

The Personal & Public Faces of Foster Care & Adoption in Appalachia

BETHANY MANNON

Under Consideration

Fall or Fly: The Strangely Hopeful Story of Foster Care and Adoption in Appalachia

By Wendy Welch (Ohio University Press, 2018) \$22.95, paper. ISBN 9780821423028, 198 pp.

Counting Down: A Memoir of Foster Parenting and Beyond

By Deborah Gold (Ohio University Press, 2018) \$22.95, paper. ISBN 9780821422977, 256 pp.

When Wendy Welch and Deborah Gold spoke about their books on a panel at the 2018 Appalachian Studies Conference, Welch opened the session by asking, “How do you tell a story that no one wants to hear?” I thought back to that question as I read Welch’s *Fall or Fly* and Gold’s *Counting Down*, accounts of foster care and adoption in Southern Appalachia from the past decade. Welch is right that readers might not initially be drawn to stories of children bouncing between homes, biological families (or “bio parents”) unable to care for children they love, and foster parents and social workers who navigate tangled laws and policies. But both books are absorbing accounts of foster parents and children who find—or create—new lives and joys in the process.

Fall or Fly

Fall or Fly collects stories from social workers, parents, and older children and adults who were fostered or adopted in the region of central Appalachia Welch refers to as “Coalton.” Welch names her approach “storytelling journalism”: all stories are true and quotations are the interviewees’ nearly exact words, but she removed distinguishing speech characteristics, obscured place names, and “rearranged where they happened, to whom, and when so as to render the main characters invisible where they live” (11). Reading *Fall or Fly* convinced me of the value

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of this method, which shows both love and respect to the storytellers in an engaging, multi-voiced account. Providing multiple perspectives alongside one another preserves tensions and contradictions that are necessary for her thorough exploration of foster care and adoption.

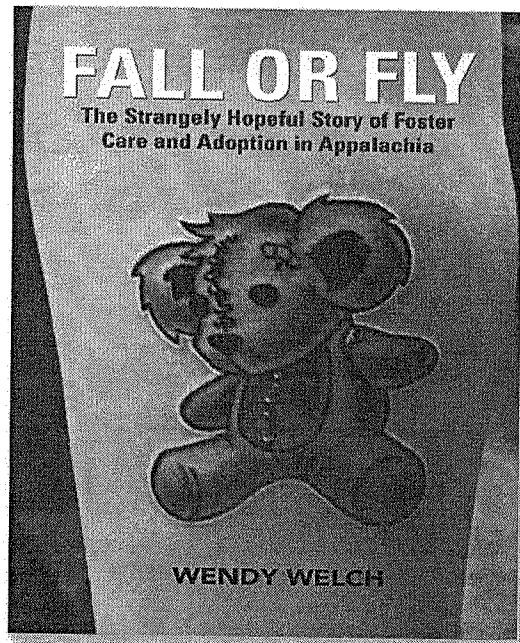
The majority of stories come from DSS staff, and they are especially informative. Welch provides an opportunity for social workers and supervisors to explain the difficulties built into the system. There are too many children seeking placements, largely due to the opioid crisis, and too few available homes. One particularly vivid example, a foster home with eight teenagers called “the Cattle Farm,” shows why DSS relies on mediocre homes. Teenagers at the Cattle Farm were forced to clean, cook, can vegetables, and hold jobs to pay rent, but they had solid shoes, regular meals, and their own beds. DSS supervisor Cody reflects on that home:

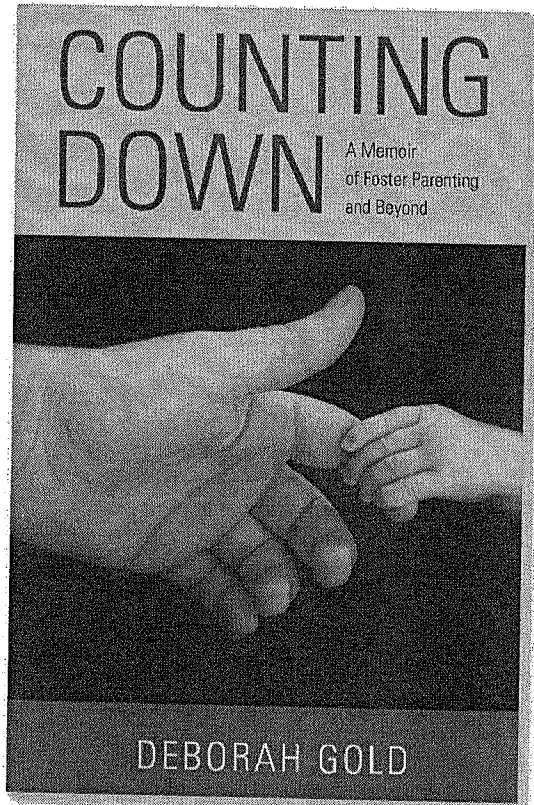
Tell me who wants those kids more than the money for looking after them? The girls weren't scared of me as a strange man, and they were proud of their food. Nobody was physically harming them. That's not saying hard work is the cure or even appropriate in every foster situation. I'm not saying she's doing right. I am saying she's the best available right now. We can't afford to wait for good homes. We're stuck with the ones where outright bad ain't going on. Tell your readers, they don't like it, they should become foster parents. (82)

