FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Autobiography & Memoir

On the Outskirts of Normal: Forging a Family Against the Grain
Debra Monroe
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It used to be that families who didn't fit the usual format—working husband, stay-at-home wife, children who all looked alike—were considered to be a kind of accident that didn't quite reach accepted standards. Times change, luckily; attitudes toward families that look different from a 1950s television show are much improved. In many large cities today, no one looks twice at a single white mother with a black baby girl in her arms.

But Debra Monroe adopted her baby, who happened to be black, when she was living in a small Texas town where everyone knew each other's name and business. A white mother with a black baby was big news, and most people—friends, neighbors, strangers, even Monroe's mother—had something to say. She shares some of these often rude comments in her memoir, *On the Outskirts of Normal*, and writes, "But people who stopped to say something bungling…could never be flabbergasted into changing long-entrenched perceptions of what belongs with what." Parenting is hard work, and Monroe had no time to dwell for long on the ignorance of other people. She never asked to be an ambassador of race. She just wanted a baby and didn't care what color it was. Ultimately her memoir is simply about the struggle to mother well, no matter what skin colors are represented in a family.

In addition to dealing with other people's race issues, Monroe has to cope with single parenthood, losing her mother, loneliness, quirky friends, and illness, both hers and her child's. She tells her story thematically instead of following a linear pattern—characters we already know are dead are reintroduced, men Monroe already divorced come back with problems still intact. This is a structure that accurately reflects the mess of real life. Life is hard, but Monroe faces it with wit, compassion, an ability to ask for help, an abundance of love, and steady persistence.

Monroe asks a lot of her readers—attention, intelligence, openness—and in return she delivers compassion, keen wit, and acute honesty. She never lets us blink; we stare while she

figures out how to handle her daughter's hair; while she suffers at the hands of a doctor; and while her neighbor makes a bad judgment call, leaving her yard and house exposed to passing cars and random predators. She shares her fear with us, and, in doing so, reveals her own bravery.

Andi Diehn