

Book Review:

The Kid: What Happened After My Boyfriend and I Decided to Get Pregnant - An Adoption Story,

by Dan Savage
(Plume, 1999, New York)

Reviewed By:
James E. Phelan, LCSW

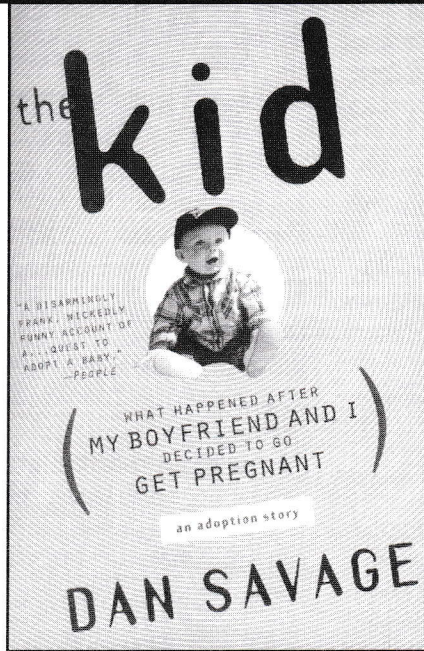
Considering the current legal controversy surrounding the issue of gay parenting, one would expect that the first autobiographical book about two gay men adopting a baby would be written from a perspective that would reflect well on this issue—which is, after all, a very sensitive one for the gay community.

Can two gay men be both mother and father to an infant? This heartbreaking account certainly does nothing to promote the cause of gay adoption.

The American Psychological Association has stated, "Not a single study has found children of gay and lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents." The author of this book, Dan Savage, will certainly not be able to buttress that A.P.A. statement with any supporting evidence from his own experience.

Savage made the news during the last presidential campaign by volunteering to work on conservative Gary Bauer's staff by making calls to supporters. On the last evening, Savage admits, he had the flu and so he deliberately coughed on phones and licked doorknobs in an attempt to spread his infection, making a point to hand Bauer a pen he had just put in his own mouth in the hope this would make the presidential candidate sick and unable to continue campaigning.

Savage talks about how he and his boyfriend Terry have adopted a boy whom they call "D.J." Savage is a freelance writer and the author of "Savage Love," a syndicated sex-advice column. His advice is often graphic but cleverly written, and is blended with self-deprecating wit and dry humor. For example, he describes how he, his boyfriend and a homeless expectant mother waited for their interview at the adoption agency: "...the three of us—two fags and a gutter punk—sat reading *Parenting* magazine while we waited..."



Dan Savage is not shy about explaining how he and his boyfriend found each other. Like many gay men, they met at a bar and had their first intimate encounter in the bar's bathroom stall. Dan summed up the pairing process: "...slowly, gradually, over two days I fell in love."

Raising Children as a "Hobby"

Throughout the book, Dan is often sexually graphic. His writing style is such that is hard to discern when he is joking and when he is not. For example, you would *hope* he'd be joking when he gives the following reason for wanting to adopt: "Having children is no longer about propagating the species...[it is] something for grownups to do, a pasttime, a hobby. So why not kids? Gay men need hobbies, too."

So what exactly prompted the pair to adopt? They had considered the possibility but when the book deal was offered, so they decided to get serious and go ahead and do it. "One day I was minding my own business, writing my column," Savage explains, "when along came an agent, an editor, and a book publisher. They offered me a book deal and I accepted. I signed a contract, and then I cashed an advance check with a lot of zeros before the decimal point." This book, Savage said, would be landmark because no other gay men had actually adopted a child and then written about it.

Oregon Okays Gay Adoption

The couple had first contemplated impregnating a lesbian or the straight women who lived next door, but finally settled on an open adoption. In open adoption, the birth mother gets to pick from a pool of potential parents whom she wishes to raise her child. The agency that Dan and Terry used to help them throughout the adoption process is located in Oregon, where the rules do not restrict adoption based on the sexual orientation of the adopting parents. In an open adoption, the birth mother is encouraged to maintain ongoing contact with the child throughout his life.

Dan and Terry were not in the adoptive-parent pool very long before they were chosen by a pregnant girl named Melissa, who was homeless. Melissa was a "spare-changing gutter punk" with a nose ring—that is, a street girl who lived in urban areas asking passerbys for money. Melissa was young and felt it would be "cool" for her child to be adopted by gay men who she identified with, as they too were "outsiders."

