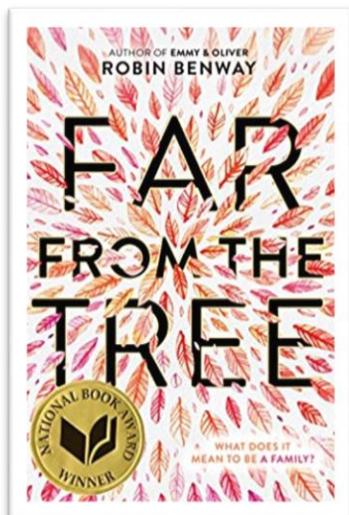


## BOOK REVIEW

### Far From the Tree: What Does It Mean to be a Family

Review written by Ellen Singer, LCSW-C, C.A.S.E. Senior Therapist and Training Coordinator



Author Robin Benway's beautifully written young adult book, Far From the Tree: What Does It Mean to Be a Family, won the 2017 National Book Award for Young People's Literature. Last December, Ms. Benway was interviewed on National Public Radio (NPR). The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) was honored that the NPR interviewer, Robin Young, mentioned using C.A.S.E. as a resource in preparation for the interview.

Listen to this interview at

<http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2017/12/12/robin-benway-far-from-the-tree>.

I am pleased to recommend this wonderful book to you!

In this book, the three characters, Joaquin, Grace and Maya and all have the same birth mother. The oldest, Joaquin is biracial (Latino and Caucasian) and was placed in foster care and moved from home to home, never being adopted. The two sisters, Grace and Maya, were placed as babies into their respective adoptive families. Grace, an only child in her adoptive family, finds herself pregnant and places her baby for adoption with a wonderful couple who embrace maintaining continued contact with her. Grace's sister Maya is gay and she has a younger sister, Lauren, born to her adoptive parents. Lauren closely resembles their unhappily married parents (mother suffers from alcoholism). The book explores the emotional and challenging experience of the siblings' developing relationship with each other as well as their journey to search for their birth mother. At the same time, the novel portrays each character's individual stories, complete with their challenges and strengths.

Ms. Benway carefully did her homework and research; for those connected to foster care or adoption, this novel validates and gives clarity to the common, normal emotions and struggles people face. Those with little or no connection to foster care or adoption get an authentic peek into the complex themes of this experience, which can correct myths and misperceptions. It is interesting to note that the three teens in the novel grapple with themes very familiar to our work with teens at C.A.S.E. In C.A.S.E.'s signature book on adolescence by CEO Debbie Riley, Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens, Ms. Riley explores "six spots where teens can get stuck:" 1) loyalty 2) permanence 3) reason for

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adoption 4) difficult or missing information (about birth family) 5) feeling different and 6) identity. The novel does a terrific job of showing how the characters work through their internal conflicts related to these themes.

The novel also beautifully portrays themes of loss and grief that underpin most foster care or adoption experiences. Through Grace, we see the anguish of loss and grief that birth parents experience, and the importance of open adoption. We see her intense need to find her birth mother coexists with her deep love for her adoptive parents (as they love her). Like the hit television show, *This is Us*, this novel shows Joaquin's foster and prospective adoptive parents as being clear about their job as "healers of trauma," as they work to gain his trust and parent him with patience, acceptance and unconditional love and support. Through Joaquin and his family, readers learn the heartbreaking challenges that can be part of the foster care experience including being a different race than your foster or adoptive parents. Through Maya, readers understand the adoptee's challenge to feel like they truly fit in with their adoptive family, imperfect as they may be. And through all three protagonists, we see what healthy romantic relationships should look like – gay or straight.

Ms. Benway infuses humor exceptionally well throughout this novel to lighten the load of a heavy topic for young adult audiences. Loose ends are nicely tied up with an ultimately happy ending.

Common sense media recommends the book for ages 13 and up. I personally recommend that all prospective parents read this to understand the journey they are considering, and all foster or adoptive parents read it to understand their teens. Family members of birth parents should read this as well. Share this book with friends to help them understand your experience. Maybe your teens will recommend it to their non-adopted friends. My only caution is around recommending the book to foster teens with no plan in place for permanency, including the option of being adopted, as the book may be painful for them.

Please share your thoughts with me once you've read this book at [singer@adoptionssupport.org](mailto:singer@adoptionssupport.org).

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