



Children of Virtue and Vengeance

Teen Book Review

Transfiguring Adoption is a nonprofit organization seeking to nurture growth in foster and adoptive families by giving a HOOT about their families. Transfiguring Adoption does not intend for its reviews nor its reviews nor its this discussion packet to be professional, medical or legal advice. These reviews and discussion guides are intended to help parents to better be able to connect and understand their children who come from traumatic backgrounds.

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As far back as ancient Greece people were utilizing books as methods for working through various ailments. The term, bibliography, is what we pair with the phenomenon of using media, specifically books, to help people suffering from trauma or psychological issues. While the Transfiguring Adoption is NOT claiming to be professionals in the psychological or mental health arena, we do believe that families can glean from this concept in using movies, video games, and, naturally, books, to help foster or adoptive children process their story.

Section I

Why are we using books, movies, and video games to help children?

- **Partially disengage mind from fear/problems**
Immersing yourself in media helps you to escape from reality for a bit. This can give our minds a partial break from the worry and stress so that we have more energy to attach the issue when we come back to it.
- **Introduced to new solutions**
We might discover new solutions to problems as we experience a character in media conquer an issue.
- **Emotional vocabulary**
Discovering more ways to express how we feel and think can help us to communicate our own thoughts and feelings. Overall, more effective communication allows us to ask for better assistance with our feelings and issues.
- **Identify with characters/stories**
You have heard the saying, “no man is an island.” No person wants to feel like they are alone in their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. When we discover a character in media struggling with similar issues as our own, it helps to “normalize,” our life situations and feel comforted. This can also help us to discover our own identity as a character goes through a process in their life.

Section II

This Only Works TOGETHER - Parent & Child.

Here is why it is IMPERATIVE that a parent or trusted adult walk through these questions and media with a child:

- **Trauma Triggers**

An event or language in a piece of media might remind our children of past events in their lives which were traumatic. If we are to assume that they have not yet had enough life experience to successfully walk through these situations and make sense of them, then they will need a safe adult to be able to process feelings and emotions.

Some caregiver might be nervous or scared to discuss the details of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and so on. Our children are also scared but have no choice but to live through it. Our children need an adult who can help them process through issues by listening. They need an adult who knows when information needs to be given over to a trusted therapist and other professionals.

- **Reliving Trauma**

Some media might not simply suggest or bring up past trauma but could expose a child to a similar situation as what they have experienced. If a child is exposed to such media, it goes without saying that they will need a safe adult to help them process their thoughts and emotions. They will even need a safe adult who may not have the right answers but can get the child to a professional who can help.

- **Living in a Dream World**

As much as negatively living through trauma can have a devastating effect on our children, too much of a good thing can also have a poor effect when it is experienced on their own. Some children who have come from traumatic backgrounds may have trouble separating fantasy from reality. When given media where the main character is always rescued in the nick of time, the waif always marries royalty, or all problems are solved in a neat package, our children could be given over to considering this is how the world operates and that the solutions of the characters will produce similar fantastical results. It is important to have a trusted adult on duty who can applaud the fun of a tale but also bring everyone back down to reality.

- **Never Really Find Results**

Again it can be a pitfall for caregivers to be nervous about a topic and simply hope that children will learn by experiencing a book or movie on their own. The problem is that many of our children lack the life experience to be able to connect the dots to see how a character's struggles and life solutions could be compared to their own life.

A trusted adult can help a child to glean solutions and conversations from a piece of media to make real life change begin.

Section III

How To Use Our Discussion Packets:

1. **Exposure as a Family**

Watch, read, or play the respective media this packet discusses together before you begin the conversation. It is important that parent and child experience things together. Natural bonding and teachable moments come about when we experience things together.

2. **Wait for the Right Time**

As foster and adoptive parents, many of us want to help our children so badly that when we get a new resource we want to try it out faster than a child wants to open up presents on Christmas. However, it is important to judge when your child is ready to talk about issues brought up by media.

