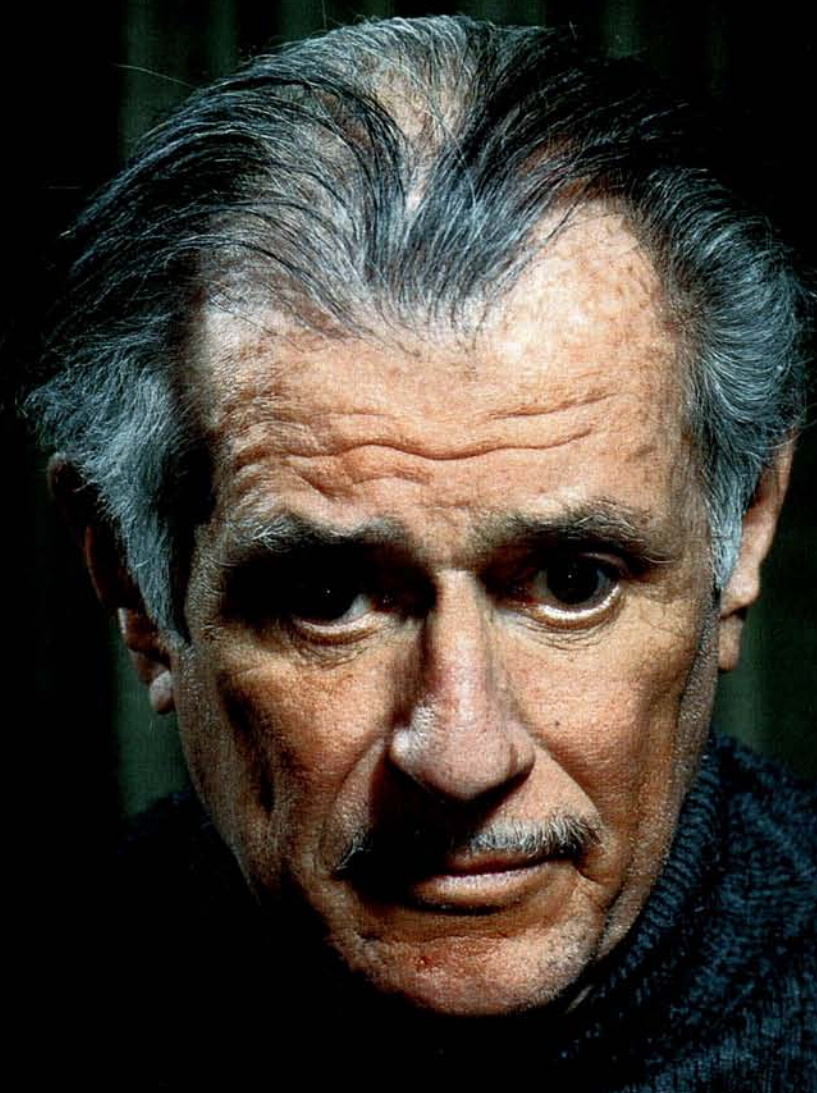


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Rugs That Tell
a Story
of War in
Afghanistan

UCLA's
Dr. Jorge Lazareff
and His Children'
Crusade



‘THE WORLD’S
GREATEST
SPORTSWRITER’

Calling Frank Deford the ‘greatest’ may be somewhat overblown. But maybe that’s appropriate.

BY GLENN F. BUNTING

Raising California

Why 'Family' and 'Ozzie and Harriet' Aren't Synonyms

By Nelson Handel

The bulb first lit up in my head two years ago, while I was painting the window trim in what would be the baby's room. Our son, Charlie, was due in a month, and though his birth mother in Tacoma, Wash., had made a firm adoption plan and chosen us to be his parents, we were still unsure. In adoption, you learn, it ain't over till the fat baby sings. We'd begun decorating the nursery in the blind act of faith that, after years of infertility, our prayers would be answered. If we built it, we hoped, he would come.

Hanging out the second-story window, I glanced down to see our across-the-street neighbor, Barbara, talking to a very pregnant lady. Barb looked up and caught my eye.

"Nelson," she called. "This is my friend, the one I told you about who's expecting twins."

I remembered a single detail from the previous conversation: twins at 50. "*Mazel tov*, good luck," I shouted back.

The woman shouted her thanks. "Barb tells me you're adopting?"

