Adoption: The Long View Transcript
Lynn Brown
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Lori Holden, Intro

This is Adoption: The Long View, a podcast brought to you by Adopting.com. I'm your host, Lori Holden, author of *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption*. Join me as we take a closer look at what happens *after* you adopt your child and begin parenting them. Your adoption journey isn't over then -- it's just beginning.

In this podcast, you'll hear from a variety of thought-provoking and influential guests as we help you make the most of your adoption journey. Like any trip worth taking, there will be ups and downs and challenges. Here's what you're going to wish you'd known from the start. Ready? Let's go.

Lori Holden, Greeting

Parenting itself is a Big Deal. Adoptive parenting? We know that adoption brings a whole nother layer to regular old parenting. Transracial adoptive parenting? Wrap another layer around an already wrapped Big Deal. Separation from original parents, no matter how necessary or well-intended, is traumatic for a child. Growing up not genetically mirrored by people you live with adds another challenge to a child's journey of identity formation and integration. And when there are big differences in culture, heritage, and history between parent and child, parents by transracial adoption have a lot of extra Big Deals to be mindful of and strategic about.

That's putting it very simply.

So if I ask you to imagine a transracial adoptive family, what image comes to your mind? What race is the parent? What race is the child?

Today's guest is a transracial adoptive mom (or "interracial," a term that previous guest Tony Hynes told me he prefers in Ep307). Our guest's two daughters were placed with her through the foster care system in 2013 with the intent of reunification with the girls' birth family, but it turned out that wasn't possible. So in 2015, the adoptions were finalized.

Now compare my guest's reality with the image I asked you to conjure of a transracial family. Today's guest, Lynn Brown, is Black. Her daughters are white.

I will be the first to admit that when I think of a transracial adoptive family, I think of white parents. I think about all the extra things these parents need to do to bring their children's heritage to them and to try to better understand their children's culture themselves. Clearly, I hold some assumptions about who adopts and who gets adopted. So when I met Lynn Brown at an adoption camp recently, I wanted to know more about her story.

Here to talk about all this today, about transracial parenting in general and her situation in particular, is Lynn Brown. Welcome, Lynn.

Lynn Brown: Thank you, Lori. Glad to be here.

Lori: So, glad to have you. Let me say a little bit more about you. Lynn Brown is mom to a newly teen daughter, a pre-teen daughter (both white) and a toddler son, who is Black. The family was originally formed in Nashville, TN, but moved to Houston last year, for reasons relevant to this episode. Lynn started the process to become a foster parent in 2012 as a single mother by choice. The girls were placed with her in April 2013 and their adoptions were finalized in September 2015. Lynn works for a healthcare insurance company and has an MBA in Healthcare Management.

Lynn: Thank you, Lori. It's a journey.

I started off in my mid to late 30s, single person, and I knew that I had more to give; wasn't in a relationship, no kids of my own. And I said I could open up my home to kids that were in the system. So, that's, like you just said in my bio, I started the process, opened up and went through training in 2012, got the girls in 2013, and ultimately adopted them in September of 2015.

And it's just been an amazing journey. It was funny. Every case is different. When they were first placed with me, initially it was, “Oh, this is like a temporary placement. There's family members.” And there were family, but ultimately, unfortunately, they weren't able to be placed with them, which led to me being able to adopt them. But I was like, “Oh, I'll just get my feet wet.” And I didn't assume – you know, you hear statistics or whatever that there's more black children in foster care.

And when I got the call that, “Hey, there's a four month old and a three year old,” I was like, “Oh, okay.” You know, you don't ask race. Initially, you indicate what you're willing to take on and so forth. And for me, race wasn't an issue, but I just assumed (and we should not make assumptions) that I would predominantly be getting calls for black kids living in the Nashville area. I just assumed that's what I would be getting.

So, when the worker showed up with these two little blond, blue eyed babies, that was a shock. And I had to get myself together very quickly. But at that point, it was just two babies that needed a home, and I was able to provide that.