If your child is struggling with habitual lying and just reprimanded earlier in the day at school, there might be intense feelings of guilt and embarrassment. It may not be the correct time to point out that Pinocchio gets in trouble when he lies and try to begin a discussion about how lies can harm your life. Instead wait a day or two when everything is going right in your family's world, and then try to begin a conversation.

People who are hurt, angered, frustrated or depressed due to a topic are not going to be open to having a dialogue about the issues.

3. **Nudging Toward Identification**

If we look at this conversation as a swimming pool, "Nudging Toward Identification" is going to be the shallow end of the pool. The goal is to simply notice - just notice - similarities you might see in a character's life and your child's life. This step is helping our children to see that they might be able to relate with a character. The media is going from merely a source of entertainment to something we possibly - POSSIBLY - could connect with in some manner.

This might come in the form of phrases such as:

- "Hey, did you notice that in the book Sally had to figure out how to make friends at school too?"
- "Tom's brother in the movie was really good at soccer just like you, right?!"
- "Too bad you're not in the story with Samantha, because you like learning about science as much as she does, right?"

4. **Emotional Involvement**

In Step 3 we helped our child to consider that they might be able to connect with a character. During this step, if the atmosphere is still good for conversation, we are going to push the similarities with the media character a bit further. We are going to take a look at specific situations and emotions. We are going to take a look at issues that characters confronted and discuss solutions and emotional outcomes. Hopefully, through this step our children will be able to more deeply and emotionally be able to identify with a character.

We might ask questions such as:

- "Sally made up stories to try and make new friends. Do you think this was the right way to make friends? Why? What should she have done differently?"

- “How do you think Tom felt when he missed the goal and lost the soccer game for his team? What would you tell him? Do you ever feel like Tom?”
- “Which do you think made Samantha feel better, winning the science fair or making new friends at school? Do you ever feel like that? Why?”

5. **Continued Conversations**

Always remember that helping children walk through trauma is not a sprint but a marathon. Do not get discouraged if the right time to talk about themes in a piece of media don't turn up right away. Do not get discouraged if your child doesn't want to talk about anything “deep” or life changing.

Some people have reported that their children might watch a movie, lightly discuss it, and then a month later begin asking deeper questions about a theme or topic in the media.

As parents our job is to create an atmosphere where learning and growth can happen AND CAN CONTINUE HAPPENING. We need to equip ourselves with the tools to be ready for those small windows of time that our children are ready to discuss and learn from us.

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Comprehensive Review

Transfiguring Adoption's Overview:

The target audience for this book appears to be children that are 12-18 years old or Young Adult. My personal opinion is that this is a very mature and triggering story and would be best for teens 16+. This book would be best for foster and adoptive families, as well as families with cross-racial/international adoption. It has a setting and multiple plots based in a culture different from our own. As the book progresses, the heroine adopts her own family among the friends and other maji she meets.

Children of Virtue and Vengeance, the second book in the Legacy of Orisha was released in December 2019, two years after the first book (*Children of Blood and Bone*) first appeared on shelves. Although highly anticipated by the vast fandom of *CBB*, I feel this second book fell flat in a number of ways. To begin, the author dumps you far from the end of the first book. This leaves you to muddle through her vague references and piece together the storyline on your own. Secondly, and perhaps more relevant to the matter at hand, the story, which should be lifting up and shining light on a marginalized character, does little to talk about her strengths and accomplishments and instead decides to focus on her failings and isolation in the world. I gave this book two hoots because although it deals with foster care, orphanages, and adoptive families, it does so in a harmful and triggering way. If anything can be gained from reading this book it is the exposure to a culture (even a fantastical one) different from our own. Foster parents of children of a different ethnicity may find this especially useful.

**** Spoilers Could Be Ahead ****

How Is This Relevant To Adoption & Foster Care?

