

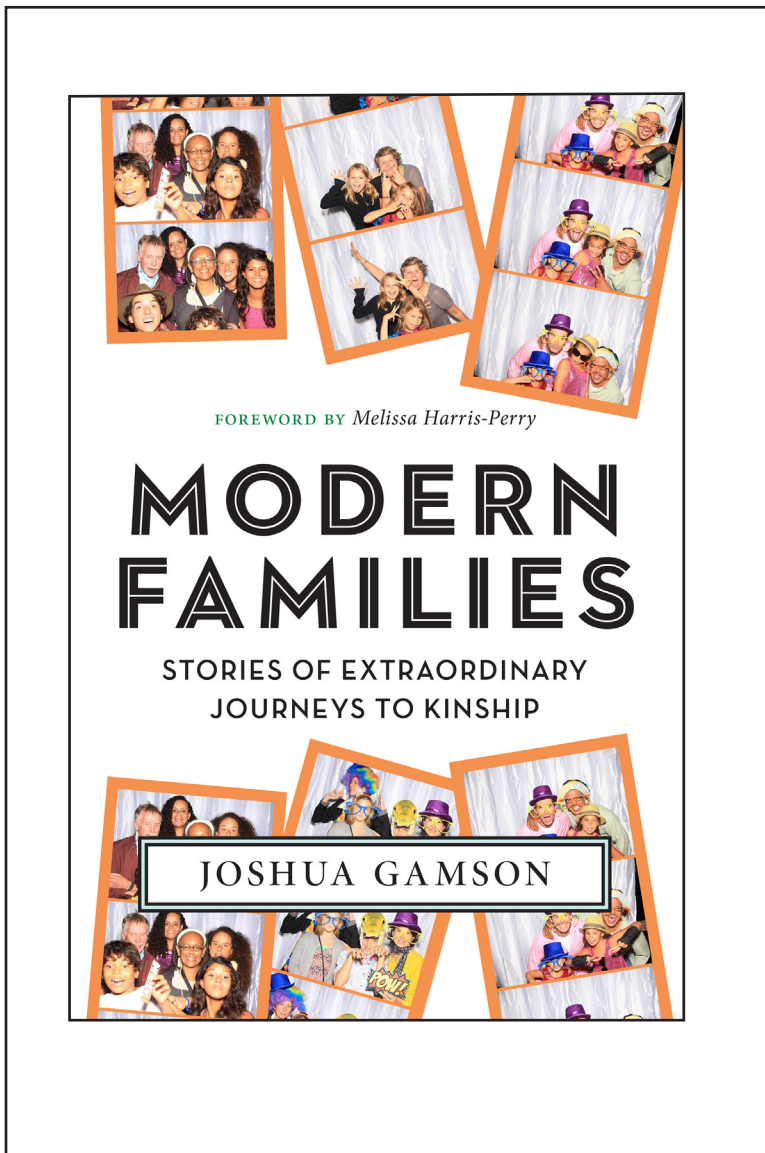
# Modern Families

Stories of Extraordinary Journeys to Kinship

By Joshua Gamson

Foreword by Melissa Harris-Perry

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



The kinds of families we see today are different than they were even a decade ago, some fantastically so, as paths to parenthood have been rejiggered by technology, activism, and law. In *Modern Families*, Joshua Gamson brings us extraordinary family creation tales—his own included—that illuminate this changing world of contemporary kinship. We meet a child with two mothers, made with one mother's egg and the sperm of a man none of them has ever met and carried by the other mother; another born to a man and a woman in Ethiopia, delivered by his natural grandmother to an orphanage after both his parents died in close succession, and then to the arms of his mother, who is raising him solo. We hear the story of a girl with two dads, conceived with one father's sperm and eggs donated by a friend, carried to term in the womb of another close friend who becomes their surrogate; and of two girls, one born in Nepal and the other in India, legally adopted by a woman who is co-parenting them with her girlfriend and a gay male couple. These are not your grandparents' creation stories.

Mapping the large, complex terrain of the modern kinship, *Modern Families* presents a personal, intimate account of social change from the inside out.