Lori: Wonderful. And so, you also have a black son who's younger than your daughters. And I'm curious about how much race is an issue in your family and for your family. And the reason I say that two ways is: when I say *in* your family, I mean like in your home where there are two people who are black and two people who are white, is there anything that comes up there that you're able to talk about? And then *for* your family, out in the world when the four of you are moving about together, how much is race an issue?

Lynn: Well, I will say, in our home, we are not colorblind; I don't think love conquers all. They know that they have a black mom. The girls, you know, they have a black mom and a black brother. And we talk; it's not something that I force down their throat every day and stuff, but we have conversations about race and how mommy and their brother are going to be treated differently sometimes than how they're treated. And my girls, you know, ultimately as a parent, I hope that I raise two young women who are allies to the minority population of this society and

looking out for everyone, making sure that everyone is treated fairly and equitably. And I will tell you that my girls (and they're two very different individuals) but they both do advocate black and brown people; their friends. So, it's very present. We can't ignore it.

Lori: You mentioned something that I want to ask about. You mentioned colorblind; that your family is not colorblind. And I do think that adoption practices have evolved over the decades. At one point, the idea of trying to be colorblind was seen as a good thing and a hopeful thing. To be functional, to be a good parent, you stop seeing color. Tell me why that's no longer considered best practice.

Lynn: Well, for me, my thought around that is if you're ignoring the fact that I'm brown, you're ignoring a part of my identity in who I am as a person. You know, we can't erase it. I don't want to erase that. I'm a very proud black woman. Although, people think otherwise because you're raising white children. But that's a whole other conversation there. But I'm very proud to be black, and I want to raise a son who is proud to be black, but not at the expense of minimizing my girls and who they are. But they need to understand that culturally, we are different in that regard and they are exposed to many black themes that many white people might not be exposed to; food, on a regular basis, the type of food that they're eating.

So, it hurts. I get that we want to love and care for them. I didn't have an issue with the race of the children who are placed with me, but you cannot be colorblind because it's being dismissive, in my opinion.

Lori: And I think that goes along with a lot of what we talk about on this podcast and in adoptive parenting in general, is that what we're trying to help our children do is build and integrate a healthy identity. And if race and color is a piece of your identity, you don't want to be blind to that. That means you're not going to be able to integrate it if it's not seen by the people closest to you.

Do you have to work at all to bring white culture to your daughters?

Lynn: No, because society is catered towards white people. So, I mean, they see that. They see that every day. It's their reality. What I'm intentional about is exposing them, though, to black and brown people who are professionals; doctors and so forth, that we see many of them (I will not lie) are black and brown individuals because I want them to see black people in these professional roles and experience, that we're just like everyone else in society.

Lori: And I suppose that's important for your son as well; representation. That all people can do all things.

Lynn: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes, representation 100%.

Lori: So, that's one of the things you've done as a result of your family's interracial composition, is to really seek out people of color as professionals, serving your family, making those kinds of choices. What are some of the other things that you've done as a result of your family's interracial composition?

Lynn: As you said earlier, the girls were adopted in Tennessee. I owned a home in Tennessee. And it's a great place and I love the town, but in my opinion, it is very black and white. There

was not a lot of diversity. And particularly where I live, because I had purchased my house long before I had the girls and it was not very diverse. I daresay I was probably the only black person in my little cul de sac. So, the school that they were zoned for was not diverse at all. Not at all. Not to where I wanted to send my kids to a school where they were going to see black and brown teachers and other kids. Because I didn't want someone to say, “Well, that's weird,” or “That's not really your mom.”

So, I made a point - An opportunity presented itself through work. We actually left Nashville and moved to Denver. Really enjoyed Denver; a lot of cultural exposure out there. But then ultimately another opportunity with work. And we are now in Houston. And Houston is probably one of the top four cities in the US. I mean, just like maybe 4 million people that live here and it is so culturally diverse. I was very, very intentional of looking and to purchase a house in an area that wasn't a school that had 90% white students, because that's not a reality for my kids. They come home every day to a black woman. So, I need them to be able to go to school and see teachers and kids who look like their mom and their brother. So, we are very much in a cultural melting pot in the Houston area. And I'm so happy that I found this that, yeah, this is going to be our home for many years to come.

