

**BOOK REVIEWS**

Control Freak

Henrietta Bond (2010). Publisher: British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF), London.

Reviewed by Kathy Mendis

Control Freak is a novel set out in the form of a diary of a 17-year-old girl, Holly, with each chapter representing a diary entry. Holly has written this diary during her transition from foster care to independent living and calls it her 'moving on diary'. Even though the diary only covers a very short period of Holly's life, it captures a fascinating chain of events and thus provides the reader with a good storyline.

Holly has been living with loving and caring foster parents since she was 12. She has just completed her GCSE (equivalent to Year 12) and is planning to commence an art and design course at tertiary level. As she is a confident, determined, organised and practical young woman she believes that she is ready to live independently. The diary entries start with her thoughts and feelings about moving into a place of her own. Moving to independent living is a challenging task for any young person, but it is even more so for young people in state care as they lack the support that is usually provided to others by their own families. Holly may have had her future all mapped out, but was she immune to the roadblocks that lay ahead? Was her transition to independence as easy and smooth as she had anticipated?

Author, Henrietta Bond has been successful in developing fictional characters that are close to those in real-life situations. She says that her writing has been shaped by the young people in care themselves, associated support agencies and care-leaver research. She certainly appears knowledgeable of the issues that young people leaving care face and the ways in which relevant agencies help them. She had previously been the press officer for British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF) and that experience seems to have put her in good stead to write about the life of a young person in care. Consequently, her fictional characters resemble those whom many human service workers meet in everyday life. Further, they are believable and convincing not only to lay readers, but also to the readers who are familiar with the out-of-home care system, for example, child welfare professionals and the researchers investigating care issues.

Control Freak draws the attention of the reader to questions such as: how do young people who have grown up in care fare on their own when they have no family safety net to fall back on? And how do they cope with the specific challenges that young people face without the emotional and financial support of family? For decades, child welfare workers, their administrators, policymakers and the researchers alike have been grappling with such questions in order to work out how best to improve the situation of young people leaving care. This book could perhaps play a part in taking those questions to a wider population and stimulating discussion, as it highlights the issues that young people in care face when they move into independence.

The intended readership, according to BAAF, is 'all those who work with young people who are preparing to leave care and step into life as independent young adults, such as social workers, leaving care workers and residential care workers and others'. Notwithstanding its usefulness to those who work with children in care, this book may be even more helpful to school principals, teachers, teacher-aides and school counsellors/social workers, as well as to foster parents, as it gives a thorough insight into the lives of children in care and to the ways in which the care system operates, given that not everyone will be as familiar with those issues as workers in the field.

On another level, however, it is to the young people in care that the book delivers its most powerful message. Written especially in young people's language, Holly's story highlights the importance of believing in oneself. Of course, each and every child in care is not as fortunate as Holly to find wonderfully caring foster parents, but her story gives hope to other children in care that with self-belief and determination one can achieve one's best. Not only encouraging hope, this story also shows the importance of actively seeking help and accessing support when needed. Those messages are, however, relevant not only to young people in care but to young people in general. By reading this book, other young people can also gain insight into the plight of their peers who, unlike them, do not live with their own family. Through responding to,

and gaining understanding of the life lived by someone of their age, they develop empathy which, in turn, could be a very small step towards alleviating the stigma attached to children in care.

Overall, it can be said that *Control Freak* is a book for adults as well as young people. A word of caution needs to be made here though as some of the events described in the book are distressing and the publishers warn that the intended readership is those over the age of 13 years. However, some events could cause distress even for adolescents and therefore it is advised that the book be made available to adolescents under the guidance of an adult. For example, workers could encourage the foster parents to read it first and, once the children have finished reading

it, talk about how they were feeling. With regard to young people who live independently, their case worker could take up that role. The book could also be made available in schools to be read during school hours and followed by a class discussion. It is important that the book reaches a young readership.

Finally, *Control Freak* is an interesting novel which is written in easy-to-read language and, through using the voice of a young person, it delivers a powerful message. The insight it gives into the lives of children who have had to leave their families behind in adverse circumstances to live in someone else's house is not to be missed by anybody who cares about the welfare of children.

Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother

Chua, A. (2011). London: Bloomsbury. Paper ISBN 978 1 4088 1316 4 \$12.99.

Reviewed by Dr Frank Ainsworth, School of Social Work and Community Welfare, James Cook University, Australia.

This book received extensive media coverage when it was first published early in 2011. It is written by Amy Chua, a law professor at Yale University. It is her account of how she and her husband raised their two daughters, Sophia and Louisa. Importantly, it is an exposition of what she describes as Chinese parenting, which she contrasts with American or western parenting practices.

Amy Chua was born in the United States of Chinese immigrant parents. Her husband Jed, who is also a law professor at Yale University, is Jewish. This means that Sophia and Louisa can claim exotic ethnic status as Chinese-Jewish-Americans.

Amy Chua could be accused of making gross generalisations about the different Chinese and American parenting styles but she is aware of this issue and qualifies the comparisons by acknowledging that neither of these parenting styles is absolute. But nevertheless, Amy Chua's parenting style is demonstrably 'authoritarian' by comparison with the more 'authoritative' style that is favoured by many American parents.

Since Baumrind's (1967) seminal work on parenting styles, her three-part typology (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive) has received much attention. Indeed, it is claimed by some that the authoritative style is the mostly likely to produce 'happy, confident and capable children'. Yet Amy Chua's extraordinary parenting demands of excellence in educational performance, linguistic achievements and concert-level musical proficiency has produced daughters with all of these attributes. Both Sophia and Louisa are straight A students, both speak Mandarin (a

language that Amy herself does not speak) and both have debuted at the Carnegie Hall (Sophia piano, Louisa violin). Equally important, both daughters, in spite of some ups and downs, appear to be happy, confident and capable young people.

There is recent literature (Chao, 1996; Jose, Huntsinger, Huntsinger, & Liaw, 2000; Parmar, 2008) that examines more closely Chinese and European American mothers' beliefs about parenting. In the multicultural world in which we now live, Australian professionals need to be culturally competent and reading this literature and Amy Chua's book, no matter how startling its content, may move us closer to that objective.

The book is an easy, but provocative, read. I enjoyed it immensely and I learnt from it.

References

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