Welch presents social workers like Cody as clear-eyed about “paycheck parents” who only foster because of the child's stipend or—and this is a hard distinction for them to make—can only afford to foster because of the payments and come to rely on that money. When they discuss the role of love and emotion in foster care, social workers show that these are thorny issues too. “Affection is born under stranger circumstances than determined commitment,” one explains (91). Concern for the emotional and physical needs of children, rather than instinctive love, defines good foster homes.

Counting Down

Fall or Fly offers a broad view of foster care in Appalachia, and *Counting Down* provides a deep dive into fostering and adoption. Reading a newspaper profile of a foster parent inspired Deborah Gold, a university teacher in southern Appalachia, to become one herself. Years later, 16-month-old Michael arrived in her home. (Gold also uses pseudonyms to conceal identities and specific locations.) By the second morning, Gold and her husband hoped they could adopt him, but Michael's bio mother, Jessica, was complying with the DSS plan that





could lead to reunification. Initially scheduled to live with her for three months (Gold never learned why he was removed from his bio home), Michael stayed for six before returning to Jessica. Writing more than ten years after that reunification, Gold sees how unusual it was that she remained an important person in Michael's life. She saw his childhood unfold in a "chaotic, traumatic, dangerous, exciting, and unpredictable" home with his siblings, his fragile mother, and her violent older boyfriend (25). The memoir recounts how Gold continued her relationship with the family, inviting Michael and his brother for weekends or much longer visits and spending holidays together, always observing the turbulence in Michael's bio family and dreading physical harm.

Counting Down shows how money enters the foster care equation in ways beyond the stipend foster parents receive. When Jessica began classes at community college, Gold helped her to apply for grants, drove her to class, and twice covered tuition. She also found

herself attuned to Jessica's choices:

For foster parents, every basic item or experience the birth parents fail to provide is always expressed in terms of something the children could have had: for the price of a pack of Camels, that child could have had at least thrift store sneakers, gone to a school dance, had spare underwear for accidents at school. It was the measure I heard most often—and used myself. (49)

Welch refers briefly to "the unnatural dynamic created between bio and foster mothers" (132) and Gold recognizes how this unease complicates her relatively straightforward bond with Michael. During those years, Gold writes, "the one card I held—both major asset and liability—was Jessica's mistaken belief that I could bring in the authorities" (33-34). Knowing that Jessica could also cut off contact for any reason, she found herself keeping secrets (like the boys' allusions to unsecured weapons in the home) in the hopes of staying close enough to provide stability and love for Michael.

These two narratives amplify each other in the questions they raise and the appreciation for certain authorities they express. Gold, like Welch, admires the majority of social workers. "From the foster parents' side of the equation, social workers are often confusing, sometimes confounding, but just as often flat-out amazing" she writes. "The great ones are the rule, not the exception. Here, they know all the children's names and, more important, they know their clothing sizes" (115). However, she asks whether the drive toward family

reunification best serves foster children. “Rationally, I know strengthening of children’s biofamilies must always be an agency’s first priority,” she allows, adding, “I know that we foster families are a tool ... Social Services uses to achieve that end” (95). In her tangible experience, though, this emphasis—and DSS policy that a threat at home was not enough to remove children—kept Michael in a fracturing family rather than the stable foster home he preferred. When Gold finally gained custody, she saw him dealing with lingering effects of witnessing violence, untreated mental illness, and drug use when he remained with his biofamily.

Limitations

The stories and questions in *Fall or Fly* resonate with broader questions about health and identity in Appalachian communities. Welch is the editor of *Public Health in Appalachia: Essays from the Clinic and the Field* (McFarland, 2014). In that collection, fatalism and self-efficacy emerge as troubling and complicated themes, particularly in the context of family dynamics and the options available to young people. In *Fall or Fly*, Welch again examines the paradox that “family is a strong element of Appalachian life, often seen as one of the region’s greatest assets” even while “the family dynamic discourages young people from developing a healthy sense of self-esteem or self-efficiency” (*Public Health in Appalachia* 7). In *Fall or Fly*, Welch expands her discussion of the role that storytelling provides—with multiple stories and personal observations that have sometimes been missing from mainstream debate.

