

The Shock of Recognition: Kinship Care Across the Color Line in U.S. Literature and Culture

Lori Askeland
Wittenberg University

Although approximately one in twelve kids in the US today live with a grandparent or other relative without a parent present—and although black and native communities have long traditions of flexible family structures—kinship care as a form of family making remains relatively invisible in American culture. Recent public policy typically encourages kinship care, framing it as a more stable, less disruptive (and in fact cheaper) mode of foster care. But at the same time, policymakers seem to feel some unease about both the degree to which children may still remain in contact with "unfit" parents and to fear the possibility of poor families using the option fraudulently (shifting children amongst family members in order to receive financial and other forms of assistance).

Interestingly, we do see families caring for the children of kin in some highly visible, mainstream cultural productions in the Anglo American tradition—think of Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly, David Copperfield's great Aunt Betsey, and Dorothy's Auntie Em. But typically those kinship care relations are either completely unexplored or are presented as uncomplicated responses to family tragedies. In these cases, elderly spinsters or childless aunts and uncles have simply taken in the children of deceased relations, no questions asked or complaints expressed, and the relationship raises no further serious conflict or narrative interest. If anything, the slight distancing suggested by the kin relationship serves merely to push the parental figures further to the background so the quest narratives of the quasi-orphaned figures can more readily attain the center stage.

Perhaps not surprisingly, we see the complexities of kinship care highlighted more frequently in stories by black writers and women authors in the U.S. starting in the mid-19th century. Susan Warner's heroine Ellen Montgomery, for example, is raised by an aunt, the appropriately named "Miss Fortune"—a character formed in the "wicked stepmother" mode who has no interest in raising "other people's children," but who does so anyway when her brother arrives at her farm with the child in tow. By contrast, the threat of having her children removed to some estranged, but equally wicked, grandparents is the driving force in Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*. In that novel, the desire of the title character to keep her children from the wicked in-laws becomes a justification for Ruth's career aspirations. Meanwhile Fern's contemporary and acquaintance Harriet Jacobs was herself raised by her own grandmother, like many enslaved children, and was compelled to turn over her own children, first to the same grandmother and then to remand them to the employment/care of their biological, white father, due to both the threat of slavery and, later, poverty. Kinship care in these works is more likely to be at once a complex duty and privilege, and one that is also fraught with the potential for betrayal and pain, particularly when interracial family relationships are involved.

One novel that explores this kind of complex potential in contemporary families is Gish Jen's the 2004 novel *The Love Wife*. Here, kinship care is presented as a mandate from the grave by the Chinese mother-in-law of an interethnic relationship, and as a kind of outsourcing of child care, as Margaret Homans has commented. But also as a mode of connecting to ethnic origins in a "half-half" family created by interracial marriage and adoption. While some reviewers of the novel found the relationships unconvincing and unrealistic, the complexity of the kinship care relationship presented here provides a platform from which to draw out the complexities of not just interracial adoption but adoption in general that can arise even when the care remains "in the family."