finally met him again as a thirty-something adult. Many readers will be heartened by Coulter’s story and her later achievements. Not only does her memoir examine an historic social phenomenon, it also demonstrates how young women have the ability to change the trajectory of their lives and embrace success. Social workers and teenage mothers in particular will find this story of interest.

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and editor.

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