

history theatre



Watermelon Hill

Play Guide

Play written by Lily Baber Coyle



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MATERNITY HOMES IN THE 20TH CENTURY UNITED STATES

An essay by the playwright, Lily Baber Coyle



Lily Baber Coyle

It's a very old story. Boy meets girl. Girl gets pregnant. Boy disappears. And until fairly recently, the girl had to disappear, as well. As late as the mid-70s, an unmarried pregnant woman was automatically expelled from school, including college. If she had a job, she could expect to be fired. Typically, she could not stay with her immediate family, or they might be shunned by society, and her father could risk losing *his* job. Her family wanted her kept out of sight. Sometimes, a pregnant young woman left home before her parents learned of her condition, ashamed and terrified of their wrath. But where did these girls go?

At the turn of the century, an unmarried pregnant woman might seek shelter in a rescue mission along with prostitutes, drunks and drug addicts. Between 1910-1920, many of these shelters were transformed into maternity homes, dedicated solely to the purpose of protecting and reforming unwed mothers. These religious institutions rallied to slogans like, "Every girl saved is a public asset. Every girl lost is a public menace." Before World War II, maternity homes set out to save the souls of 'fallen women,' while providing food, shelter and medical care. Often, the women received practical job training, and after the baby was born, they were assisted in finding employers sympathetic to their status as single moms. The babies were not adopted out, partly because their 'illegitimate' status made them undesirable, and partly because it was considered fitting punishment for a promiscuous woman to be saddled with the care of her fatherless child, and never escape that stigma.

After World War II, maternity homes were busier than ever. Some were so crowded that the women slept on couches and examining tables. The Baby Boom made many women mothers out of wedlock, but there was also a glut of new families who desperately wanted, but could not have children. Conveniently, the new public opinion was that nurture and not nature developed a person's worth; therefore, the baby of an unmarried woman could become a respectable member of society, if removed from her care as soon as possible and placed in the hands of a responsible married couple.

The supply and demand of adoptable babies was fueled by society's insistence on keeping women ignorant about their own bodies. Sex education was non-existent and birth control was hard to come by. Many 'women's problems', which are easily treated today, were routinely solved by hysterectomies, without always informing the patient of the consequences. Without being entirely sure how it happened, some women were finding themselves sterile, while others were finding themselves pregnant.

Maternity homes were transformed into adoption clearinghouses, and middle-class white families were no longer forced to disown their pregnant daughters, failing a distasteful 'shotgun' wedding. Now they could simply deny that it ever happened, and maintain control over their daughters' lives. Young women were

packed off to maternity homes by their parents. Although many doomed 'shotgun' weddings were avoided, just as many young couples who wanted to marry and keep their babies were split apart by disapproving families.

Without a husband, a white woman had little choice but to give away her child. Family, church, social welfare, hospitals, the court system, every institution she was forced to depend upon told her that adoption was the only solution. If she was determined to keep her baby, regardless of the cost, she was usually worn down and convinced that the only possible way to love her baby is to give it to someone worthy of parenthood. Some were told that being an unwed mother is proof enough for charges of neglect, and the baby will be taken anyway, so just sign the papers.

Unwed mothers of all races were considered unfit and psychologically flawed by virtue of having had sex outside of marriage. However, a black woman who wanted to give her child to 'better' parents was generally denied that opportunity. Very few maternity homes accepted black women. And although there were many childless black couples seeking to adopt, their applications were often denied by adoption agencies.

In the late 1960's, things began to change. The new generation began to question society's authority. Protestors and activists demanded equal rights for women and minorities, and refused to support the war in Vietnam. The status quo was no longer acceptable. Women in maternity homes like the Catholic Infant Home (nick-named Watermelon Hill) began keeping their babies, and bravely faced the life of a single mom.

In the early 1970's, Watermelon Hill relocated and was transformed into an out-patient service, providing health care and resources for pregnant women in need. The dark old building, home to many secrets and sorrows, was eventually demolished. In a beautiful twist of fate, the land it stood on now holds a new type of home for single mothers: The Jeremiah Program. This organization houses, educates, and nurtures young women along with their children, empowering them to thrive and succeed as family units. It is a whole new story.

And it is about time.

