

Chosen by Chandra Hoffman
(HarperCollins, August 24, 2010)

Debut author Chandra Hoffman hooks her readers with a contemporary topic many people are passionate about: adoption. In *Chosen*, she offers the reader an interesting insight into what goes on during the painful and often melancholy process involving a couple's search for a child.

Hoffman knows the subject well, having been entrenched in the adoption culture after serving as an aid worker in Romania at the infamous Orphanage Number One. Recall that after western news cameras first captured images of hundreds of abandoned children huddled together in decrepit buildings and stark conditions in Romania, orphans everywhere became the news du jour. Returning to the United States, Hoffman worked in a domestic adoption program in Portland, Oregon, where she served as the director. Her work there served as the venue and story line for *Chosen*.

Chloe Pinter, the protagonist of this tale, is an interesting, compelling character. She works as the director of The Chosen Child's domestic adoption program. Her personal life sometimes mirrors her professional one in that both seem this close to going over the edge. She shares an apartment with her boyfriend, her unofficial fiancé, since her engagement ring is merely cubic zirconium, and perhaps a foreshadowing of a faux wedding as well. The couple's future is just as uncertain as some of Chloe's clients' chances are for adopting a baby. Her position forces her to maintain a hectic pace. Phone calls and visits with both adoptive couples and birth mothers frazzle her to the point of exhaustion and frustration. It doesn't help that her supervisor takes every opportunity to remind her that the agency's future is contingent upon new clients, happy parents, and compliant birth mothers.

The book presents the reader with some of the gritty, human drama that is at the forefront of the adoption process. Chloe's laborious involvement with paperwork, ensuring its timeliness and completeness, both frustrates and impedes her abilities

with each case. The tightrope a caseworker must walk keeping both the adoptive couple and birth mother happy, is an enormous challenge that at times proves to be an impossible task. The author has insightfully included adoption chat room dialogue, which proves to be a unique way for the reader to get inside the characters' heads.

However, through it all Chloe maintains her enthusiasm and altruistic outlook on her work. That is, until fate draws her into a professional relationship with a trio of couples whom she soon discovers will alter her own future. Penny and Jason, while firmly ensconced on the lowest rung of the social ladder, nevertheless have something that makes them very attractive to Chloe's well-to-do clients—a baby. Jason, an ex-con and the birth father, knows how to play the system and twists Chloe in knots with his constant demands for money and just about every social service government has to offer. This back and forth between Chloe and Jason makes for an interesting dynamic throughout the story.

The reader is also introduced to Paul and Eva Nova, a happily married couple, who like others, has had fertility problems, but finally finds themselves pregnant. They are former clients of The Chosen Child, and are friends with another couple, the McAdoos, who live in the same community. Although occupying different social strata, the two couples bond together via the adoption culture.

Chosen offers a perspective on several themes: motherhood, infertility, and adoption. The book illustrates to what lengths people will go to achieve what they believe to be the one thing that will make them happy and whole.

It's a good read; this reviewer particularly enjoyed the short chapters. Hoffman experiments by using alternating points of view, a technique that piqued this reviewer's interest. Her writing is concise and forceful, without superfluous verbiage to confuse readers and distract them from the drama—she gets right to the point.

Chosen is a suspenseful tale, told in part with plenty of authentic street lingo, and bureaucratic messes that will have readers wondering if there can possibly be a happy conclusion, particularly when a child turns up missing. I find her writing to be fresh and emotional, demonstrating perfectly what Ernest Hemingway exclaimed, "In order to write about life, first you must live it." Chandra Hoffman has lived it.

Reviewer John M. Wills is the author of Grippped by Fear (TotalRecall Publications), the second novel in the Chicago Warriors Thriller Series; he is also a former Chicago Police Officer and retired FBI Agent.