Lori: So, when you say diversity, you're meaning moving beyond just “there are people in the city who are black” and “there are people in the city are white,” to also, “there are neighborhoods here that are melting pots.”

Lynn: Absolutely. I mean, I like Nashville, but it was just black and just white. And you get the stereotypical; you're in the south. Tennessee, Texas is south, too. I get that. So, you're not avoiding that. Just from a political standpoint as well, the county that we're in is a little more leaning towards my political preference. So, they're exposed to so much more. And their friends that they have; it's not just white people. They really have friends across the spectrum.

Lori: How unique would you say that your family is?

Lynn: Within the adoption world, I would probably say that black families adopting white children, I don't know, I want to say I saw a statistic once that we make up like 1% of all adoptions that happen. So, we're not that frequent. Although, I will say I have been very fortunate to find and make some connections, through social media, to connect honestly with many other families that look just like my family. So, we are definitely out there. Some tend to be more vocal than others in regards to sharing their experiences. But yes, I'm in a group where there's at least like 100 of us where parents are black and brown and we're raising white kids. And we share our struggles and the things that our kids deal with, and how do they ultimately feel having a black parent raise them? You know, most of our kids are on the younger side, so we're not dealing with the older levels and them being able to really share experiences like, “Oh, no, I wish it had been someone else.” But there definitely are struggles to deal with in this society.

Lori: I'm so glad you've been able to find that and somebody created that. Because whenever you are going through something that's unique, to find other people who are going through it too, is super helpful, just to not feel so alone and also to just have some other people's experience to rely on. So, I'm going to try to remember to put that link into our show notes and make that available for people who may want to find something similar.

Now, what about your children, do they – we met at camp. We met in an adoption camp. Is that a place where your daughters might find their own set of people that are going through their challenges as well?

Lynn: Well, you know, I love Heritage Camps for Adoptive Families. There are a lot of cultural camps that they have, but we attend the domestic adoption camp. And we actually attended our first year in Denver back in 2017. And the girls just had an incredible time. And I, personally, being able to meet other adoptive families and to talk about the stuff that we deal with as parents of adoptive kids. But the girls had such a phenomenal time at the camp that it's one of our summer trips every year we have to make it a point to go. They make connections with other kids who are adopted so that in their day to day, they may not have a lot of friends at school that are adopted, maybe a handful, but they don't necessarily have connections to those kids. Whereas these are connections that are lifelong and we'll be able to stay in touch with these families and our friends for many, many years in the future. So, we love attending our domestic adoption camp.

Lori: I found that that was really helpful for my children too, even without the transracial piece. I'm going to put that link in the show notes and then that'll be a good one to share. And I want to put in PACT adoption camp. They have a camp every summer in the West Coast and one on the East Coast, and they really do focus on transracial issues as well. So, we'll make sure that we have that.

I confessed at the top of this episode that I made assumptions about what a transracial family is. And so, I'm curious, in your experience, what assumptions do people make about you and your family when they see you out and about?

Lynn: Oh, goodness. You know, when I first got the placement of the girls, we'd be out, and – Oh, I remember the very first one vividly. I was in a Barnes & Noble's and just hanging out, looking at the books. And this family just kept staring at us. And girls, you know, unbiased, beautiful little, like I said, blond, blue eyed girls: "Oh, they're so cute. Are you the nanny?" And I'm just quick to, "Oh, no, they're in foster care." I always felt quick to justify why they were with me. Although I'd already been through the state's background process and knowing legally that I was cleared, but I used to feel the need to have to explain.

So, that passed very quickly, where now I jokingly say that I do not get questioned a lot. Now, I can be out in public in the grocery store with the girls. My youngest loves to hold my hand or she'd be like, "Mommy, can we get this?" and people might hear it and look, but I jokingly say that I have this resting bitch face and I don't get a lot of people that approach me and question it now. Because sometimes I might – And it depends on the timing, where I'm at, you know, I might indulge it many times. Many times, I have shut it down. I've had people, "Oh, who are they?" "They're my daughters." "Really." and I'm like, "Yes." And I just kind of shut it down. I don't indulge it. So, I don't get questioned as much now anymore. Yeah. And I just charge it too; the look. Like, "Don't come at me sideways. You're going to maybe get a response that you don't want."

