

ADOPTION UNFILTERED

REVELATIONS FROM
ADOPTEES, BIRTH PARENTS,
ADOPTIVE PARENTS,
AND ALLIES

SARA EASTERLY
KELSEY VANDER VLIET RANYARD
LORI HOLDEN
Foreword by Joyce Maguire Pavao, Ed.D.

Book Club
Discussion Guide



Book Club Discussion Guide

Sara Easterly, Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard, and Lori Holden, authors



Dear Readers,

Thank you you for choosing to read *Adoption Unfiltered* in community. Whether your book club is discussing adoption from a singular perspective (such as an adoptee-only book club) or from multiple perspectives, we are excited that you've decided to explore the full spectrum of adoption experiences and reimagine how we might better serve adoptees and their families.

Included in this guide are more questions than you will probably get to. We invite you to pick and choose those that resonate and use our prompts to bring out questions of your own.

It's possible that Sara, Kelsey, and/or Lori, solo or in combination, may be able to attend a 30-minute segment of your book club discussion by Zoom. Please message authors@adoptionunfiltered.com with your invitation.

We are pleased to have you join us on the quest to unfilter adoption!

Sara Easterly | Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard | Lori Holden



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Q&A with Adoptee Sara Easterly

What are your hopes for those reading Adoption Unfiltered in community?

My ultimate hope is to create better understanding. For my fellow adoptees, I hope that the insights shared will make sense of, and normalize, the ways adoption affects us emotionally and physically. Personally speaking, I grew up feeling like something was wrong with me because of the unspoken, filtered thoughts I had around adoption and the ways separation trauma manifested. It wasn't until later in life, after learning about human attachment dynamics and discovering how separation impacts adoptees at different developmental stages over the course of our lives, that I understood my brain was responding in ways brains instinctively respond to separation—separation that is inherent in adoption, often too much to bear, and also not widely acknowledged in our culture. Consciousness, I have found, is helpful in lifting the stigma around these dynamics. And getting out of isolation, as I write about in Chapter 22, is quite normalizing in this regard, too. So, hooray for reading in community! May discussions that ensue leave you feeling seen, heard, and loved.

For parents and other caregivers, as well as educators and helping professionals, my desire is that the insights shared—both in the book and in your conversations about it—lead to better support of adoptees' needs and opportunities for more openness, with previously filtered dynamics brought to light.

For anyone in the broader culture, my hope is that we look at adoption through a more nuanced lens, less likely to dismiss its significance, and more likely to think twice or speak up when hearing cliché stories about how adoption is only a win/win.

And for adoption professionals, I hope you'll take seriously the call for a reforming the industry and start running with some of our ideas and brainstorming on others. Perhaps that brainstorming can begin in your community right now!

What was your favorite chapter to write?

Definitely Chapter 22, "Journeying Home." I thought of this chapter as a love letter to my fellow adoptees, sharing words I wished I'd read when I finally began to take a deeper look at adoption. It was a daunting time for me and I would have felt so much comfort knowing that I wasn't alone. In a way, this chapter offered my younger self some needed love, too.



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Q&A with Adoptee Sara Easterly (continued)

What was the hardest chapter to write?

The chapter on alarm was a challenge. In gathering research to tell the story of what happens to adoptees' alarm systems on a physiological and psychological level, I felt my heart racing. I was literally hyper-alarmed writing about alarm! This is partly because I went down a rabbit-hole, reading everything I could find about our responses to trauma and wanting to pack it all into the chapter, which could easily have been its own book. Deadlines and word count limits were helpful, because if it weren't for those boundaries, I might still be gathering data! My co-authors were fabulous, too, in pulling me back to reality and reminding me that I'm not doomed and enticing me to get out of "work" mode and back into the "play" zone.



