Prologue: What Is Adoption?

I don’t recall when it started, but I first noticed it about thirty years ago, on a sunny summer afternoon at the Philadelphia Zoo. The cast of characters on this occasion included my wife, Terry, and I, and our four children: in chronological order from youngest to oldest, Jennifer, Alison, David, and Steven. Jennifer, who was about nine at the time, is our adopted Korean daughter. As the six of us walked from one section of the zoo to another, we noticed that several of the enclosures featured newly installed signs inviting visitors to “adopt an animal.” I cannot remember just which animals were available for adoption, but I’d guess that polar bears and monkeys and lions would have been likely candidates. I had never seen such an appeal before.

“Adopt an animal,” said Jennifer in a hushed and puzzled voice, reading aloud from one of the signs. She read it several times, then turned to her older brothers and sister for information and advice. Terry and I watched, unsure whether to be amused or just confused. Being parents has usually confused us, so we chose confusion as our initial response.

“Adopt an animal,” she said again. Does this mean, Jennifer wanted to know, that we could take an animal home with us? Would it become part of our family? Where would it sleep? Who would take care of it while all of us were away each day at school or work? Good questions, we all gravely agreed.

She also worried that this adoption seemed rather—what’s the right word here?—casual. Apparently,
“adopting” the animals in the zoo was simply a matter of putting a quite modest check in the mail. Adoption, in fact, meant nothing more than a fully revocable pledge to donate a few dollars to the zoo, which would be folded into the operating costs. Our daughter’s distress reminded us that we had all of us, Jennifer as much or more than the rest, invested a great deal of time and anxiety and love to build the adoptive family we had.

We decided not to adopt any of the zoo’s animals, but in the years since that memorable summer day, opportunities to “adopt” something or other have done nothing but multiply.

You can still adopt an animal: I have found more internet sites offering penguins for adoption than there are penguins in all of America’s zoos. If penguins are not your animal of choice, you could adopt a lion or a tiger or a bear. If animals don’t do it, you can adopt a classroom, or a tree, or a soldier (that one surprised me), or a section of highway, or a ship, or any one of several archaeological artifacts in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, or a Shakespearean actor at London’s Globe Theatre.

I open with this small story to illustrate one of the themes I will be examining in this book: adoption is an exceptionally elusive term. The meaning of adoption, both literally and symbolically, has varied widely over time and place. Practices called adoption have ranged from the informal and often temporary care of a child (or adult) to the legal and permanent inclusion of a child into a new family, with several stops in between. *West’s Encyclopedia of American Law* defines adoption as “the taking of a child into one’s family, creating a parent to child relationship, and giving him or her all the rights and privileges of one’s own child, including the right to inherit as if the child were the adopter’s natural child.” While this rhymes with our more or less common sense understanding, it doesn’t begin to capture the variety and complexity of the practices we will review. Children have been adopted, legally and extra-legally, formally and informally, to constitute or re-constitute families, to provide homes when birth parents could not or would not do so, to serve as slaves, on the one hand, or to replace disinherited or deceased heirs on the other.

In this book, I have set out to provide a brief but reliable survey of the history of adoption, incorporating my reading and my personal experience as part of an adoptive family. In addition and more significantly, I want to reveal the complex nature of adoptive kinship, and its different meanings in diverse cultural contexts. In the course of the exposition, I hope that readers will come to understand that families really do come