Lily Baber Coyle

Lily joined the Navy to see the world and pay for school. She spent the following years as a freelance writer, editor, ghostwriter, and has had five plays produced on three continents. Lily is Director of Publishing at Beaver's Pond Press, and has two fine daughters with her husband, filmmaker Patrick Coyle.

This is the second time her play *Watermelon Hill* has been produced at History Theatre.

Adoption in America

1851 Massachusetts passes the first modern adoption law, recognizing adoption as a social and legal operation based on child welfare rather than adult interests.

1853 Rev. Charles Loring Brace founded the Children's Aid Society of New York.

1854 The Children's Aid Society of New York launches the orphan trains.



Orphan Trains

1868 Massachusetts Board of State Charities begins paying for children to board in private homes. This was the beginning of indentured or "placed-out" a movement to care for children in families rather than institutions.

1872 New York State Charities Aid Association is organized. It is one of the first organizations in the country to establish a specialized child-placement program, in 1898.

1883 St. Paul Protestant Orphanage is founded in St Paul, MN.

1887 Dr. Martha Ripley opens first home for unmarried mothers.

1898 The Catholic Home Bureau is organized in New York by the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It is the first Catholic agency to place children in homes rather than Orphanages.

1900 St. Joseph Catholic Orphanages is founded in St Paul, MN.

1909 First White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children declares that poverty alone should not be grounds for removing children from families.

1910-1930 The first specialized adoption agencies are founded.



St Joseph Catholic Orphanage

1912 Congress creates the U.S. Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor "to investigate and report on all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people".

1912-1921 Baby farming, commercial maternity homes, and adoption ad investigations take place in Boston, New York, Baltimore, Chicago and other cities.

1915 The Bureau for Exchange of Information Among Child-Helping Organizations is founded (renamed Child Welfare League of America in 1921).

1917 Minnesota passes first law mandating social investigation of all adoptions (including home studies) and providing for the confidentiality of adoption records. Annulment of an adopted child was warranted within the first five years if the child showed any signs of feeble mindedness, venereal infection, or other conditions thought to be contracted at birth.

1918 Minnesota passes law to seal adoption records, protecting children from the stigma of illegitimacy.

1919 The Russell Sage Foundation publishes the first professional child-placing manual; the U.S. Children's Bureau sets minimum standards for child-placement.

1921 The Child Welfare League of America is formally renamed and reorganized.

1934 The state of Iowa begins administering mental tests to all children placed for adoption in hopes of preventing the unwitting adoption of retarded children (called "feeble-minded" at the time). This policy inspires nature-nurture studies at the Iowa Child Welfare Station.

1935 The Social Security Act includes provision for aid to dependent children, crippled children's programs, and child welfare, which eventually lead to a dramatic expansion of foster care.

1937 First Child Welfare League of America initiative that distinguishes minimum standards for permanent (adoptive) and temporary (foster) placement.

1948 First recorded transracial adoption of an African-American child by white parents takes place in MN.

1949 New York is the first state to pass a law against black market adoptions.

1953 Orphan Voyage, the first adoptee search support network, is founded by Jean Paton.

1953 The first nationally coordinated effort to locate adoptive homes for African American children, the National Urban League Foster Care and Adoptions Project.