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Photo credit: Lena Eivy

Q&A with Birth Parent Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard

*What are your hopes for those reading *Adoption Unfiltered* in community?*

I hope to help our communities dispel the mystery of birth parents. So often, birth parents are only a figment of people's imagination instead of real humans, with feelings and lives that matter. I hope reading *Adoption Unfiltered* brings understanding about each part of the adoption constellation, dropping the curtain that often hangs between us. Most importantly, I hope reading in community compels us to create change together. I hope we can realize how powerful we are together, especially in pursuit of positive change for all.

What was it like to write your chapters as a birth mom who is currently in an open adoption?

I had so much fear writing my section of the book, knowing that my child's adoptive parents would likely read it. However, I did not let this stop me from being honest. I made an internal commitment to myself, as well as my readers, to write with transparency about my experience, the experiences of my interviewees, as well as the larger birth parent community. As birth moms, we have an ever-present fear of losing our children all over again, whether by pushing our children away or by the adoptive parents closing the adoption on us. Writing about my open adoption was tricky, but it was a good challenge. I got to explore how far my own feelings went without crossing the boundary line and speaking for my child, or the adoptive parents.

What was it like to have a three-way collaboration?

Writing with other people in general, was a great intro to book writing, as we had each other to read, edit, and bounce ideas off along the way, which was truly an invaluable experience for me. In many ways, our collaboration mimicked adoption dynamics, and I had to fight a reflex of not voicing my thoughts for fear of being pushed away. At one point in the writing process, I mentioned to Lori and Sara that I



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Q&A with Birth Parent Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard (continued)

felt I was coming up short with things to write about. I thought, *adoptees and adoptive parents were the ones experiencing adoption every day, my life is just happening on a parallel track*. This was my self-talk, downplaying my importance as the birth parent, and not properly feeling the responsibility to tell our stories the way they've always needed to be told. I am proud to have worked through that, and thankful to have been in a collaboration where my writing partners could reaffirm that for me.



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Photo credit: Lena Eivy

Q&A with Adoptive Parent Lori Holden

*What are your hopes for those reading *Adoption Unfiltered* in community?*

Talking about something with others is such a great way to find our own blind spots and begin to unblind them. Adoptive parents especially, as parents of adoptees and as power-holders in adoption configurations, need to see as clearly and as much as possible. Book club friends can sometimes see what we ourselves may not be able to—and vice versa. I have had many such aha moments in my own long-running adoption book club (shout out to my people!).

Why does the adoptive parent section come after the others?

Adoption has long been filtered through the lens of adoptive parents and adoption professionals. We deliberately flip that script and instead model what it's like to orient on adoptees, de-marginalize birth parents, yet also include adoptive parent perspectives—in that order.

What was it like to have a three-way collaboration?

It was equal parts rewarding and challenging! I was reminded again and again that what I know about adoption is really quite small in the scheme of things. There were plenty of times Sara and Kelsey helped me discover a new way of seeing something I thought I already “knew.” So our collaborative experience was both painful (at times) as well as gleeful for the good fortune of writing alongside them and understanding their viewpoints to the best of my ability.



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INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

Where do you fall in the adoption constellation? What revelations in the book resonated and what didn't?

How does the concept of separation trauma pertain to your own adoption story?

When did you first begin to realize that adoption wasn't only rainbows and daisies?

How does *Adoption Unfiltered* relate—or not—to other adoption-themed books we've read?

QUESTIONS AROUND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

What parts of the book led to moments of introspection? What challenged your core beliefs?

Did/do you think adoption is God's plan? Why might different parts of the constellation want to frame it this way?

In Chapter 5, Sara quotes Dr. Gordon Neufeld in saying, "Frustration has to be felt to be managed." In what ways have you been taught to not feel your feelings? How do you manage your frustration?

Based on the authors' definition of openness (as opposed to contact), how would you describe openness in your own constellation?



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QUESTIONS FOR ADOPTEES

Do you see any of these in yourself: People pleasing, presenting a false self, compliancy, fantasy attachments, perfectionism, defensive detachment? How do you experience separation-based emotions showing up in your relationships?

