

You'll Forget This Ever Happened: Secrets, Shame, and Adoption in the 1960s

Laura L. Engel

She Writes Press (May 10, 2022)

Softcover \$16.95 (344pp)

978-1-64742-349-0

You'll Forget This Ever Happened is a wrenching memoir that testifies to the unbreakable bond between a mother and their child.

In her poignant memoir *You'll Forget This Ever Happened*, Laura L. Engel divulges a long-held secret and covers years of longing and searching for her child.

Engel became pregnant at the age of sixteen, and she put off telling her parents for as long as she could. After all, “nice girls” didn’t have sex outside of marriage in 1967 in Mississippi, and they certainly don’t have babies out of wedlock.

After Engel’s boyfriend disengaged from her and joined the army, proving emphatic in his refusal to marry her and even threatening legal actions against her, Engel’s parents shipped her off to a home for unwed mothers in New Orleans. Though Engel took responsibility for her actions, she still hoped to keep her baby, fantasizing about being a mother and reuniting with her boyfriend. While she awaited the baby’s birth, she met and befriended other young women, including an old school friend who had moved away; listened to music; enjoyed her work in the home’s nursery; and took up smoking. At the end of this period, however, she was still forced to sign over custody of her son, a decision that led to her endless feelings of regret.

The story of Engel’s pregnancy, birth, and its aftermath is enlivened by recalled conversations and sensory details, as of the lemon scent of a bar of soap and the rustling of eucalyptus leaves. Its scenes are immersive. In the first half of the book, easy references to popular songs, transistor radios, and beehive and bouffant hairstyles are used to establish the era, which also proves to be marked by less savory medical practices, such as the “twilight sleep,” in which women were drugged to such a degree that they did not even remember giving birth.

But the book’s later sections jump from decade to decade, covering significant life events (including Engel’s marriages, motherhood, family deaths, and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina) with considerable speed. They are more steady and constant in expressing Engel’s concerns about the son whom she was forced to relinquish. The interjection of modern technology results in some late hope of a reunion with Engel’s son, and the book is tense with the possibility of missing him forever until that time.

You'll Forget This Ever Happened is a wrenching memoir that testifies to the unbreakable bond between a mother and their child; it contains an indictment of past practices regarding adoption.

SUZANNE KAMATA (April 6, 2022)

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