1954 St. Paul Catholic Infant Home is founded.

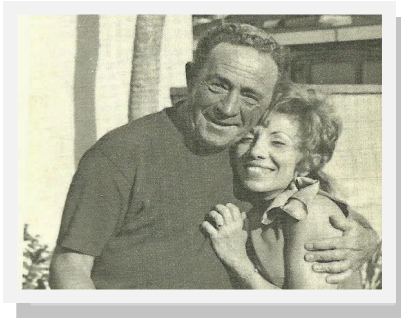


Child Welfare League of America



From brochure to adopt children in New York

- 1955 Child Welfare League of America national conference on adoption in Chicago announces that the era of special needs adoption has arrived. Adopt-A-Child is founded by the National League and 14 New York agencies to promote African-American adoptions.
- 1957 International Conference on Intercountry Adoptions issues report on problems of international adoptions; U.S. adoption agencies sponsor legislation to prohibit or control proxy adoptions.
- 1958 Child Welfare League of America publishes *Standards of Adoption Service* (revised in 1968, 1973, 1978, 1988, 2000); the Indian Adoption Project begins.
- 1959 The UN Assembly adopts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.
- 1961 The Immigration and Nationality Act incorporates, for the first time, provisions for the international adoption of foreign-born children by U.S. citizens.
- 1963 U.S. Children's Bureau moves from Social Security Administration to Welfare Administration.
- 1965 The Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions launches the first organized program of single parent adoptions in order to locate homes for hard-to-place children with special needs.
- 1966 The National Adoption Resource Exchange, later renamed the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA), is established as an outgrowth of the Indian Adoption Project.
- 1967 Catholic Infant Home becomes Seton Center.
- 1970 Adoptions reach their century-long statistical peak at approximately 175,000 per year. Almost 80 percent of the total are arranged by agencies.
- 1971 Seton Center moves to the former St. Joseph's Academy facility on the corner of Marshall and Western.
- 1971 Florence Fisher founds the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association "to abolish the existing practice of sealed records" and advocates for "opening of records to any adopted person over 18 who wants, for any reason, to see them".



Florence Fisher with her first father.

- 1972 The National Association of Black Social Workers opposes transracial adoptions; *Stanley v. Illinois* substantially increases the rights of unwed fathers in adoption by requiring informed consent and proof of parental unfitness prior to termination of parental rights.
- 1973 *Roe v. Wade* legalizes abortion.
- 1976 Concerned United Birthparents is founded.
- 1977 Adoption records become more open; Minnesota Search Law is passed.
- 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act is passed by Congress; the American Adoption Congress is founded.
- 1980 Minnesota law mandating services to searching birthmothers is passed.
- 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act offers significant funding to states that support subsidy programs for special needs adoptions and devote resources to family preservation, reunification, and the prevention of abuse, neglect, and child removal.
- 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption.
- 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act is the first federal law to concern itself with race adoption.
- 1996 Bastard Nation is founded. Its mission statement promotes “the full human and civil rights of adult adoptees”, including access to sealed records.
- 1997 The Adoption and Safe Families Act stresses permanency planning for children, and represents a policy shift away from family reunification and toward adoption.
- 2000 The Child Citizenship Act of 2000 allows foreign-born adoptees to become auto-matic American citizens when they enter the United States.
- 2003 The Adoption Promotion Act: Performance-based incentives to states that successfully increase the number of children adopted from foster care (amended in 2008).
- 2007 The Jerimiah Program opens in Saint Paul on the same land that the Catholic Infant Home was located.



Open Adoptions vs Closed Adoptions

Decades ago, virtually all adoptions were closed. But nowadays, the trend in adoptions in the United States is toward open adoptions, in which all the parties to an adoption meet and often remain in each other's lives.

Fully closed adoptions are not as popular as they once were in the United States. Reasons for closed adoptions historically were to help the adoptee and the adoptive parents not have the stigma of an illegitimate child as well as hiding the birthmother's identity, which saved her from ridicule. A closed adoption (also called "confidential" adoption and sometimes "secret" adoption) birth parents and adopting families are anonymous. While many details may be shared, no identifying information (such as last name, addresses, social security numbers, etc.) is exchanged. The birth parents and adopting family can meet, share pictures and updates, and have ongoing contact through the agency, but they do not share last names and addresses.

An Open adoption is a form of adoption in which the biological and adoptive parents exchange identifying information and are then able, if they so choose, to be in direct contact with one another.

There are varying degrees of an open adoption which are agreed upon the birth parent(s). decision to choose the adoptive parent(s).

Partial open adoptions

- a) The birthmother and adoptive parent(s) meet before the child is born and then not have any contact after that first meeting.
- b) The birthmother and adoptive parent(s) never meet but it is decided through the agency or the lawyer that letters and pictures will be passed on to the respective people.
- c) The birthmother may have a letter that has been written that is saved for the child through the agency that when they turn 18 if they are interested in learning or searching for their birthparent(s) they may receive it at that time.

Fully Open adoptions

- a) The birthmother and adoptive parent(s) have contact before the baby is born and may send pictures and letters to one another.
- b) The birthmother is a part of the child(s) life through scheduled meetings set up by the adoptive parent(s) and the birthmother. They are usually apart of the events for the child such as birthdays, baptisms, and bigger life events.

