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Three Little Words: A Review

Ashley Rhodes-Courter. 2008. *Three Little Words: A Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

reviewed by Rita L. Soronen

Ashley Rhodes-Courter is a gifted communicator and a disarmingly honest young woman who, in *Three Little Words*, shares her personal journey of tragic abuse and indefatigable personal courage. At age 12, after 10 years and 14 different homes, she escaped from the ravages of the Florida foster care system and began a different quest—learning to trust her adoptive family while working to hold accountable those who criminally failed time and again to keep children in their care safe and nurtured. Brilliant, disturbing, and almost mythical, the tale weaves the innocence and trust of youth through Dickensian images of brutal and bumbling actors in the child welfare system.

Rhodes-Courter begins the book by recounting early memories of family and her mother's deteriorating ability to care for Ashley and her infant brother, Luke. In so doing, the author finds herself, in her words, "peeling a scab off an almost-healed wound." Her nightmare is an all too familiar American narrative of a child torn from home, family, and cherished possessions; caregivers who don't understand child development or children's emotional and physical needs; and years of, at best, broken promises and, at the most egregious, criminal abuse and neglect by those entrusted with her care.

In two years, before she was five, Rhodes-Courter experienced short stays and inconsistent care with five families, including her grandfather. Although in a volatile environment, she remembers life with her grandfather as dreamlike and infused with warm feelings. After her grandfather was shot, she and her brother moved again, to a strange, overcrowded home. Here, watching over Luke, she notes:

Even at that age, I knew what he needed more than the professionals did. I was the only one who comforted him when he was scared or lonely. If any worker had bothered to review our case, they would have realized that at the age of three, Luke had already lost his biological mother, then Mrs. Hines, and now Adele. Seeing Grandpa shot or our hasty removal might have traumatized him. Now he was in a congested home with strangers. He received no loving, individualized attention from a parent figure. I was his security blanket.

Rhodes-Courter could be talking about herself. She moved eight more times and was faced with a range of problems due to courts that overlooked and neglected her case for years. Separated from her brother and placed with a man

accused of molesting children, she got empty promises of reunion and brief visits with her mother, endured torturous punishment in one foster home, and cycled through assorted religious and ethnic households, and public and private schools, before landing in The Children's Home of Tampa.

At 10, Rhodes-Courter learned the routine of institutional care, and tried to suppress the longing for her mother. Still, she was often overwhelmed wondering "where she was and why she had never come for me." At the same time, she was thriving in school and honing her coping skills. She made classmates laugh at her antics and stories, yet suffered daily under the stigma of being from "that place" and not being allowed to simply visit a friend's home unsupervised. She also learned the agency "mating dance" of adoption during, for example, twice-a-year adoption picnics. She writes:

While it was not supposed to be so obvious at The Children's Home of Tampa, prospective parents did act as though they were looking at puppies in a pet shop. For more than two-and-a-half years, I watched the lucky few dogs pack up their belongings, wave good-bye and exit the gate. I also saw them return—even after being placed with a family—with their tails between their legs. People made promises about "forever families," but often something went wrong. I don't know what families expected. Nobody is perfect, and children who have already been rejected by their parents are hoping someone will love them no matter how they behave.

An adoption appeal on a television show with her brother generated no responses, and a sense of hopelessness at ever being adopted took over. Yet through it all, Rhodes-Courter displayed an uncanny confidence, wit, creativity, and strength.

According to Rhodes-Courter's files, covering 10 years in the child welfare system, 73 child welfare administrators, 44 child welfare caseworkers, 19 foster parents, 23 attorneys, 17 therapists, 5 guardian ad litem staff, 4 judges, 4 court personnel, 3 abuse registry workers, 2 primary caseworkers, and 1 CASA volunteer were responsible for her case. Since being adopted, in spite of life lessons that

promises are never kept, adults are not to be trusted, and love is conditional, Rhodes-Courter has learned to trust and love again. And from that secure base, she has participated in a class action suit against the state of Florida on behalf of children in the foster care system, and worked tirelessly to allow the voices of these children to be heard through her presentations, advocacy, and written work.

Three Little Words simply must be read by all adults, but most importantly by child welfare workers, CASA volunteers, attorneys, judges, foster parents, adoptive parents, policymakers, and anyone else who works on behalf of children in America. In *Three Little Words*, Ashley Rhodes-Courter shares her very personal story of childhood, courage, and hope, and in doing so, inspires us all. ☼

Rita Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, works to find loving adoptive families for the 150,000 waiting children in the U.S. and Canadian foster care systems. Under Ms. Soronen's leadership, the Foundation has markedly increased its grant-making and awareness commitments, while developing signature initiatives that underscore and act on the urgency of the issue. In three years, the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program has grown from seven pilot site grants to 109 active sites in the U.S. and three Canadian provinces. More than 500 children have been adopted as a direct result of Wendy's Wonderful Kids.