Do you feel as though you know your complete adoption story? If not, what parts may have been hidden, misrepresented, one-sided, or falsified?

What are some of the ways you've found healing from the wounds of separation related to adoption?

QUESTIONS FOR BIRTH PARENTS/FAMILY

Has anyone in your life ever disenfranchised you from grief, or have you ever disenfranchised yourself from grief? What is your relationship with grief, and how has it ebbed and flowed over time?

What pre-placement counseling and/or post-placement support was available to you, if any? What do you think that should look like?

QUESTIONS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

How do grief and trauma show up in your child? How does your own attachment history impact the ways you react/respond to their grief?

How might you use the Frustration Traffic Circle (Chapter 5) to understand your own experiences? How did the graphic help you see anger and frustration in your child through a different lens?



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QUESTIONS FOR ADOPTION PROFESSIONALS

Do you think the authors were too hard on the adoption industry? Not hard enough? Or did they strike a fair balance?

In what ways might you begin to unfilter adoption as you work with people entering into adoption, on both sides? What filters have you become aware of?

What do you think true informed consent looks like for a parent considering placing her baby or child? How about for someone considering adopting a baby or child?

What are your thoughts on saviorism? How do you see it show up? Do you agree with the authors that it is something that needs to be shifted in our culture?

QUESTIONS ABOUT IMPACT ON THE WIDER SOCIETY

If adoption were to be practiced in a more adoptee-centered way, what would be the role and responsibilities of adoption agencies? How is that different from their current roles and responsibilities? What would you have them stop doing? And what would you have them start doing?

What should informed consent look like for expectant/birth parents and adoptive parents?



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OTHER QUESTIONS

What do you think about including a chapter on pronatalism? Do you see this issue in our culture? If so, in what ways? If not, explain.

Each of the authors addressed the intersection of religion and adoption. What do you think of each of these three viewpoints?

What do you think about the authors' underlying premise that separation from a person's very first relationship—one's mother—is, in itself, trauma?

Generally speaking, where do you fall in terms of privilege and power? Are you a member of majority groups? Are you a member of groups that have historically been marginalized? What did you think about the discussions in *Adoption Unfiltered* about power dynamics?

What other questions came up for you as you read *Adoption Unfiltered*?



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EVOKING EMOTIONS PLAYLIST

When we interviewed Gordon Neufeld, Ph.D. for our *Adoption Unfiltered* podcast (episode 11), he stated, “Music is an emotional playground. It’s a way to access sadness for which we have no words.” Dr. Neufeld prescribes “the lullaby for the baby, the lament for the aged.”

Below is a list of songs that evoke in the authors the sadness we can be tempted to resist, yet need to be able to access for our emotional well-being. Note that even songs that sound “happy” can remind us of loss and enable us to feel our emotions (example: John Lennon’s “Beautiful Boy” on Lori’s full list). While songs and can be deeply personal, we hope that you will find your own meaning in these and discover new songs to add to your playlist.

SARA’S STARTER LIST

- “I’m with You” by Avril Lavigne
- “Just Like Heaven” cover by The Lumineers
- “Oceans” by Hillsong UNITED
- “Keep You Safe” by JJ Heller

Listen to these and other songs on Sara’s Spotify playlist:

<https://bit.ly/auf-music-sara>

KELSEY’S STARTER LIST

- “Good News” by Mac Miller
- “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free” by Nina Simone
- “Mother” by Overcoats
- “Try a Little Tenderness” by Otis Redding

Listen to these and other songs on Kelsey’s Spotify playlist:

<https://bit.ly/auf-music-kelsey>

LORI’S STARTER LIST

- “Laughing With” by Regina Spektor
- “Seasons of Love” from the *Rent Soundtrack*
- “Falling at Your Feet” by Daniel Lanois and U2
- “Just Breathe” by Pearl Jam

Listen to these and other songs on Lori’s Spotify playlist:

<https://bit.ly/auf-music-lori>



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BOOK CLUB RECIPE IDEAS

Need a meal idea for hosting a book club? Here are recipes from each of us.