For both birth parents and adoptive parents, the open adoption process can permit a greater degree of control in the decision-making process. The process allows adoptive parents to better answer their children's

questions about who their birthparents were and why they were adopted and any concerns can be directly answered. There can also be downsides. Many find the degree of openness to be a threat, fearing that the birthparents will intrude upon their lives after the adoption is over or even to have the child returned to them. Adoptive parents may also worry that the child will be confused over who is the “real” parent.

When adoptions are closed, the files are usually sealed. The process and degree of access to information varies widely from state to state, with some states requiring a court order to reveal information that can identify a party to an adoption.

The Search

Due to the large number of closed adoptions throughout the history of the United States, there are many different outlets that people searching for their birthparent(s) can go for help. There are activist groups that advocate for opening all adoption records. The most well-known activist group is Bastard Nation, which regard knowing one’s background as a human right.

Below is a list of organizations that help searching birthparents, adoptees or other family members. Many of the organizations are free or have a very small cost attached to them. Some states also have their own sites through the state.

Adoptee’s Liberty Movement Association: there is a life time paid membership of \$50.00 to belong to this group. It does not do the search for the person looking but they give them the tools needed.

Search Angels: Volunteers help birthparents or adoptees with the search. Volunteers are people that want to aid in peoples search, but have no formal training.

Other organizations:

Adoption.com

Adoption Database

Find My Family

Findme- Free Search Agency

GS Adoption Agency International Soundex Reunion Registry

TXCARE

When starting out in the search for most of these websites the searcher would put in the date of birth and place into the database and it brings up the people that were born in the time stipulated or within the month and year. If the searcher finds their birthdate they can start the process to connecting to see if they are a match.

ACTIVITIES



Discussion & Writing Activities

Linda Black McKay is a poet who stayed at Watermelon Hill. She wrote a poem about it, (in the back of this study guide) and she wrote a book called "Shadow Mothers", about women who gave babies up for adoption but were reunited years later. Read her poem before seeing the play, and discuss it in class. Read it again after seeing the play, and see if the meaning changes.

Imagine that you are the parent of a baby put up for adoption. Write a letter to the child to be read when he or she reaches your age. Or, write a poem about the hardest decision you ever had to make.

The first Catholic Infant Home was located in the Rondo neighborhood, which was demolished in the 1950's to make way for Interstate 94. Most of the demolished Rondo homes belonged to people of color. Research and discuss the old Rondo neighborhood and the politics that built I94.

Adopted children and their biological parents have used the services of private detectives to find each other. Now, much of the information they need can be found on the internet. Become a private detective on the internet, and find out what the process would be to find a missing person. Write out step-by-step instructions.

A good story always includes a struggle: The main character against a “bad guy”, or against nature, or against society, or against self. Who is the main character in “Watermelon Hill” (if you had to pick one), and what is the main struggle? Describe and support your views.

Until it closed in the early 1970’s, Watermelon Hill was just one of hundreds of “maternity homes” around the country. Every city had one maternity home, if not several. Now there aren’t any. Why?

The Minnesota Act of 1917 was the first law in the U.S. enacted to seal adoption records. It was originally intended to protect adopted children from being stigmatized for being born out of wedlock, or “illegitimately”. Today, many states allow for “open” adoption, in which the identities are no longer a secret. How has society changed since 1917? Should all of the adoption records be opened up, allowing biological parents and adopted children to locate each other?

Sharon, Leah and Joan do certain things in the play, like smoking, that pregnant women are cautioned against today. What kinds of changes can you imagine, in science, medicine and social opinion, that will affect the way babies are born, 35 years from now?

It sometimes seems as though teen pregnancy is a recent phenomenon, but it has been around as long as teenagers have. In the era of Watermelon Hill, it was simply hidden. What other stories do you know that deal with teen pregnancy, and how is it portrayed? How does the media suggest our society handle teen pregnancy?

The Coddling of EGG-Baby

Having children is a responsibility for parents which involves a lifetime commitment of love and caring. Each student will care for an egg as if it were an infant for one week. The teacher will sign each egg to guarantee there will be no substitutions in the case of mishaps.