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## Summary

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Beginning with a child's simple question—"If she doesn't have a mom, how did she get born?"—this chapter describes the complexity of telling unconventional family stories, and locates them within the history of family creation and family discourse. The traditional "nuclear family," historians have shown, was dominant only for a brief period and only for some people, yet the One True Family ideology has remained powerful as a normative force. Even so, the heteronormative, biological family ideal has been losing its pride of place in recent decades. The promotion of family diversity is due largely to social forces that have made unconventional family creation both possible and historically likely. Increasingly, as they have become more common and stigmas have begun to dissipate, novel ways of creating families have simply taken their place alongside "normal" conception. The result is a multiplication of paths to parenthood—and the proliferation of creation stories that are not widely told. When such stories are publicly discussed, the storytelling tends to take contradictory forms. On the one hand, popular "Repro Lit" presents unconventional family creation as personal, moving, and celebratory. On the other hand, academic "Repro Crit" focuses on the structures of inequality in which such family-making practices as surrogacy and adoption take place, and which they reproduce. *Modern Families* aims to bring together these two perspectives taking on the puzzle of fortunes intertwined with misfortunes, intimacy within commercialized and bureaucratized reproduction, and family equality in a radically unequal world.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- The author cautions against reading the book as a "systematic study of unconventional family creation." How does the author conceive of it? How were the stories for the book selected? What are the advantages and limitations of such an approach?
- What is the "nuclear family"? What is the historical evidence that it was "dominant only for a brief period and only for some people"?
- What is the One True Family ideal, and where does it stand today?
- What are the major social forces that have made it possible for people to pursue parenthood in nontraditional ways?
- Why might it be difficult for people who made their families in less conventional ways to tell their stories?
- What are the major differences between "Repro Lit" and "Repro Crit"?

## Summary

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### ACTIVITIES:

- Have students interview each other about their own “creation stories,” as handed down to them within their families. Share these stories in larger groups. What patterns are apparent in the storytelling? What sorts of narratives are most common? What sorts of details are emphasized, and where are the gaps or silences in the stories?
- Have students investigate and present examples of “Repro Lit” and “Repro Crit.”

## SUMMARY

This chapter tells the story of how the author and his husband came to begin their family. Their first daughter, Reba, literally began with a dream. The chapter tells the story of how this dream came true, and of how homophobia and “outsourced” reproduction, friendship and money, combined to bring a family into being. This baby resulted from the egg of a close friend, fertilized by the sperm of one of the two men—they know which one, but don’t disclose that publicly—carried by the author’s college girlfriend, supported by her then husband, and birthed by her near the home of the author’s parents, who helped sponsor the whole expensive endeavor and greeted newborn Reba Sadie, along with several other members of the couple’s families of origin, in the maternity ward of Martha’s Vineyard Hospital. It involved confronting an unfriendly legal system, reproductive medicine institutions that were made for others, a cultural system that provided very few scripts for this kind of family-making, and an economic system in which making a family through surrogacy requires an enormous amount of financial and cultural capital.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ 1. What is “assisted reproduction,” and how is it visible in this story?
- ➔ 2. What is “reproductive stratification,” and how is it visible in this story?
- ➔ 3. What is the “outsourcing of intimacy,” and how is it visible in this story?
- ➔ 4. What are the legal obstacles for people interested in pursuing surrogacy? How does the American legal system define parenthood? Where does the legal system stand on surrogacy?
- ➔ 5. That author describes a “strange mix of creativity, convention, marginalization, commercialization, intimacy, and privilege” that had made him and his husband into parents. What is a concrete example in the story of each of those? Do any of the elements of that mix conflict with one another?
- ➔ 6. What is the most moving part of this chapter for you, and why? What is the most troubling part, and why?

## ACTIVITIES

- Have students investigate and report on the history of reproductive medicine since the 1970s. What are the major developments in medical technology that made it possible to generate biological offspring without heterosexual intercourse? What was the “Baby M” case? What are the major controversies that have surrounded assisted reproduction?
- Have students investigate and report on surrogacy laws in their home state (or assign them to different states). What are the current laws? Have the laws changed since *Modern Families* was published?
- The author argues that every baby is “a creature of a political moment, within particular social institutions, of a class structure, legal system, and technological order, of ideas about nature, gender, kinship, and sexuality.” Have students make a map of the politics of their own birth. Have students place a baby picture on the center of poster board, and then draw (or write up and glue onto the board) the relevant institutions, structures, and ideas that defined their own birth story. Place these posters around the room for display and discussion.