Lori: You put off that vibe. That vibe as a whole.

Lynn: I really do put off the vibe. I really think I do.

Lori: Now that your daughters are a little bit older, do people come up to them with assumptions about who you are to them?

Lynn: Now that they're older, now mind you, we're newer to this area. So, we're still making our friends and getting connections. But I know when my oldest was younger, we really struggled with, "That's not your mom," and really explaining that families look all kinds of ways. They can be two moms, two dads, you know, just one mom, she may look like you, but she may not. So, it's really honestly changing society's view of what a family looks like.

And we had to go through that because she didn't always like to say that she was adopted because it's forcing her to tell her story because her mom doesn't match her. So, those are some things that we've had to deal with as a family. My youngest, she will in a heartbeat, "This is my mom." And if you said otherwise, she is very quick to defend and question like, "Why is this wrong?" Because she doesn't view it, you know, she's been with me since she was a baby. And this is all she knows. All she's ever remembers is having a black mother. They're very different individuals and the responses are very different.

Lori: And you've kind of led us into the next question I want to ask you, which is about boundaries around what parts of the story you will tell and how you're teaching your daughters to put boundaries around the story they will tell, when people are making assumptions and checking their assumptions by asking questions. Sometimes they are really well intended questions, sometimes they're nosiness, sometimes they're people you have an ongoing relationship with, and sometimes there are people you're just passing by in a store or something.

So, what are some of the guidelines you have for boundaries around the stories you tell? You already mentioned like your resting bitch face, which is just you keep it private. You already mentioned educating people sometimes, teaching a little bit about adoption in general and what families can look like; all the different ways families can look. Do you have any other techniques or guidelines you've had about the boundaries around your stories?

Lynn: One thing that I've learned is that their adoption story is theirs to tell. Kids don't ask to be placed in foster care and stuff like that. So, even many, many of my close, close friends, very few actually know the full, full story of the girls. And not that they need to be embarrassed by it, because I'm a believer that your past does not necessarily dictate your future and that you're going to be given opportunities to do and be exposed to things to make yourself the individual that you're going to grow to be. So, your past is definitely does not dictate your future. But understanding they still dealt with a lot of stuff and how to navigate that to be a successful teenager and adult and so forth. So, I don't know if I answered your question. Sorry, I think I went off on a tangent there.

Lori: No, you did. And I'll put something in the show notes, because we covered this in Episode 301, just about if people are curious about how to do some of what you're talking about, which is setting boundaries around the story and different things that you can do. So, you covered that well.

My next question is either brilliant or the stupidest thing ever. So, brace yourself, everybody. Do your daughters experience racism?

Lynn: I don't really think that they can experience racism as white people because, you know, they don't experience racism that a black person would experience because the power struggle; the power dynamic that exists in the US is white people have power. So, they might experience discrimination or prejudice because, “Oh, you have a white mom and I can't hang out with you. My mom says I can't hang out with you.” I mean, I can't say specifically.

I do think there's an instance where one of my daughters had a friend and I tried to engage with the family and they really were not receptive. Could it be because I was black? Obviously, that's what I'm going to think. But my daughter was quick to say, “Well, I don't want to be friends with her.” And you know, I don't want to teach her that. I don't want to teach her that because that's how you create racism, prejudice and discrimination; thinking that someone's not as good because they don't like me. So, I had to be really quick to teach her that. And honestly, going off on a tangent, same with political and us voting and so forth, I've had very candid conversations with the girls about certain people that I've voted for, for presidential, and why I voted for them or why I didn't vote for a certain person. And being really clear so that they understand; you don't just not like someone because of something that they've said or done. But I like to think I'm also very much pro feminist and advocate for us as women and the rights that we should be entitled to and so forth. So, we definitely have those conversations.

Lori: Now, I need to ask the companion question. Do you and your son experience racism?