Dan admitted that he and Terry had fears about adopting Melissa's child because she had admitted to using drugs and alcohol during the pregnancy. Melissa had twice been rejected by potential adoptive parents because of this

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lifestyle, so Dan figured that she wasn't compatible with "suburban Christian couples, so why not two fags?"

Overcoming their fears that the child could be at risk for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, they stuck with Melissa, even paying her rent and other expenses until the baby was born. Although it became a struggle in the end, Melissa handed the boy over to the gay pair and signed away her parental rights.

Dan talked about giving up some of their uninhibited lifestyle when they became parents. Having "a kid meant no more Amsterdam," at least "not for a while," he said (referring to a one-night stand he had had in Amsterdam while on business.) "Terry and I had talked about having a three-way sometime...but once we had a kid in the house, it was unlikely we ever would....[p]robably, neither of us would ever have a good ol'-fashioned big-gay-slut phase again. I got sad when I thought about that, because I'd enjoyed my last couple of slutty phases quite a lot."

As a clinical social worker, and knowing human behavior, I have seen many couples who thought that having a child would erase previous habits or impulses, but I have found that this is not solid insurance. In fact, the stress and pressure of raising a child (especially a non-biological child) adds strain to a relationship and can actually worsen a preexisting problem.

Savage admitted that he frequented the PDX Eagle, a "leather" bar in Seattle. He also admitted to surfing gay porn sites on the Internet, particularly when he is under pressure, such as during the time when he had to write his biography as part of the adoption process.

Dan admitted he did not feel affection for the baby when the adoption first went through. On Melissa's delivery day he held the baby and felt "nothing": "I was not the baby's biological father. This was not my baby. This was not flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood. This was flesh of my paperwork, blood of my checkbook."

Dealing With the Stress of Parenting

After he found out that the baby had a small heart murmur, Savage relieved the stress by going to a gay bar and watching a porno movie. Not only did he have difficulty bonding with the child, but when under pressure, Savage diverted his stress into sexual acting-out, which leads the reader to ask, what type of role model could he be?

Two weeks before the birth of their adoptive son, Savage said, "We had more bondage stuff in the house than baby stuff." Savage figured he would admit to the book's readers that he "dug" bondage so that, if found out by the "religious right," he wouldn't be caught in a lie. Anyway, S&M is not really "depraved," he said, but rather it is just "cops-and-robbers for grownups."

A Priest Praises the Adoption

There was no problem about the adoption from their families, nor from the Catholic Church in Chicago—where a priest baptized the baby and at the same time commended the two men for adopting him. But there was some backlash from other gay men. One gay man accused the couple of acting "hetero-normative," and "selling out" gay culture by becoming domesticated. Another gay man said (wisely, indeed) that it was inappropriate for those living in the "urban gay lifestyle" to adopt a child, and he pointed out that Dan and Terry had not been together long enough to be in a stable relationship.

Melissa told Dan that her mother had "messed [her] up" and said that if her mother cared about her that she would have come and looked for her after she ran away. She only saw her biological father once a year. Therefore her homeless friends and other "punks" were her only family. Since Melissa clearly despised her mother, Dan concluded that she must have picked two gay men to adopt her baby because that way, the baby would never have to deal with a mother.

Dan and Melissa also felt a mutual connection because both were rebels; she had run away from home and been arrested several times, and he had been arrested for disorderly conduct during ACT-UP demonstrations.

Savage admitted to having an over-enmeshed and over-protective mother. He so highly identified with her that he joked, "one day, I will *be* my mother." His parents divorced during Dan's late adolescence but they had always had a rocky relationship. His father, a Chicago homicide detective, had little interaction with Dan when he was younger and was aloof, not only geographically, but emotionally as well. (In psychoanalytical terms, these characteristics are hallmarks of male homosexuality.)

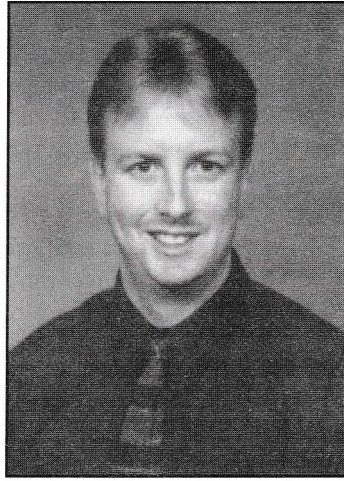
Dan recalled harsh words spoken by his father of gays. One remark in particular was Dan's father telling his mother that, "gays should be tolerated, but they couldn't be trusted with kids." After learning this and the other dynamics, the reader is left to wonder if perhaps somehow Dan sought to adopt in order to prove something to his father.

