

## Book Review

### Swimming Up the Sun

Nicole Burton, APC: Apippa Publishing Company,  
Riverdale Park, Maryland 2008  
Reviewed by Micky Duxbury

From the first few pages of this enticing memoir, Nicole Burton draws us into a story that increases in its power as it sweeps us along. Although Burton was fully rooted in her adoptive family, she has always felt the call of her birth parents. She is on a search not to fill a black hole, but to broaden and deepen her picture of herself: "Wanting to find my birth parents had less to do with my childhood and more to do with yearning to learn the shapes of their face, the gestures of their hands, and the geography of their hearts."



The search process can be a harrowing journey and some lose their way on this roller coaster of discovery, but Burton is able to experience the unanticipated complexities of the adventure without losing her ability to stand outside of the drama. She is at times frustrated or deeply disappointed, and occasionally exhilarated, but always able to observe the process with a language and style that is both straightforward and lyrical.

As she begins her search, she meets with a bureaucratic and somewhat patronizing official who functions as a gatekeeper. She precisely describes the experience of many adoptees from the closed system: "The reality of being an adult adoptee was that officials were kind, but treated us like we were wards of the state. We needed approval from strangers to get information other adults would take for granted." She also captures the dissonance of being polite on the outside, while guarding ferocious feelings: "Years of acting uninterested in my own history had prepared me perfectly for passing in the non-adopted world. Inside I was a she-warrior with a lion heart; I would follow every lead until it died."

As Burton uncovers her hidden history, she gains knowledge of the self she has developed and understands more fully what has been lost: "Forget the past, I wish I could. I can't forget what I do not know. But I am beginning to feel involved, no longer a detached adventurer." Her story is not without the anguish that many adoptees experi-

ence as they try to fit in and be connected to their birth families. "I still wanted to be accepted into her family. So I prayed, I went to adoptee-birth-parent support groups, I went to adult children of alcoholics meetings, I wrote angry letters and threw them away, I forgave, I took it back, and I forgave again."

This book moves along like a mystery—with signposts of discovery planted as she goes along. It is a very human story filled with disappointment, hope and movement towards wholeness. Ultimately, Burton discovers more than she expected, even more than she hoped for. She comes to terms with dashed hopes and creates new expectations as she forges relationships with members of her birth family and continues to make discoveries about the meaning of adoption in her life.

As the mystery unfolds, so does Burton's experience of herself as an adoptee. This search and reunion story does not focus only on the drama of the finding. Interwoven among the vivid details are Burton's evolving insights into the meaning of her history. One gets a sense that no matter how the search unfolds, that she is on a path of self-discovery that will not be stopped, with or without the resolution she so fervently desires.

Adoptees will be affirmed by reading this book; adoptive parents and general readers will benefit from a deeper understanding of how birth parents reside inside of adoptees' hearts. Whether or not they engage in an actual search, all adoptees wonder who their birth parents were and are, and what qualities they share. Burton does an excellent job of letting us know how deeply this search for her full identity is tied to her sense of wholeness: "The time of searching in the mirror for the eyes of someone who looked like me was over. I'd found them. I was related to someone who walked this same planet, someone kind. I was no longer alone in the world."

*Micky Duxbury is the author of Making Room In Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties Through Open Adoption. An adoptive mother and licensed therapist in the San Francisco Bay Area, she specializes in pre- and post-adoption education. Visit her website at [www.mickyduxbury.com](http://www.mickyduxbury.com) for more information.*