Lynn: Obviously, I think there's always subtle microaggressions and stuff that we experience. But again, here in Houston, it's very diverse. I think it still exists. I can't say specifically a blatant thing. But, you know, when we're in stores, I notice the people looking over the shoulders, if I'm out shopping and so forth, thinking that you're trying to steal something, I'm like, “Really? I could probably buy half of the stuff in here. I'm the least person that you need to be worried about.”

And my son, he's in daycare; I try to make sure it's a culturally diverse daycare. Lots of great teachers. I think he's getting a really good exposure and it's just kind of reinforcing, as a parent, things that he's going to experience. He might not have it now, the blatant stuff, but he's going to be called a nigger; it's going to happen. I remember when I was called a nigger the first time; you'll never forget it. And it's being able to work through that and know that you're more than that word.

Lori: So, comparing your daughters’ experiences and you and your son's experiences, what is the role of privilege in the difference between the racism that is or isn't experienced? I think you've kind of touched on that.

Lynn: The girls, because they're white, obviously, they have privilege. They have natural privilege. People are going to look at them. I think they've been given passes in school. I know for a fact my oldest has when she was younger. When she started school, a very young five. And she started kindergarten. And again, she was in foster care and stuff. So, there's a lot of dynamic, educationally. And socially, you know, she was five, but from a maturity standpoint, she was probably three and a half. She struggled a lot. We had lots of opportunities and the teacher used to send her to the office a lot, but that wasn't like a punishment. They were very engaging and like it was like a reward to go to the principal's office. Whereas I know had that been my brown son, that experience would have been completely different. So, I think they've been giving a lot of passes by some schools that we've previously attended.

But I try to make it a point for them to understand that I need them to use that privilege to advocate for be an ally for your brother and people that look like your brother and your mom because you're going to get to do a lot more and people are going to listen to the things that you say about race and how we should treat people. So, ultimately, as a parent, that's my role that I will feel that I've been successful as a parent if they go on to be adults who are allies for black and brown people.

Lori: I feel like over the last couple of decades I've watched white parents in transracial adoptions who weren't aware of privilege before, raise their brown and black children and become aware of it because they suddenly had to protect their children from something that they thought they wouldn't have to. Because that privilege is like an umbrella that extends from the parent. But as I also know from listening to adoptee stories and adoptee podcasts, once that adult adoptee goes off to college or something and is away from their parents white privilege, it's a whole different world for them. And so, this privilege becomes apparent when you start to see it out of necessity.

I want to talk about another phenomenon I've heard about, which is code switching. Are you aware if your daughters need to code switch as they move in between different worlds? They're in Houston. And maybe first you could explain what code switching is.

Lynn: You know, which is interesting because I don't really think of code switching for white children. I think code switching is typically thought to be for black Americans. We work every day in very typically white spaces. So, it's being on your Ps and Qs, minding certain things that you say about certain political events or anything. It's being very much on your A-game. Maybe sometimes people even say you're acting white. But then you code switch when you get home. You can take that, you know, I'll air quote the word "hat" off, and you can be yourself. Not to say that you're not as proper or whatever, but you don't have to watch every little thing that you're doing. You know, you have to work twice as hard just to get the same level of recognition. That's how I think of code switching.

But I don't think for the girls, honestly, I don't think that they act any differently. I mean, you know, my teenager, she's going through her teenage stuff. So, there's that whole dynamic. And I'm not trying to raise them to being as a stereotype; like there are some white individuals that are very much immersed in black culture and they tend to mimic certain style, maybe vernacular language and so forth. So, I'm not trying to raise them to be black because they are not black. They are white. I'm not trying to be white. I am very much a black woman. And like I said earlier, I embrace that identity. I just want them to be the individuals that they're going to be. And I don't think that they have to code switch. I just think they recognize the different cultures and they're very comfortable. I will say that the girls are very comfortable being in predominantly black spaces (and obviously they're fine in white spaces) but they don't shy away from people when we're in all black spaces.

Lori: In talking with you, Lynn, I'm finding just the amount of thought you need to put into everything; the mindfulness that you have in helping all three of your children be authentic and be true to themselves. I keep thinking of that old commercial; love the skin you're in. So, that authenticity while moving in the world that isn't always receptive to that in all situations. So, I can tell how much thought and work you've put into that.