As comfortable as I felt about adoption, I still felt odd talking about it with strangers. "I'm just feathering the nest here."

Oblivious to my discomfort, she continued. "We were going to adopt until someone suggested I see this doctor they knew, and now look at me!"

As we spoke, other neighbors walked by. They heard our conversation and smiled friendly smiles. We could have been discussing the weather. It was a scene out of "Mayberry R.F.D.," except in the middle of Los Angeles.

"Did you preserve any genetics?" I called, knowing that twins at 50 meant reproductive science.

"His, not mine." She laughed. "We had a great donor, though."

"Twins. I can't even imagine," I said.

"How'd you meet your birth mother?"

"She found us through the Internet," I replied.

She smiled, and we said goodbye. I continued painting, a semigloss turquoise to match the blue-and-green walls and the cloth kites over the crib.

Rolling out the paint on the walls the day before, I had watched two white guys walk by, pushing a stroller with a 2-year-old African American girl in it. They held hands. Seeing them, I thought of the beautiful Latina child our friends, a mixed Jewish-Christian couple like us, had just adopted. Two other friends had given birth recently to babies conceived through in-vitro fertilization. Another had three children, one by birth (Jewish/Latino), two by adoption (a Latino boy and Vietnamese girl). She was a single mom. Our next-door neighbors had a newborn biological son, though they had him (and bought their house) while neglecting to get married. Nothing ideological; they just never got around to it.

In-vitro, donor eggs, adoption. Twins at 50, gay white men with adopted daughters, lesbians becoming moms through sperm donation, married couples using surrogate mothers, international adoptions—there's a whole lot of babies goin' on. Families are forming in all sorts of ways, in a rainbow of col-

ors, and my son, Charlie, now 2½ years old, is growing up right in the middle of it all.

We live in an era that forces us to reconceive our notions of kinship. No longer dependent on genetics or breeding, family must now be defined as parents and children united in love and common self-interest. Perhaps it's the logical, postmodern extension of family, a collage approach that says the glue is more important than the bits being conjoined. Perhaps that's what family has always been, but we can no longer take for granted that it's in the genes.

I imagine the following conversation between Charlie and a new friend (call him Elias) at, say, 8 years old. I'm driving, the kids sit in back:

Elias (dully): So ... I hear you're adopted.

Charlie: Yup.

A pause.

C: You?

E: I came from some other lady's egg.

C: Oh.

Elias yawns.

E: (With enthusiasm) "So, you wanna see my new Game Boy when we get home?"

The media—with movies-of-the-week about stalking birth mothers, articles about "\$50,000 Eggs" and front-page coverage of the latest cloning announcement—have by and large missed the boat when it comes to telling the real story of so-called "nontraditional" families. What strikes me is how utterly normal the whole thing has become. Far from being aberrational, or even exceptional, the circumstances surrounding a family's creation are fast becoming banal.

In my lifetime, I've always talked about my two families: the one I was born into, and the family I chose. A trick of fate landed me the former, my biological family. The latter I grew with my closest of friends, bonds forged through our long histories together, through love and one shared experience at a time. Now the two ideas—birth family and chosen one—are inseparable. Family is what you make it.

Our children will grow up in a world in which the assumptions about what constitutes a family have blurred, and in which judgments about their "traditional" nature or validity don't matter nearly as much as they once did. Mom and Dad (or Mom and Mommy, or Dad and Pop, or Ms. Dad, or single Mom) will be simply Mom and Dad. It won't be an issue for our kids any more than it is an issue for us as parents.

Since Charlie joined our family, we've given little thought to how he got here. Who has time? We are too busy parenting a 2-year-old boy—an activity that involves diapers (still), basketballs (forever), blowing belly bubbles, hugs and lots of giggles—to worry about what it means.

We are a chosen family, bound by our strong circle of love. I am an Eastern European Jew, with roots in Russia, Poland, Romania and other parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire. My wife carries Huguenot blood from Canada, mixed with Anglo and German lines. Charlie covers most of the Americas, his Puerto Rican, Mexican and Native American roots blending strikingly with his Italian and Jewish parts. We are America, and in my house, to quote Walt Whitman, I hear America singing. Not about our differences, but about our bonds.

Most of the time, it sounds like my wife's delicious lullabies.

Nelson Handel last wrote for the magazine about the excesses of aromatherapy.