Zelie is an orphaned girl searching for a way to restore order to her war-torn lands. In the progress of the story she both gains and loses friends and family who are dear to her. Displaced from her home, she bounces from place to place, much like a child in the foster system. Throughout the book she must make incredibly hard choices regarding the people she holds most dear. Further in the book she is confronted with the death of not one, but two people she loves, one by her own hand. At the end of the book, she finally comes face to face with the boy who broke her heart and killed her father. She has a chance to kill him and attempts to do so, but is stopped by an unseen enemy. These themes mirror themes in adoption/foster care. Abandonment, displacement, death, and desire for revenge/retribution are all triggers

foster/adoptive parents should be aware of and open to discussing with their child, especially once they reach their teen years.

This book, although triggering, is extremely important. It discusses, in a safe and fictional way, some of the hardest feelings your adoptive/foster child may endure. You should pay special attention to the ways Zelig deals with the continuous letdowns from the people she cares about. This is an excellent portrayal of how your teen may react to disappointment in their own life. On the other hand, I would tread cautiously with the themes of hatred and revenge exhibited by many of the characters. Read this book together, chapter by chapter, and discuss why the characters may have acted the way they did, and what other ways there are to resolve problems in life.

Discussion Points:

- **Cultural Diversity**

Zelig lives in a world very different from our own yet many of her struggles are the same. She spends much of the story railing against a system that would see her put down for her differences. What are some similarities between Zelig's plight for freedom and the events that are taking place in our world? I understand this is an uncomfortable topic for some. Try discussing it within the boundaries of the book. Use examples in the story to talk about real-world issues in a safe environment.

- **Breaking Generational Bonds**

It is discovered early in the story that Inan and Amari's mother is not dead like originally thought. She is alive and well...and leading an army against the maji. Upon realizing her daughter is not going to be swayed to her side, the queen defames Amari, and attempts to kill her and her companions. This is a valuable lesson. Prejudice is not inherent, it is learned. Talk to your teens about what acceptance looks like. You could pose questions about your own personal views to lead in. Where do you and your teen agree, where do you disagree? Where is there room for growth (on either side)? Why do you think Amari stood her ground in front of her mother? Do you feel like it was the right thing to do?

- **When “Doing the Right Thing” goes too far.**

Let's jump to the other end of the spectrum. Amari does something unthinkable in the name of "The Greater Good." She is willing to wipe out an entire village, just to win a war. Talking to teens about when enough is enough is important too. Sometimes it feels like the only way to win is to Fight Fire with Fire. But then, the whole city burns. Ask your teen what they would do in Amari's shoes, and share honestly about what you would do. Then come up with a new scenario together to thwart the evil queen, maybe without raining destruction on a village.

- **Forgiveness**

How do you forgive someone who never says "I'm Sorry"? How does it feel to let go of anger/sadness towards a person or situation, even when the other person may not have done so? At the end of the book, Zelig comes face to face with Inan. She is determined to end him but feels guilt when he puts up no resistance. Amari has crossed the point of no return with Tzain after what she pulled in the village and he refuses to even acknowledge her. How do we move forward when the closure we crave so deeply never comes? A person can only ever control their own actions. This would be a good opening to talk to your teen about forgiveness, especially forgiveness that may never be reciprocated.

Cautionary Points:

Note: This is a heavily triggering book in general. Almost all triggers are employed in the writing of it. Please read this alongside your teen. I recommend this for 16+ only.

- **Death of a Mentor/Friend/Family Member**

There are many deaths in this book, some are very graphic. Children are tortured and die, people sacrifice themselves for their cause, and in the end, family members turn against each other.

- **Drug-Related Death**

Inan poisons his mother at the end of the book. There is mention of other drug use/overdose.

- **Heavy Violence/Betrayal**

This is a book set during a war and there are constant scenes of violence and guerrilla warfare. Family members frequently betray/harm each other. The fight scenes are graphic.