It's time for us to get to our last question, and this is what I'm asking of all Season 3 guests. From your perspective as a brown adoptive mom, I'm not going to say black because I've heard you call yourself brown. As a brown adoptive mom of two white daughters, what do you think is the most important piece of the long view of adoption that people miss on the front end?

Lynn: Oh, that's a really great question because my adoption was from the foster care system, which is going to be a little bit different than a private domestic adoption. But I will say, if – Well, and it's kind of a cliche like I know that you talk about openness in adoption. So, what I will say is that when we adopt from foster care, it's all about being very shut off and not being as open or engaging with birth families. But I would say, long term, it is beneficial for them to have a connection to their birth family. You cannot sever it. I don't care what social workers tell you. I'll say you need to try to keep a line of communication.

Now, you can set boundaries in their safety. It's not to discount – It's not safe, because we're quick. Foster parents, we're so quick to say, "Birth families are not safe. Their environment is not safe." But we need to get beyond that. We really do need, because of the best interests of your kids, they need to have a connection to their birth family. They're going to always want it. And if you suppress it or deny them access long term, when they get teenagers, mine's not that old, but I ultimately think they would seek it out, good or bad. So, you can kind of set the stage for what that relationship looks like if you start off on a younger page. So, try to truly be intentional about keeping connections with their birth family.

Lori: I love that you brought that up and I love that you're calling it "keeping connection" instead of choosing the word contact, because sometimes contact isn't possible and sometimes it's not safe, but you can always maintain a connection by being willing to enter that space and talking with your child about their birth family and creating space in your home for birth family to exist, even if they're not actually physically present. And I didn't even touch on the relationships that you have with your girls' birth family. Are you in touch with them? Are you in connection with them?

Lynn: I do, per the request of a therapist that my daughter was seeing, if there was the opportunity, if I could reach out. So, I did. I looked her up on social media and stuff and we did connect a couple of years ago. She doesn't talk to the girls. The girls do ask questions; like more so my older daughter, she'll have questions and I'll ask her birth mom and she'll answer them. So, it's not an everyday thing. Maybe every couple of months something comes up. But she was curious about her heritage and her background, and birth mom was able to share a lot more detail about medical stuff with me. You can fill in some of those blanks that we never are able to answer. So, we have that connection.

Like I said, it's not that we talk on a regular basis. I send pictures periodically, she touches base, she checks in, like, "Thinking about you guys." So, we have that connection so that as my girls get older and they start wanting more, I hope to be able to have them engaged and be able to talk with each other. I don't feel threatened about it. I know that that's hard for some adoptive parents. You know, I raised her. She lives with me. You know, I'm doing all the day to day stuff, so I don't feel threatened about that. And that's still her birth mom. And everyone's going to view it differently, I understand that, but that's just my take on it.

Lori: If we can't actually have the contact in a healthy and integrated way, we maintain the conduit. We find that channel. We're caretakers of it. We hold on to it until we can turn it over to our older child, and then they can start managing that in the way that they want to. But our job is to not corrode that channel; to keep our own stuff out of it. So, I love that you've been doing that.

We have touched on so many things and this is such a complex topic; transracial adoptive parenting. We could do a whole podcast series on this just alone, but I really want to thank you for entering into this space with me today and sharing your experiences from your heart and from your mind; both of those are so integrated and well defined. And I just am really thankful then for having you here today.

Lynn: Well, thank you, Lori. I appreciate the opportunity to talk a little bit about our family and what we deal with.

Lori: Special thanks to Adopting.com for producing and sponsoring this podcast.

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Show Notes

Facebook Group for Non-White Transracial Adoptive Parents: start here to find access to a goup that is hidden. https://www.facebook.com/groups/transracialperspectives
Heritage Camps for Adoptive Families: https://www.heritagecamps.org/
PACT Transracial Adoption Camps: https://www.pactadopt.org/
Adoption: The Long View Ep 301 on setting boundaries around our stories.
The Adoptee Next Door: podcast on transracial adoption by Angela Tucker
Adoption: The Long View Ep 307 with Interracial Adoptee Tony Hynes
Episode on Trauma & Transracial Adoption from Creating A Family