## SUMMARY

This chapter tells the story of Rahel, who at 38 years old quits her job in Israel and moves to New York to figure out how to have a kid. The chapter follows Rahel as she lets go of first one plan (date until the right man appears) and then another (have a baby on her own), until a plan finds her: she meets a rabbi who suddenly announces to her with peculiar certainty that her child is in Ethiopia. Eventually, this proves to be correct. First, though, Rahel makes her way through adoption workshops, where she meets with condescending sympathy; navigates the politics of international and transracial adoption; enters the oddly comforting bureaucracy of the adoption process; manages a tortuous effort to confirm the HIV status of the baby; and travels to Ethiopia, where she finally meets Yisak—and his extended family of origin. Her story tells a larger one of the hegemony of “the couple” and of “nature,” of the crossing of national and cultural borders, with relative advantage as an American and relative disadvantage as single women, in the making of a family.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Historically, single parenthood has been on the rise for decades. What accounts for this? Do you think single parenthood is considered socially acceptable? If not, why not?
- 2. How does decision-making around single motherhood vary for women from different social classes?
- 3. What are “single mothers by choice”?
- 4. Why is “fate” so often a part of how adoptive parents tell their stories?
- 5. What is “transracial adoption,” and why has it been controversial? Where do you stand on this controversy?
- 6. Describe the process Rahel had to go through for her adoption. In what ways was she advantaged in this process over other prospective parents, and in what ways was she disadvantaged? How does this compare to the process by which heterosexual couples typically become parents?
- 7. Why is it so difficult for many adoptive parents to get information about the early life of their child? How does Rahel’s case illustrate this difficulty?
- 8. How did you feel reading the encounter between Rahel and Yisak’s grandmother and other Ethiopian relatives? Why did you feel this way? What, if any, do you think Rahel’s obligations are to Yisak’s first family?

## STRANGER THINGS HAVE HAPPENED

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# CHAPTER 2

### ACTIVITIES

- Provide students with excerpts from Rosanna Hertz's *Single by Chance*, *Mothers by Choice* and Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas' *Promises I Can Keep*, assigning each reading to different teams of students. Have the students then report on the way the women encountered in each book made decisions about becoming mothers. Use this to develop a comparative analysis of the intersection between class, gender, and paths to single motherhood.
- Have students read the 1972 National Association of Black Social Workers statement on transracial adoption. Dividing students into "pro" and "con" teams, have them debate the issue.
- Divide students into research teams, assigning each a different country on a different continent. Have students investigate international adoption laws and regulations in the country they've been assigned, and how these have changed over time. Compare these as a group, in order to discern patterns in the regulation of international adoption.

BIRTH CONTROL

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## SUMMARY

This chapter tells the story of Maureen and Julia, who made their way individually and as a couple across minefields of shame and fear, through a powerful regime of normalcy in which lesbianism seemed wrong and lesbian motherhood a contradiction in terms, to become the parents of a boy they named Aldo. Although many of their friends used donor insemination, they chose instead a more elaborate process—in vitro fertilization of Julia’s egg, then implanted into Maureen’s uterus—so that both mothers would have a biological link to their child. Their story carries a broader tale of the allure of normalcy, and within that of the cultural primacy of biogenetic over social definitions of kinship, that often shape unconventional family creation efforts.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ 1. What have been some of the criticisms of the pursuit of “normalcy” in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender politics? What do you think of these critiques?
- ➔ 2. How might ideas about “normal” sexuality and “normal” families shape paths to parenthood for those who don’t fit those norms? How did they shape Maureen and Julia’s path?
- ➔ 3. What is “biogenetic determinism,” and what are some examples of how it is visible in some alternative family making (including Julia and Maureen’s)?
- ➔ 4. What are the various ways women pursuing pregnancy via sperm donation think about, make decisions about, and talk about the “sperm donor”?
- ➔ 5. What are “affinity ties”?



## BIRTH CONTROL

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### ACTIVITIES

- Have students investigate online contracts between prospective parents and sperm donors. What are the most common concerns that are addressed in contracts?
- Have students conduct an online search for sperm banks and poke around on at least two websites. What services are offered? How do these organizations present themselves to potential clients or customers? How can potential clients or customers search for donors?
- Dividing students into teams, have them debate the pros and cons of “normalizing” gayness.
- Divide students into “lesbian couples” and role-play decisions about pursuing pregnancy via sperm donation. They must address such questions as: What are the top three characteristics you will look for in a donor? Why these? Who will become pregnant, and what are her concerns? What are the concerns of the woman who will not become pregnant? Will you look for a “known donor”? Will you use a sperm bank? Will you want their child to know who the sperm donor is? If so, when? If not, why not? What will you want to be sure is included in the contract between you and the donor?

