

## Book Reviews

**How Tia Lola Came to Stay.** By Julia Alvarez. New York: Knopf, 2001, 160 pp., \$5.99. paperback. ISBN: 0-37580-215-0.

**Sahara Special.** By Esmé Raji Codell. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2003, 192 pp., \$5.99. Paperback. ISBN: 0-78681-611-2.

**How it Feels When Parents Divorce.** By Jill Krementz. New York: Copper Beech, 1998, 128 pp., \$11.20. Paperback. ISBN: 0-39475-855-2.

**What Can I Do? A Book for Children of Divorce.** By Danielle Lowry. Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2001, 48 pp., \$14.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 1-55798-769-6.

This review considers four books of fiction and nonfiction, which have engaging story lines, complex characters, and therapeutic value. They are of particular value for educators and therapists working with preadolescents as they struggle with the processes and consequences of their parents' divorce.

*How it Feels When Parents Divorce* (1988, 7th reprint, 1998) is written and photographed by Jill Krementz. This non-fiction photo essay uses first person accounts of boys and girls aged 7–16 years old who had experienced divorce. Youngsters tell of their memories, and express their feelings of hurt and sadness during specific situations that caused distress. One recurring distressful theme is that of parents arguing. Children tell of events leading to the divorce, the divorce itself, and the consequences that lead to a sudden unpredictability of their lives, premature independence, and the discomforts associated with remarriage and half-siblings.

Although the interviews appear to have been tidied up somewhat, the children's voices come through as clear and genuine. The photographs seem to bring the children to a present reality almost as if the reader were attending a support group and hearing their painful experiences.

Settings, backgrounds and developmental levels vary from essay to essay. The age of the child during the divorce was an important factor, as well as other influences, some involving diversity of backgrounds. Children tell of their experiences from perspectives that include religious and ethnic understandings. Catholic, Jewish, Puerto Rican, European and African American children attempt to find

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*Editor's Note:* The *Journal of Poetry Therapy* includes reviews of books of interest to poetry therapists. Of special interest are thematic poetry anthologies that deal with personal issues and experiences, as well as books about any aspect of the therapeutic use of literature and writing. Please note, however, that chapbooks and self-published poetry books will not be considered. To be considered for review, books should be sent to: Charles Rossiter, PhD, CPT, Book Review Editor, *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 705 S. Gunderson Ave., Oak Park, IL 60304, USA. Email: [Charlie.Rossiter@poetrypoetry.org](mailto:Charlie.Rossiter@poetrypoetry.org)

explanations within their frameworks, and therefore reactions to and situations with divorce differ. The range of stories is wide and, while some may be highly applicable, others may not apply to a particular child's experiences. However, one application that would likely emerge would be to encourage children to develop their own photo essays. Each one of these essays would then be directly applicable.

You will find no outside "expert" informing about divorce and that makes this book different from many others. This book is like a carpenter's box with a variety of tools that need to be chosen carefully for a particular task. It would be important for the teacher or therapist to read and to consider the appropriateness of specific essays. Kremenz offers not only photos, but also real pictures into the hearts and minds of children affected by divorce. We recommend this book be used like a set of tools, each essay carefully selected for a specific need.

*Sahara Special* (2003) by Esmé Raji Codell is clandestinely about a child's experiences with father absenteeism, divorce, prejudice, poverty, confidentiality, and friendships, as well as learning challenges. We use the word clandestine because, from reading the book jacket, it would be impossible to know that it is about divorce. The summary focuses on Sahara's educational problems, but such problems are mostly symptoms and vehicles for delving into deeper issues.

Sahara, an African-American girl, loved to write letters and saved them in her desk. Her letters included expressions of her sadness about her father's absence from the family and the divorce. A teacher found the letters and gave them to the school counselor who, in turn, went public with them. Sahara, feeling exposed and betrayed, erected defensive walls and refused to complete her schoolwork. Now, as she repeats fifth grade her new teacher, Ms. Pointy, encourages students to write in their journals. After several days of turning in blank pages, Sahara writes, "I am a writer." To which Miss Pointy responds, "A writer writes." Miss Pointy conveys her belief in Sahara and encourages her to lower her defences and emerge from her shell. Sahara writes of her struggles, fears and concerns about her parents. She learns to trust again and, by writing, she demonstrates great courage especially after having her letters (and true feelings) exposed. The main character, Sahara, is highly believable. The friendships and concerns are realistic and supportive female characters serve as strong role models.

