

One of the many birthmothers who phoned for help during the heart-wrenching trial discovered that her six year old's independent adoption had likewise never been finalized. Only because of the publicity of the case in progress did the district attorney's office agree to look into the matter. They reported back that the child was in a "good home" and that they would immediately rectify the oversight of not finalizing. There are currently no penalties for not finalizing an adoption in New York. Therefore, there was nothing illegal.

Those who like to dismiss the adoption aspect of this case ignore the fact that as far as Lisa's mother, Michele, and Travis' mother, Nicole, were concerned these were no different than you child's adoption or mine. Nicole and her mother, Graceann, had not time to think and were taken advantage of at a time of great crisis. Michele, on the other hand, was making what she believed to be a well thought out decision. She had no reason to fear or mistrust independent adoption as she had two cousins who came into her family via that route and were raised as a "Prince and Princess."

What Lisa Knew makes some very interesting suppositions, but of course concludes that no one will ever know what Lisa knew. The real question, and the one Johnson avoids, is not what Lisa knew but what she didn't know. Lisa never knew the undying love of her mother, Michele Launders, and how that love for her

was used as a weapon against her. Or how she was told she'd be selfish to nurture her own precious child and how the child deserved "better." How she was told of the wonderful Catholic couple Steinberg had for her child.

Johnson ignores all of these issues. She is kind and sympathetic in her descriptions of Michele but lacking in any sympathy for Nicole and Graceann. Is it simple jealousy or belief in the myth that makes Johnson see the physically attractive and well dressed Smigiels as uncaring rather than victims of exploitation and coercion at a time of duress? It was eight hours from the time Graceann discovered her 17 year old daughter appeared to be pregnant until Dr. Sarosi, Steinberg's friend, who is still practicing medicine, induced labor.

Johnson has written a book of interest for voyeurs with strong stomachs. But like the system which failed Lisa, Johnson fails too. Graceann Smigiel, on the other hand, despite Johnson's alluding to her as liking the limelight, has turned down all book, movie and tv offers. Her only interest is working with us to prevent future family separations.

## BOOK REVIEW: WHAT LISA KNEW

by Marsha Riben

Because of the public's fascination with real-life atrocities, Joyce Johnson's version of the "truth" behind the Steinberg/Nussbaum trial for the murder of their "illegally adopted daughter," Lisa, has quickly become a best seller.

What Lisa Knew reads easily, though not pleasantly, and is interesting if you are curious as to how two "nice" Jewish, well educated professionals (he an attorney, she an editor of children's books) fell to the depths of sexually depraved, drug using, fatal abusers. Johnson appears to have done extensive research into their backgrounds to help us put together the jagged and jaded puzzle pieces that combine in just the peculiar way they did to make Joel and Hedda the ultimate slave and master.

In addition to profiling these two extreme and bizarre personalities, Johnson attempts in a limited way to come to the defense of abused children by inserting a page of statistics in an otherwise "based on truth" novel.

Johnson's primary goal, however, for some unknown reason, is to prove that Hedda Nussbaum was a villain as well as, or instead of, a victim. In direct contrast to the feminists and battered women's organizations who rallied support in defense of Hedda, Johnson attempts to convince her readers that Nussbaum was not a typical battered housewife but rather a willing participant of sadomasochistic sex.

Because of all of these "higher" priorities of Johnson, she all but ignores the fact that were it not for adoption as an institution, Lisa would not have been placed into the situation which ultimately ended her short life. Odd that a writer and editor with Johnson's background could have made such an oversight since she edited Betty Jean Lifton's Twice Born and Lost and Found.

Because of her focus on child abuse, Johnson begins with the position that birth is a lottery. Some babies are winners and some are losers. She neglects to mention that adoption is what is supposed to correct the imbalance, to take babies from incapable parents and place them with capable ones. Not vice versa.

During the weeks after Lisa's tragic death and all during the trial, fingers of blame were pointed. Why hadn't Lisa's teachers noticed and taken any action? One student teacher tried, unsuccessfully. Why hadn't neighbors done more? Several had called child service agencies numerous times. One neighbor wrongly believed that there had to be a file on the Steinbergs because of all of her calls and one or two follow-up visits by child protection agencies.

Of all of the many institutions and systems which failed Lisa, the adoption system must be held the most culpable. Hedda Nussbaum's co-workers at Random House had given up on trying to suggest to Hedda that there was help available for battered wives. When she told them she was having trouble conceiving a child they were relieved. When she revealed that she and Joel planned to adopt they were outraged. They contacted Spence Chapin, one of New York's most formidable adoption agencies, and were told there was nothing that could be done without proof. No effort was made to investigate their claim.

When this notorious case is discussed and written about, we often hear that it had nothing to do with adoption; that it was an abduction or a kidnapping. Most accounts refer to Lisa as Steinberg's "illegally adopted daughter." Yet, Steinberg, who practiced law without ever passing the bar exam, is never referred to as an "illegal lawyer." The only thing irregular about Lisa's independent adoption is that it was never finalized.