- **Brief Sexual Content (Consensual)**

Both Amari&Tzain and Zelig&Roen share intimate scenes during the book. (Heavy petting and implied sexual intercourse).

- **Rejection**

Amari's mother rejects her outright in the beginning of the book. The other maji reject Amari out of hatred at the rebel camps. Inan betrays his sister/mother/friend at various parts in the story. Roen and Zelig have a tense scene near the end of the book where Roen storms out. (lover's quarrel)

Discussion Questions

This book has exceptionally short chapters. To make it easier to discuss, I have included a question/activity every ten chapters, plus a question at the end to encompass the book as a whole. I hope you find this discussion guide useful in talking to your teen about the world and the challenges they may encounter.

Chapters 1-10

1. Have you ever had to deal with something you didn't expect to happen when making a big life choice?

Caregiver Note: In the beginning of the book, Zelig has to face the unexpected consequences of bringing magic back to Lagos... Talking about unexpected outcomes/repercussions from making big choices in life (even the right choices) helps teens understand that the world isn't painted in black and white. And, sometimes, even if they do the "right thing", things don't go the way they want. (Queue music to "The Next Right Thing" from Frozen 2)

Chapters 11-20

2. What are the kids' expectations about meeting birth parents/siblings/family members? How could they approach this reunion with an open mind?

Caregiver Note: At the beginning of Chapter 11 Amari is dealing with the blow back from her reunion with her mother. Which, suffice to say, does not go as she envisioned. Aside from discovering that her mother is not actually dead, Amari finds out her mother has Titan abilities of her own. And, is more powerful than any Titan or maji they have encountered thus far. If that wasn't enough, apparently the queen really hates maji. The kind, motherly woman of Amari's dreams simply does not exist and the queen attempts to kill her, and her friends, on the spot. What will they/you do if a family member is less than receptive to the reunion. You cannot control how other people are going to react, it is important to make sure they understand they are supported and do not need to reach out until they feel emotionally ready to do so.

Chapters 21-30

3. How do you reconcile when someone you care about truly believes they are doing the right thing when they hurt you, even indirectly?

Caregiver Notes: Inan and Amari may be on opposite sides of the war, but they are still siblings. Each one is doing what he/she feels is best for their people. Talking to your teen about differences of opinion and different sides of the same story can help prepare them for life. Not everyone will see the world the way they do, and not everyone will be mindful of their situation when speaking or interacting with them. Giving them the tools to navigate disagreements with others is a valuable skill in life.

Chapters 31-40

4. It can be frustrating to feel like you're not being heard. Talk to your teen about ways to express themselves when they are feeling like an outsider because of their background.

Caregiver Notes: Amari has just won the battle for elder of the connector clan, but at what cost? She believes she can gain respect if she forces the other maji to acknowledge her power as a Titan as being valid. But, in the process, she alienates herself further. Start by opening a dialogue about any situation in their life (at school, work, even home) they feel strongly about because of their past. (ex. Being the teen with non-biological parents, being the teen who reacts differently to outside stimuli, having a family that looks "different" from other families.) Discuss positive ways to work through and embrace these differences.

Chapters 41-50

5. How Does This Book Make You Feel? What are some other feelings that arise towards people in your life?

Caregiver Notes: Zelig is finally confronted with her feelings for Inan again. Does she hate him? Love him? Feelings are hard, especially for teens going through intense hormonal changes. Talk to your teen about feelings that may arise towards others in their life. Let them know that all feelings are valid, then help them work through tough feelings by supporting them verbally with affirmation and empathy. Show them they have options. It is okay to leave a situation that makes you angry. Feeling frustration when you don't understand a situation is a valid response. Crying when you are sad does not make you weak. Help them navigate their emotions in a positive and fulfilling way, and when they are faced with traumatic or triggering situations they will have coping skills to pull from.

Chapters 51-60

6. What are some boundaries set in the story? What are some boundaries you can set in your own life to protect your well-being?