In an interview published as part of the “Author’s Chair” podcast, Welch defends storytelling journalism that scrambles places and identities but offers revealing detail [<https://soundcloud.com/woubdigital/dr-wendy-welch-author-of-fall-or-fly?in=woubdigital/sets/the-authors-chair>]. She explains that anonymous interviews offered safe spaces for powerful storytelling that revealed both frustration and hope. She contends that when people have a problem with anonymity, it’s often a red herring that distracts from the problems she writes about. The storytelling-journalism approach has limitations, as does the memoir genre. *Fall or Fly* and *Counting Down* leave thorny questions open-ended, often the questions regarding policy. What measures are necessary to stem the opioid crisis fueling the need for foster care? Is the money “thrown at” foster care too much, too little, or distributed ineffectively? For how long should family reunification remain a priority? Both books illustrate the urgency of these questions, and weigh in with evidence that DSS administrators might consider. For example, Welch shows that in the Coalton region, many families would not be able to foster without a stipend; she calls for a pragmatic (rather than sentimental) view of this exchange. However, treating foster parents as a tool to achieve family reunification means that potentially successful foster or adoptive parents drop out after multiple disappointments. Neither Gold nor Welch advocates separating children from bio parents, of course, but both show that courts currently overlook dangers in order to achieve reunification.

Finally, *Fall or Fly* and *Counting Down* have much to offer college courses. Social work students could benefit from stories of DSS creativity in navigating policy, and I anticipate including sections in my future writing and rhetoric courses to facilitate discussion about the ethics of reading and writing about the lives of others.

Welch and Gold acknowledge that the stories they tell are troubling because they are honest; at times they show children, bio parents, foster parents, social workers, and judges in an ambivalent (or negative) light. Welch is consistently aware of this negativity, which is partly a result of cynicism from those who repeatedly encounter the chaos and irrationality of the system and human actors within it. Parents, social workers, and children “who don’t get a chance to talk very often could say what they pleased without fear of repercussions,” she explains (166). The collection also aims to be honest about the pain that these human actors experience. Welch offers an important frame to the narratives she collects: “if the stories told here don’t seem to make sense sometimes, or seem like they shouldn’t have happened, that’s because they don’t make sense and probably shouldn’t have happened” (5). Gold, too, narrates the anxiety she experiences during the years Michael spends with his bio family; she also reflects on her own paralysis and confusion within the system. *Fall or Fly* and *Counting Down* provide insight into the human emotions and reasoning within a chaotic system. These insights are useful for prospective foster parents wondering what types of relationships and obstacles to expect; current foster parents will find encouragement, advice, and validation in the stories.

In her “Author’s Chair” interview, Welch reflects that she intended to write a book that would recruit new foster parents, but midway through the project realized she was writing “an indictment.” Because of the inherent challenges in telling these stories, and in caring for children in precarious circumstances, Welch worries that *Fall or Fly* does not show the joy of nurturing foster children. However, I found the opposite to be true. Reading about hope and frustration side-by-side made the stories compelling, and the repeated examples of “determined commitment” are as appealing as the moments of triumph. I found hope and inspiration in accounts of foster parents who respond to children’s difficult behavior with kindness. Welch includes a story about Eve, whose foster son, Maurice, intentionally damaged her prized hardwood floors. Eve halved his allowance to pay for repairs, but reassured him that “nothing he could do would make Eve stop taking care of him”; she later adopted Maurice (58). Welch quotes another foster parent, Margie, who reflects, “I feel as fiercely protective of them, as dedicated to helping them reach where they want to go, as my first three kids. I regret that we didn’t get to protect them from the beginning. They’re our responsibility, our joys, and our loves” (97). The story of a Child Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer who persuades a judge to fast-track adoption for two sisters who had been bouncing among homes shows that fostering and social work are not the only ways to invest in foster children.

"Nothing is easy, but they continue to amaze us all"

Wendy Welch explained that, to tell stories no one wants to hear, a writer can offer moments of connection and identification that reach beyond the specific topic. I knew little about foster care before reading these books, but I have seen how family circumstances both prepare children for adult life and hold them back. As a teacher, I thought of students who struggled for reasons I couldn't fully understand or know. I wondered how I might reconsider my classroom policies knowing that "bad stuff keep[s] happening to good kids" (Welch 142).

I came to *Fall or Fly* and *Counting Down* with a background in rhetoric and writing, particularly the rhetoric of personal narrative. Anecdotes and personal narratives are not quantitative evidence or logical argument, the rhetorical strategies that our public discourse commonly—but mistakenly—regards as most persuasive. However, stories are useful for understanding human motivation. They are also useful in motivating action and mobilizing empathy. For a reader like myself, who is first learning the details of the problems Welch and Gold address, storytelling reveals the magnitude of the challenges that foster care faces in Appalachia and the ways that many involved "continue to amaze" (Gold 244). Scholar Gillian Whitlock argues in *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* that memoir "circulates as a 'soft weapon'" that can "personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard" (3). These two books confirm that memoir and storytelling journalism are not self-indulgent or self-serving, and both demonstrate that personal narratives can do vital work in the world.