*Sahara Special* can be used to initiate discussions about the power of journaling as a therapeutic process, but also about the importance of confidentiality. It can be useful for introducing journaling to therapy groups. We highly recommend *Sahara Special* for therapists working with young adults and also encourage its use with adults as well.

*How Tia Lola Came to Stay* (2001) by Julia Alvarez, a fictional work, begins with a Dominican-American family living in New York City. However, the situation changes quickly when the parents separate and big brother Julian, little sister Juanita, and their mother move to a small town in Vermont, where their mother has taken a job, while Dad stays in the city. Julian tries to deal with their diminishing financial resources, missing friends, changes in birthday and holiday celebrations, and, of course, Dad's visitations.

As winter starts, Julian, Juanita, and their mother move into a dilapidated house. Unlike New York, when Julian starts school he is surprised to find no other brown faces in class. While their mother works, the children need supervision so Aunt (Tia) Lola from the Dominican Republic is invited to travel to Vermont to look after the children. Tia Lola is not your usual auntie. She dresses flamboyantly, speaks no English, and Julian is embarrassed. While Julian is doing his best to fit in, Aunt Tia stands out! Julian attempts to hide her from friends and townsfolk, to no avail. Over time Aunt Tia wins over the children, their friends, and eventually the townsfolk.

This book offers a realistic progression for resolving life's issues, especially for divorce, cultural, and long-distance complexities. The positive, balanced portrayal of both parents speaks volumes. This book can be used individually and with small groups for educational or clinical purposes, and should not be limited to young adults. Younger children and older clients would benefit from hearing this story especially for those dealing with cross-cultural concerns. Told from a male child's point of view, the story is affectionately humorous, culturally respectful, and rich in descriptions.

As one character speaks no English and the children are trying to learn Spanish, there are words and phrases in Spanish scattered throughout with proximal explanations, exposing readers to language diversity. This story can prompt conversations related to feelings about divorce, and cultural and linguistic differences, as well as issues related to traditional and non-traditional families. The story offers hope, finds the best in people, supports being proud of one's heritage and demonstrates how folks can work together to achieve goals. Although this story is culturally specific to the Dominican Republic and children from other backgrounds may not relate to specific references, some basic concerns are universal. A therapist or teacher can guide children to these understandings. The story is appropriate for both group discussions and for individual counseling.

*What Can I Do? A Book for Children of Divorce* (2001) is written by Danielle Lowry and illustrated by Bonnie Matthews. When her parents share the sad news that they will be divorcing, Rosie tries to figure out what's wrong and how to fix it. When her "solutions" prove unsuccessful, she gives up, withdraws, becomes angry, and acts out at school. This prompts her teacher to discover the family's situation and she suggests a visit to the school counselor, Ms. Gonzalez. Eventually Rosie joins Ms. Gonzales's divorce group.

Much of this story revolves around school relationships, including interactions with friends, teachers, and especially with Ms. Gonzales, the school counselor. The author captures feelings and reactions common to children in divorcing families. She then uses specific situations to offer factual information and problem-solving models for consideration and discussion.

The illustrations are clear, uncomplicated and expressive. Pen and ink line drawings come to life with watercolor and offer an attractive, realistic presentation of thoughts, feelings, and situations from the protagonist's viewpoint. The language is simple, but not simplistic. This book offers hope and helps model positive action, such as seeking and accepting help from the school counselor. As so much of the

story involves Rosie's school, the book appears to be very appropriate for school-based interventions.

The author, a school counselor, explains in the introduction how this book can be used by students to read on their own, by helpers working with children involved in divorce, and by parents who want to open lines of communication and better understand their child's perspective. One of the author's goals is to get beyond reassuring children that divorce is not their fault and that they can't fix the problem. Rosie's development models ways for readers to feel more in control when their situations suddenly shift as a result of their parents' divorce. This book has wide appeal and we recommend it.

Each of these divorce-related books has major strengths: we highly recommend them for use with developmental or clinical bibliotherapeutic interventions.

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