Dan and Terry's relationship appeared to be a strange and uneven match. There was a considerable age difference and a huge part of Terry's life revolved around dance music, all of which Dan literally despised. This caused much dismay and frustration on Dan's part and was the issue of many arguments. Terry was the more passive partner, allowing Dan to make most of the decisions regarding the adoption. Dan even wrote up Terry's biography for the adoption process. Not surprisingly, the domestic arrangement was for Terry, the more passive partner, to stay at home and be the primary caregiver

while Dan remained the primary breadwinner.

Dan said the reason he wanted to be a dad, besides the desire to show the straight world that two gay men could parent, was so he "could take the kid to ball games and McDonald's and on camping trips" (p. 183); in other words, do the things he didn't get to do with his dad. One can empathize with Dan on this, but to fill an emotional void by using a motherless child is not the way to go about it. Furthermore, to join with a secondary parent of the same gender does not fulfill a child's normal need for genuine mothering.

There are many sacreligious comments throughout the book and Dan makes it clear that first, he is an atheist and does not want any part of religion; second, he does not have anything good to say about the so-called "religious right"; and lastly, he does not want "the kid" to have a religious faith. "We worry about DJ falling in with the wrong crowd and becoming a fundamentalist Christian," he notes ironically.



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Still, Dan did have his adopted son baptized, saying this was done under pressure from family members.

"What the religious right fears most about adoption is not that we'll be bad parents, or that we'll have sex with our kids, or that we'll try to make them gay," he says. "What they fear is that we'll be pretty good parents. I've done drag. I did Barbie drag, dominatrix drag, nun drag, and glamour drag. Now I'm going to do dad drag."

Dan says that "few gays and lesbians will subject themselves to 'reparative therapy' quacks, and the vast majority of us have no interest in becoming 'ex-gay.'" "Homosexual behavior cannot be eliminated," he says, "without eliminating homosexual people."

"Quack therapists who claim they can 'repair' gay men believe poor relationships between father and son are the root cause of homosexuality. If only I'd bonded properly with my father in childhood, they argue, I wouldn't spend so much time fantasizing about bondage with Matt Damon today...These quacks fail to take the obvious into consideration: gay boys sometimes have strained relationships with their fathers *because* they're gay. My homosexuality damaged my relationship with my father; my damaged relationship with my father did not create my homosexuality." (He is referring to the theory, popularized by psychiatrist Richard Isay, that certain males are born gay; as they grow up, their fathers "sense" the son's inborn gayness and reject them due to their own dislike and fear of homosexuality; this is said to explain the poor father-son relationship.)

When doing a research project at Marywood University I looked at two groups—one of gay men and the other, straight men—and compared their recollections of their fathers. In line with the previous research done on this matter, the gay men had poorer recollections of their fathers compared to the heterosexual men. My study's findings supported decades of psychoanalytical evidence which has found the same family dynamics. But to suppose the poor father-son relationship is due to the father's rejection of the son because of his perceived feminine qualities and "inborn homosexuality" is an unlikely explanation because it relies on the discredited "born that way" theory.

Adoptive Dads "Feel No Joy" When Reality First Hits Them

After the baby was finally and officially "handed off" to the guys, Dan writes, there was a time of very ambivalent feelings. Guilt about taking Melissa's child away and panic about their responsibility as fathers had evidently overwhelmed them:

"As soon as the door was shut, Terry and I locked eyes for an instant then looked away...we were alone. We looked at each other again for a split second. "That was so hard—" I said. "Shut up don't say anything," Terry said.

"...Terry opened the van; we locked the car seat in place, shut the door, and climbed into our seats. Then we folded up, sobbing, hands on heads... finally a family, we felt no joy at having become fathers."

Now, one year after adopting the infant, Dan and Terry say they've spent lots of time "laughing and laughing and laughing," but after reading *The Kid*, I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or cry. How funny can it be that two gay men adopt a baby? The reader cannot help but feel deep concern for the child's future, as well as anger that an adoption agency would approve this couple as parents.

Will they "live happy ever after? Dan sums it up this way: "My Irish Catholic God...is a murderous and psychotic God, the O.J. Simpson of Higher Powers. I don't want to tempt Him by predicting that any of us....is going to live happily ever after." ■