Goals and Objectives:

- To keep your egg baby alive without breaking it
- To experience the constant responsibility of something fragile and “infant-like”
- To reflect and make connections to the feelings and emotions a new parent may have

Requirements:

1. You must have your “baby” with you at all times during the school day Monday through Friday. The only exception to this will be during an activity that would be inappropriate or unsafe for your young child. You may put your egg down for a nap in your locker during this time only (one class per day).
2. Any cracks in your Egg-Baby will result in a 10 point deduction of the final grade,
3. During the week of the egg project, I encourage you to discuss with your parent (s) or guardian (s) what it is like to be for an infant.
4. After the project, you will write a reflective paper on the fragility, the inconvenience and the interminable burden of care Egg-Baby required. What can you conclude from this about authentic child care?

How to Make Egg Babies

1. Fill a medium sauce pan or pot with 6 cups of water. Bring to a boil over medium heat. Boil egg 10 min.
2. Allow the egg to cool for 20 minutes.
3. Draw a face on your egg using a colored marker. Make your egg baby an outfit using scraps of material, and glue onto the egg

Make the Crib

Create a crib to protect your egg using a small cardboard or plastic box, no more than a 6-inch square. If you like, decorate the crib, and write the egg baby's name on the front of it. Insulate the crib with several layers of tissue paper to keep the egg nestled in place. Lay the tissue flat, or crumple it up and place it inside. Place a few cotton balls in the center of the crib as added cushioning on which your egg baby will rest. The cotton balls can go either on top of the tissue paper or underneath since it is just extra insulation for your baby.

Reflection Paper for the Egg Baby Project

How do you feel about your egg baby after a week? What were the most difficult moments as an egg baby parent? What was the most rewarding moment?

What social difficulties you would encounter if you did have a child at the age of 18. What would you miss out on? How would this affect your social life? Draw on your experience of when you were carrying your egg baby around.

Focus on the economic effect that having a child at this age would have on you. How could you afford raising a baby at your age?

What emotional effect do you think a baby would have on you. Are you ready to care for another human being? To look out for them and worry about them?

What did the project teach you about having a baby at your age?

For Further Reading

Blau, Eric. *Stories of Adoption*. Portland: New Sage Press, 1993.

Fessler, Ann H. *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2006.

Kunzel, Regina G. *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

McKay, Linda Black. *Shadow Mothers: Stories of Adoption and Reunion*. St. Cloud: North Star Press of St. Cloud, 1998.

McKiernan, Ethna. *Caravan*. Minneapolis: Midwest Villages & Voices, 1989.

Schaefer, Carol. *The Other Mother: A Woman's Love for the Child She Gave Up for Adoption*. New York: SoHo Press, 1991.

Solinger, Rickie. *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy Before Roe V. Wade*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

St. Vincent Vogel, Kate. *Lost & Found: A Memoir for Mothers*. St. Cloud: North Star Press, 2009.

Wadia-Ells, Susan. *The Adoption Reader: Birth Mothers, Adoptive Mothers, and Adopted Daughters Tell Their Stories*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1995.

Waldron, Jan L. *Giving Away Simone: A Memoir*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

Movies

Foster Child (2007)

An urban poor family hired by a local foster care facility to provide temporary home and care to abandoned babies pending the latter's formal adoption. The inevitable separation is heart-rending for the foster family. Every moment becomes more precious as Thelma goes through the day fulfilling her motherly duties for the last time—bathing John-John, feeding him, and bringing him to school where the boy participates in a school presentation.

Juno (2007)

A young girl named Juno gets herself pregnant and tries to stand on her own. She soon learns a few lessons about being grown up.

Philomena (2013)

A woman searches for her adult son, who taken away from her decades ago when she was forced to live in a convent.

Magdalene Sisters (2002)

Four women are given into the custody of the Magdalene sisterhood asylum to correct their sinful behavior: Crispina and Rose have given birth to a premarital child, Margaret got raped by her cousin and the orphan Bernadette had been repeatedly caught flirting with the boys. All have to work in a laundry under the strict supervision of the nuns, who break their wills through sadistic punishment.