



## Book Review

*Does Anybody Else Look Like Me? A Parent's Guide to Raising Multiracial Children* by Donna Jackson Nakazawa. Perseus Publishing, 2003.

Reviewed by Mark Daims

Much of parenting seems beset with unknowns and controversies, even for the experts. For example, Roy Sugarman in his review of the five volume, eight-inch thick *Handbook of Parenting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, edited by Marc H. Bornstein, states: "So it is with much of the book chapters; despite the vitally important nature of the subject matter overall, most conclude that we still simply do not know."

But Donna Jackson Nakazawa sets out to find some answers to the even more complex questions faced by the parents of multiracial children. In preparing her multifaceted study, she examined her own parenting of two children; she approached the experts; reviewed the literature, and gathered information from more than sixty interviews that she conducted with families of multiracial children. She seeks answers for her own children and for other multiracial children, sharing her information in the personal style of one parent speaking to another. Her passion for children is in her words and in the depth and sophistication of her thoughts and feelings as she searches for what is best for the children. She speaks at once from personal experience and from the ideas gained from her well-documented research.

Mrs. Nakazawa's multi-layered study yields many fine insights. At the core of her book are three sections covering three stages of development in the life of children: the years before grammar school, the middle childhood years, and adolescence. In each section she summarizes those facets, in that stage of development, that have the greatest bearing on how a multiracial child might be reacting and assimilating the information about race, culture, and their own self-worth coming to him or her both from concerned parents and from the often callous society beyond the family. Children two to five years of age, for instance, have strict rules of categorization, the author explains. Things can only belong to one category; a ball cannot be both round and red. At this point, she relates the story of a mother and a daughter who were out shopping when the biracial daughter observed: "Oh, look, mommy! There are some black people!" The mother who was black herself stared in surprise at her child who was half black. The story demonstrates that the child conceived of her mother simply as a mother and belonging to no other category. Race as an adult concept or misconception is perhaps indiscernible to younger children; it

follows that the recognition of one's self as multiracial is very difficult for a multiracial child.

Race is not forced into young minds until the second stage when children are about five years of age. This is the point in the life of a multiracial child that the author describes as a "pressure point"—a time when things can be especially difficult. Another such time is adolescence when each multiracial child's unique appearance and nature collides with that teenager's desire to fit in and not stand out. For each of the stages of the child's life, the author offers suggestions, stories, insights, and ideas of the multiracial parents she interviewed. In addition, stories from multiracial adults about their own childhood and what they missed or appreciated about their parents add even more depth. Their stories represent yet another layer of information that she weaves throughout her book along with her own stories about her son, named "Christian," a name that reflects both his Scandinavian heritage and his Japanese heritage wherein "Chris-chan" means "dear beloved child Chris."

Despite the challenges facing parent and child, Donna Nakazawa consistently encourages. She's not one to wait until a child has a problem at school or elsewhere and decide what to do then. Her approach is proactive. Throughout her book she emphasizes that multiracial children, especially, need a sense of self-worth and security in order to confront the difficulties they will face. Raising them "color blind," as if race doesn't matter, may reflect an ideal, but it does not reflect reality. Multiracial children should be well prepared for a world where race matters. The author suggests giving children scripts on how to answer or deal with the "What are you?" questions they are asked over and over and role-playing with them to prepare them for difficult encounters. She urges that parents help their children understand their own heritage and provides lists of books that feature biracial and transracially adopted children; she offers honest, accurate, and specific informa-

tion to guide parents in helping to make their children secure enough to face the challenges; at the same time she presents discussions on the influence of community and school on multiracial children.

Mrs. Nakazawa concludes her study on another encouraging note, that along with the challenges of being multiracial come the possible advantages of a unique perspective and life experience. As they mature, these multiracial children may come to love their multiracial nature and feel it provides them with a very special perspective. As one of them says,

I've probably had to think more about who I am than most people my age have, but I think that's given me a kind of strength. I feel like a lot of my friends admire that in me.

There's also a wonderful dialog between the author and her young son who is related to Stonewall and Davey Jackson as well as the samurai clan of Lord Nakazawa.

"You know Mom, today when they were teasing me, I felt all weird and little inside, like I wanted to cry but I didn't *want* to cry. But then I thought of my three selves and I felt really strong.

"Wow!" I said very curious. "What do you mean by your *three* selves?" I hadn't a clue and had some small vestige of concern at the concept, to be truthful.

"Well," he said, very matter-of-factly. "my Davey and Stonewall Jackson self, and there's my Samurai self, and then my *third* self - the me that's both of them mixed together!" My heart leapt. The concept of being mixed had not only clicked, it had clicked as a source of strength.

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