## THE KIDS IN THE PICTURES

## SUMMARY

This chapter follows the making of a lesbian couple and a gay male couple who decide to become a family. Their journey begins with the intense desire of Tess to become a mother, a pursuit in which she is joined first by her partner Jo, who is at first ambivalent and fearful; her friend Michael, whom she and Jo had met at a Buddhist Center and who agreed to contribute both sperm and future fathering; and Michael's partner Joaquin, who saw the offer as an unexpected opportunity to become a parent. When getting pregnant doesn't work, Tess and Jo, turned off by fertility medicine, proposes adoption instead, with Michael and Joaquin still on board as willing dads. The chapter follows the family as they travel to Nepal to adopt baby Maia, whom records said had been left at a police station as an infant, and then, three years later, to India to adopt five-year-old Priya. Their story highlights the legal and bureaucratic structures that work against imagining and making a multi-parent, lesbian-and-gay-headed family, and the global poverty and politics that structure adoption possibilities and build within the beauty of adoption stories difficult silences.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ 1. Multi-parent families are commonplace, if we consider stepfamilies made through divorce and remarriage, for instance, but those that are designed from the beginning to have more than two parents are rare. What do you think of such family arrangements? What might be their advantages and disadvantages? What are the obstacles faced by people who want to build multi-parent families?
- ➔ 2. How do the rules of international adoption shape the countries where prospective parents might pursue adoption?
- ➔ 3. What are the central ethical issues raised by international adoption?
- ➔ 4. The author suggests that parents and children were brought together by "their relative positions within a global stratification system." What does this mean? How does the global stratification system show up in the making of individual families such as the one described in this chapter?
- ➔ 5. What is the Hague Convention, and what did it set out to do?
- ➔ 6. Spiritual practices and beliefs played a strong role in the building of this family and in how they tell their own story. In what ways?
- ➔ 7. Think about the silences in your own origin story. Where are the missing pieces of the story? What might account for those missing pieces?
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## THE KIDS IN THE PICTURES

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### ACTIVITIES

- 1. Have students investigate the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption, tracing its history, its terms, and its signatories.
- 2. Divide students into teams, assigning each team a different country (choose some from the Global North and some from the Global South), and have them investigate and report on: a) the adoption policies of their assigned country; b) the adoption statistics of their assigned country. Use this to discuss the dynamics of “sending” vs. “receiving” countries.
- 3. Divide students into groups of four, and tell them that they are to pretend they have decided they want to build a family together. Their task is to come up with a family-making plan. How do they intend to have children? How will parental responsibilities be divided? What will be the parents’ legal rights and obligations? Will they have one household or two? How will parenting decisions be made?4. The author suggests that parents and children were brought together by “their relative positions within a global stratification system.” What does this mean? How does the global stratification system show up in the making of individual families such as the one described in this chapter?

## SUMMARY

This chapter follows Josh and Richard as they embark on the process of having a second child, this time much more directly involved in the world of commercial surrogacy. The chapter follows the serpentine path, as a friend of a friend offers her eggs, the couple signs up impetuously with a Boston-based surrogacy agency that claims to specialize in same-sex couples, fork over savings, and are introduced to the woman the agency has “found,” a single mother of three from Bowling Green, Kentucky named Gail, who was interested in serving as a paid gestational surrogate. This story of Madeleine Blanche’s creation illustrates the unexpected ways that institutionalized homophobia combines with everyday acceptance, creating both distressing impediments to and surprising support for atypical family creation. It also captures many of the concerns critics voice about market-linked reproduction even as it unravels the complexities of outsourced personal life: connection is displaced by commerce, even as new intimacies are produced; financial transactions highlight class differences, even as they also generated balance; the marketplace acts coercively even as it facilitates the freedom to make families outside of heteronormative forces and traditional family structures.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of commercial surrogacy for prospective parents? What are some of the ethical and political concerns about surrogacy? Where do you stand?
- 2. How do the rules of international adoption shape the countries where prospective parents might pursue adoption?
- 3. What is the difference between “traditional surrogacy” and “gestational surrogacy”? Why might parents prefer one to the other? Why might surrogates prefer one to the other?
- 4. What are the goals of a surrogacy agency? How do these overlap with and conflict with the goals of prospective parents? How do they overlap with and conflict with the goals of surrogates?
- 5. How did social class impact the relationships described in this story?

MY NEW KENTUCKY BABY

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- 6. What is a “pre-birth order”? More broadly, how are parental rights defined and established by the legal system? What obstacles did these particular parents face in getting legally recognized as parents?
- 7. Where do you see homophobia in this story? How did it affect the family-making experience? 3. What are the central ethical issues raised by international adoption?

