

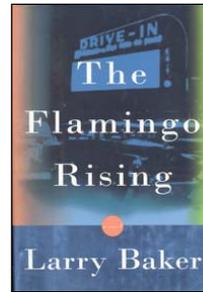
Coming of age in a real family

The Flamingo Rising

by Larry Baker

Alfred A Knopf, Inc.

New York; 1997



Review by Susan Soon-Keum Cox (Fall 1998 issue)

“For the last time: My name is Abraham Isaac Lee, and I am my father’s son.”

When I read those words in the first few pages of *The Flamingo Rising*, I thought, “This writer knows what he’s doing. This is going to be good.”

I was right. My only disappointment... the story ended before I was ready.

The Flamingo Rising, by Larry Baker, is not found under “Adoption” in book stores. But anyone associated with adoption will recognize the importance of this story about the realness of families formed through adoption, a concept which is often misunderstood by those outside of the experience.

The story of *Flamingo* concerns Hubert and Edna Lee who live with their children, Abe and Louise, in Jacksonville, Florida, in the 1960s. They are a bit unusual, even quirky. They own and live in a drive-in theater called the Flamingo. This unusual arrangement provides the backdrop for an assortment of lively and richly entertaining people and adventures that take the Lee family through the growing up and coming of age of Abe and Louise.

Abe and Louise bring their own unusual circumstances to this story about families, growing up and learning about who and what they are going to be. They are both adopted, and they are Korean. Abe and Louise, like most of the rest of us who were adopted from Korea in the ‘50s and ‘60s, were still unusual enough that they had a lot of explaining to do. Answering to questions such as: “Where were you born,” and “What are you... Japanese (Chinese, Hawaiian, or fill-in-the-blank country),” and “Are those your ‘real’ parents?”

The Flamingo Rising is told through the voice of Abraham Lee in mid-life, looking back. The author has described his novel as a story about the power of parents to influence their children’s lives. I believe that for adoptive families it is much more.

The Flamingo Rising affirms adoption, especially intercountry adoption. Baker has uniquely captured the essence of the experience from the perspective of an adolescent, interracial adoptee. It is vividly written to expose the nuances and subtleties that only someone very close to adoption would know.

Larry Baker dedicated this book to “Ginger, Jenny, and Ben. My family.” Jenny and Ben are adopted, and Korean. That explains Baker’s sensitive and tender understanding of the struggles to balance issues of race, belonging and identity that adolescent adoptees often endure as they are growing up. (There are references to Harry and Bertha Holt, which many adoptive families will find fun and exciting.)

Do not for a minute get the impression this book will only be of interest to adoptees and their families. Rather, it is about the Lee family, which happens to include adoption in its profile. That distinction does make this book especially relevant for adoptive families. However, the fact that adoption is only one facet of the Lee family’s personality makes the story even more true to life. Neither the Lees nor any other adoptive family is defined exclusively by the adoption experience.

Depending on how old you are, this book will either awaken you to that time period or remind you of growing up in the ‘60s. It was a glorious dose of nostalgia, living with the Lees and their assortment of friends, neighbors and cohorts.

Through the broad appeal of *The Flamingo Rising*, Baker may have done more to expose the general public to understanding adoption than all the shelves of other books dedicated to the subject. Being an adoptive father gave Larry Baker salient insights for this book, but his gift for storytelling is what really makes it a success.

Get the book. The dilemma becomes whether to pass it on and share, or keep it since you’re sure to want to read it again.

The Flamingo Rising, Larry Baker’s first book, has been nominated for the Pen Faulkner Award and has been made into a movie.