SARA'S FAMILY FAVORITE: SLOW COOKER COCONUT CURRY LENTILS

From Budget Bytes

Ingredients

- 1 yellow onion
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 cups brown lentils
- 1 sweet potato (about 3/4 lb.)
- 2 carrots
- 3 Tbsp curry powder (hot or mild)
- 1/4 tsp ground cloves (optional)
- 15 oz can petite diced tomatoes
- 15 oz can tomato sauce
- 3 cups vegetable broth
- 14 oz can coconut milk (full fat)
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 1/2 red onion
- 1/2 bunch cilantro or green onions

Directions

1. Dice the onion and mince the garlic. Peel the sweet potato and carrots. Dice the sweet potato (1/4-1/2 inch cubes) and slice the carrots.
2. Add the onion, garlic, sweet potato, carrots, lentils, curry powder, cloves, diced tomatoes, tomato sauce, and vegetable broth to the slow cooker. Stir to combine. Place the lid on the slow cooker and cook on high for four hours or low for 7-8 hours. Once cooked, the lentils should be tender and most of the liquid should be absorbed.
3. Stir the can of coconut milk into the lentils. Taste and adjust the salt or other spices as needed (the amount of salt needed will depend on the type of broth used and the salt content of the canned tomatoes).
4. To serve, add 1 cup cooked rice to a bowl followed by 1 cup of the lentil mixture. Top with finely diced red onion and fresh cilantro.



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KELSEY'S GRANDMA PEGGY'S "14 CARAT" CAKE

CAKE

2 cups flour
2 teas. baking powder
1 1/2 teas. soda
1 teas. salt
2 teas. cinnamon
2 cups sugar
1 1/2 cups 611
4 eggs
2 cups grated carrots
8/ 3/4 oz. can crushed pineapple, drained
1/2 cup chopped nuts

CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

1/2 cup butter or margarine
1 8 oz. package cream cheese, softened
1 teas. vanilla
1 lb: (whole box) confectioners sugar, sifted
Combine butter, cheese and vanilla and beat well.
Add sugar gradually, beating well. If too thick,
add a small amount of milk to thin to spreading
consistency.

Sift together flour, baking powder, soda, salt and cinnamon. Add sugar, oil and eggs and mix well. Stir in carrots, pineapple and nuts. Turn into three greased and floured 9 inch layer cake pans. Bake at 350 degrees 35-40 minutes. Cool a few minutes in pans then turn out and cool on wire racks. Fill layers and spread on top and sides with frosting.



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CHICKEN TORTILLA SOUP FROM LORI

This recipe is courtesy my friend Jenn, frequent and extraordinary host of the local adoption book club I belong to.

Ingredients

1 lb chicken (optional; could be made vegetarian)
15 oz can whole peeled tomatoes, mashed (fire-roasted are yummy!)
10 oz can enchilada sauce
4 oz can chopped green chiles
10 oz can sliced black olives (optional)
10 oz corn, canned or frozen
1 med onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 T chopped cilantro (optional)
2 C chicken or vegetable broth
1 t cumin
1 t chili powder
1 t salt
1/4 t black pepper
1 bay leaf

Directions

Put all ingredients in a slow cooker and set for at least 4-5 hours until chicken is thoroughly cooked. Shred chicken before serving.

Host or guests can provide shredded cheese, sour cream, salsa, tortilla chips, sliced avocado or guacamole, etc.



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ADOPTION UNFILTERED: THE PROCESS

What was it like to write this book together? Most of our collaboration looked like this:



But we were able to be in each other's presence one time while writing the manuscript, near Seattle where Sara lives.



Photo credit: Lena Eivy

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