Caregiver Notes: After every chance Amari and Zelig have given him, Inan has betrayed them again. (or so it seems.) This would be a good starting point to talk to your teen about boundaries and when to draw the line when dealing with the behavior of others. Many teens are looking to fit in at school/work/home, peer pressure is at an all time high during these years. They may offer people chances far beyond what is deserved just to feel like they belong. Talk to them about the importance of listening to their gut instincts and not allowing others to take advantage of their kindness. Talk to them about the power of walking away and not engaging in co-dependent or destructive behavior with others

Chapters 61-70

7. Have you ever felt so defeated by something that you wanted to run away?

Caregiver Notes: At the start of chapter 60, Zelig realizes there is an opportunity to leave Lagos with the maji and flee to safety instead of finishing the war. This is a good discussion to have

with your teen, who is likely dealing with multiple stressors in their life. What is one way you could support your teen in an area they are struggling with? Ask them. Sometimes knowing someone has their back is enough for them to stay the course. Or, back out gracefully if that's what they need to do.

8. What do you do when the actions of an individual are so maligned there is no way to rectify the situation?

Caregiver Notes: In chapter 64 Inan learns the real reason the war between monarchs and maji started, and who was behind it. The pain and suffering the Queen caused with her actions is unjustifiable. In chapter 68 Inan realizes his best friend, who lost both parents in the rebel attack caused by his mother, overheard his mother's admonition of guilt. Talking to children and teens about past traumas can be daunting. Seeking the help of a licensed professional to help guide and mediate the discussion can be incredibly helpful. Creating a safe space to talk, and open dialogue, when your teen is ready, is also something you as foster/adoptive parents should facilitate.

Chapters 71-80

9. How far would you go for something you believe in? How far is too far?

Caregiver Notes: Amari is willing to sacrifice an entire village for the chance to finally win the war against her mother and brother. This question is something we can all relate to. Discuss with your teen the need for balance, when is the cost of winning too high? Many adoptive children feel the need to "prove themselves" in their lives. Talk to your teen about what makes them special. Discuss your own strengths and weaknesses. Talk about morals and what that means to them.

Chapters 81-90

10. Sacrifice and letting go of what no longer serves you. How is Mama Agba's self-sacrifice different from Amari Sacrificing the villagers?

Caregiver Notes: In order to achieve the strength needed to end the war, Zelig has to sacrifice someone she loves, Mama Agba. In what way is this different than Amari sacrificing the villagers?

Mama Agba is willing to sacrifice herself for the safety of everyone else. Does that make the sacrifice okay? Instead of focusing on physical death, talk to your teen about metaphorical death. The death of the past self to make way for the birth of the future self. How can letting go of old ways help you to adjust to changes in your life. What thoughts/beliefs no longer serve you? Teens are going through many changes. Talking with your teen about changing feelings, bodies, and emotions can help them grow into the person they are meant to be.

11. Family Activity: Personal Viewpoint vs. The Whole Picture

Caregiver Notes: Throughout the book, the story is told by three major viewpoints. Zelig, Amari, and Inan. All three characters have vastly different experiences and motives throughout the book that weave together the tale as a whole. Go back and read only Zelig's point of view, then Amari's, then Inan's. See how the narrative changes with only one piece of the story. Talk about different points of view in the world and why it's important to understand other people's viewpoints, even if you don't agree with them. Ask them their viewpoint on an issue, then share yours. Talk about similarities and differences.

About the Reviewer

Robyn

Robyn resides in Charlotte, NC where she divides her time working as a newborn care specialist, writing, and speaking at literature conventions around the Southeast. She pursued a double major in Sociology/Psychology at university, concentrating in child psychology. She rose to become president of the Sociology/Psychology Association chapter on campus. She was adopted as an infant and uses her experience as an adoptee in a cross-racial family to write and speak about challenges that may arise for both children and caretakers. When not writing, speaking, or holding babies, you can find Robyn in Asheville, NC hiking with her dog.