

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mixed Race Children, The Girl Who Fell From the Sky

Marcia Alesan Dawkins · Thursday, June 23rd, 2011



Professors Ravinder Barn and Vicki Harman from the Centre for Criminology and Sociology at Royal Holloway, University of London are carrying out a [groundbreaking research project](#) about white mothers and mixed race children. Theirs is part of a wider study of mixed race children, youth and families that has spanned over twenty years. According to Dr. Harman, “white mothers of mixed-parentage children can find themselves dealing with racism directed at their children as well as facing social disapproval themselves.” Such is the case with Nella, the white mother of mixed race protagonist Rachel, in [Heidi W. Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*](#) (Algonquin Books).

When we meet them, preteen Rachel and her mother Nella have been victims of an improbable family tragedy. Rachel’s mother, brother and sister all died after jumping off the roof of a Chicago apartment building. Much like the events that inspired Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the amazing event in Durrow’s award-winning novel is based on a true story.

In a recent [interview with NPR’s Michele Norris](#), Durrow said that, “it was a real newspaper story... a jaw-dropping turn of events that was actually based on a real story... A mother went to the top of the building and the only survivor of this fall was this girl. I remember reading that and just being haunted by, not the questions that the other people were asking about why this happened, and how could we live in a world where it would happen, but I wondered what would her survival look like.”

At first glance this book seems like an updated take on the same old “tragic mulatto” story—complete with pressure to choose a race or a culture, pressure to choose a romantic partner, and a family full of characters who either aren’t there or don’t care. But a deeper look reveals something more. Durrow’s Rachel is a young mixed race woman who is anything but tragic. Despite her complex journey through alienation and despair she emerges as a woman with her own voice, open to a world of possibilities.

An excerpt from the novel makes Rachel’s possibilities clear: “‘Look,’ I say. The swan takes one step. Three steps, four. It dips its head and then its wings catch the wind. It’s hard to tell: is it still running or is it flying now? It’s on top of the water and in the air—like it’s in two worlds at once. The swan flaps its wings again and again, three times, four, and then it’s aloft. We watch it fly. Away.”

Rise above. Take flight. Move on. This is the message delivered so elegantly to the reader. That's why this reader's recommendation is to [pick it up](#). Check it out. And, most importantly, think and talk it through. Extending Durrow's frank communication into our own lives will help us understand more clearly what it means to be mixed, and to be mixed and happy.

Image: Heidi W. Durrow, photo by Timothy Jane Graham.

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