

A limited history of adoption

By Mona Charen

Surveying the output of major publishers in recent years, one would be safe in concluding that the institution of the editor is in eclipse. Even academic houses like Harvard University Press seem to slap covers on manuscripts, like this one, that need a good blue pencil.

E. Wayne Carp has undertaken to provide the first comprehensive history of adoption in America. It is a subject fraught with legal and emotional mine fields. By the nature of the topic, it should grab readers by the lapels and never let go.

Mr. Carp's book does the opposite. It is dry, repetitive, needlessly exhaustive on trivial matters and surprisingly sparse on important ones. The author provides an almost week by week account of changes in state adoption laws from 1920 to 1997. His larger points — and he does have some — are lost in a thicket of unenlightening details, most of which are presented without due context or interest.

We learn that during its origins in the 19th century, adoption was sometimes used as a method of removing Catholic children from their poor, urban parents and farming them out to be raised by proper Protestants in the heartland. We are told that in the 20th century, social workers were heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theory, which tended to view unwed motherhood as the expression of certain neuroses in

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the mother. OK — but none of this helps us to understand the great battles that are raging over adoption today.

The author is at pains to make the case that secrecy is a relatively recent adoption practice. Before World War II, court records dealing with adoptions were kept confidential, but only from the broad public, not from those involved in the adop-

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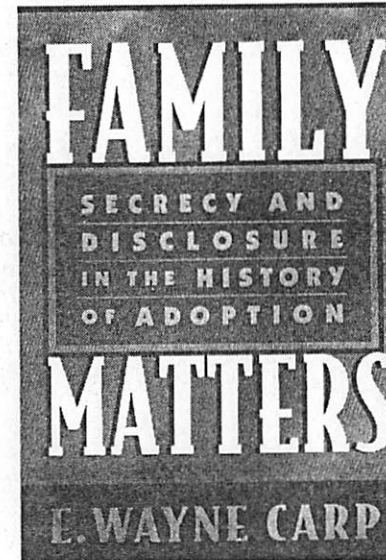
FAMILY MATTERS: SECRECY AND DISCLOSURE IN THE HISTORY OF ADOPTION
By E. Wayne Carp
Harvard University Press,
\$27.95, 304 pages

tion themselves. According to Mr. Carp, secrecy was introduced only after World War II, in response to the desire by unwed mothers to avoid the stigma of illegitimacy. Mr. Carp is clearly uncomfortable with the stigma that once attached to unwed motherhood, and his distaste for the idea of women being pressured by society to give up their babies for adoption suffuses this labored text.

Here is a typical example: "After World War II, professional social workers would increasingly respect unwed mothers' wishes for secrecy. . . . Later, when under attack by adoption rights activists, [Child Welfare League of America] officials would refuse to change its policy on

sealed adoption records, viewing it as a violation of the contract entered into with unwed mothers to keep their identities secret."

What does he mean, "viewing it as a violation"? Of course it would be a violation of the explicit promise made to the birth mother if agencies were later to change their policies on secrecy. There is simply no finessing this point. This is the great



battleground in adoption today, and though Mr. Carp has devoted years to studying adoption, he does not seem fully to understand the issues at stake.

His portrait of the adoption rights movement is incomplete at best. The author describes the circumstances that led to its radicalization: the 1970s success of the book and

movie "Roots," which led to a genealogy craze, and the rights revolution of the 1960s, which caused everyone with a grievance — real or imagined — to become politically active.

Mr. Carp goes further, carefully noting that all of the research upon which the adoption rights movement is based — studies purporting to show that adoptees, their parents and birth parents are all better off if secrecy is cast aside — are deeply flawed. Yet even as he recognizes that the research is flawed, Mr. Carp still seems to be in sympathy with the adoption rights movement. He does not include the crazier statements of the most prominent members of organizations like Concerned United Birthparents, nor does he reckon with the fact that 94 percent of adoptees never search for their biological parents.

The author has written a history of adoption that is all detail and no understanding. Maintaining the promise of secrecy to birth mothers is important not just because a promise is a promise, but because to withdraw that shield from the adoption option now will mean a terrible choice for unwed mothers in the future. They will be able to choose abortion, with no worries about confidentiality, or they will be able to choose adoption, with no guarantee that an unwelcome knock at the door might await them in 20 years.

Mutual consent registries for those who wish to meet in adulthood are the most equitable answer to the pleas of adoptees and birthparents who wish to reunite. Anything more than that will destroy the institution that has provided loving and happy homes for millions of families.