## ACTIVITIES

- Have students debate the ethics of surrogacy. Then, ask them to develop a Guide to Ethical Surrogacy that is built on the principles of treating all the participants in surrogacy arrangements as full partners, and of minimizing risks and maximizing benefits to all involved; instruct them that this would be a “best practices” guide for agencies, parents, donors, surrogates, and medical practitioners. After they have completed their guide, have them read “A Framework for Ethical Surrogacy” (Men Having Babies). Discuss the overlap between the documents, and the viability of “ethical surrogacy.”
- Have students investigate and report on the global surrogacy industry, based on books such as Sharmila Rudrappa’s *Discounted Life* and France Winddance Twine’s *Outsourcing the Womb*.
- Have students investigate and report on current surrogacy laws in the United States.

## SUMMARY

This chapter follows Max, a cisgender art teacher, and her husband Min, a transgender health care consultant, as they go about making a family together first through insemination and then through domestic adoption. They both bring to the mix experiences of self-recreation: Min, who reconciled his identity as a Korean-born adoptee raised by white parents in Minnesota, and who begins transitioning into a male body just as the couple begins trying to have a child; Max, who thought through queer identity in her art and who relinquished her given name as an adult and named herself Max. The chapter follows them through the adoption process, as they face how, and how much, to present themselves as an average heterosexual couple, confronting an adoption process that insists that they both hide and disclose their queerness; make decisions about transracial adoption; deal with the complex relationships with birth parents, both in a devastating failed adoption and in the eventual adoption of a Texas-born baby they named Aiden. The story highlights the ways racial, sexual, and gender identities affect family making, within the larger institutional and interactional contexts of domestic adoption.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ 1. What particular obstacles to parenthood do transgender people face?
- ➔ 2. In what ways did the adoption process push Min and Max to disclose their queerness, and in what ways to hide it?
- ➔ 3. What are “open” and “closed”? Why might some people prefer one or the other?
- ➔ 4. What are the “conflicting accounts” with which transracial adoptees sometimes struggle?
- ➔ 5. What is a “Dear Birth Mother” letter? What does it need to do? How would you go about writing one? What presentations are favored in such letters?

## QUEER CONCEPTIONS

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### ACTIVITIES

- Have students dig deeper into the experiences of transgender family creation, using online sources such as Lambda Legal’s “FAQ About Transgender Parenting” and the documentary film “Transgender Parents.”
- Have students write their own “Dear Birth Mother” stories, either in assigned roles (a single construction worker in his 30s; a college-educated lesbian couple in their late teens; a divorced flight attendant mother of two; etc.) or as themselves in the future. If you want to make the exercise more complex, have students also pick particular details from an envelope (you live with your parents; you identify as polyamorous; you have a trust fund; you are a member of the National Rifle Association; etc.), which they then must decide whether to include or exclude.

BEDTIME STORIES FOR A NEW GENERATION

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## SUMMARY

The book concludes with a consideration of the politics of telling family stories, both for individuals and groups. Scholars argue that stories are always both incomplete and skewed, as they are told to achieve an explicit or implicit goal. Storytelling has also been seen to be strategically useful for groups whose voices are routinely silenced or marginalized; yet they also can generate counter-stories and serve to reproduce existing ideologies. Ways of telling stories matter: some “hegemonic stories” focus on individuals divorced from their social context, while other “subversive stories” make visible the social forces shaping individual experience. The chapter details the “micropolitics” of family storytelling, as adults often disagree over how a family creation story should be told, what to disclose and what not to, with an eye to power dynamics within the family and interpersonal relations outside of it. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the “macropolitics” of family storytelling, including the confronting of the One True Family myth and the refusal to separate the hyperintentional, loving actions that unite parents and children into a family from the social, cultural, political, and material circumstances in which they do so. This type of family storytelling may point the way towards broader ways of thinking about reproductive freedom.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. In what ways is storytelling “political”?
- 2. What is the difference between “hegemonic stories” and “subversive stories”?
- 3. What are the “micropolitics” of family storytelling, and what are some examples? What are the “macropolitics” of family storytelling, and what are some examples?

## ACTIVITIES

- Have students write their own family origin story first as a “hegemonic” story and then again as a “subversive” story. Alternatively, have students invent a character, whose story they then tell first as a “hegemonic” story and then as a “subversive” story. Have students then share the two versions of their story, either by posting them around the room as an exhibit, or by reading them aloud (depending on the size of the group).