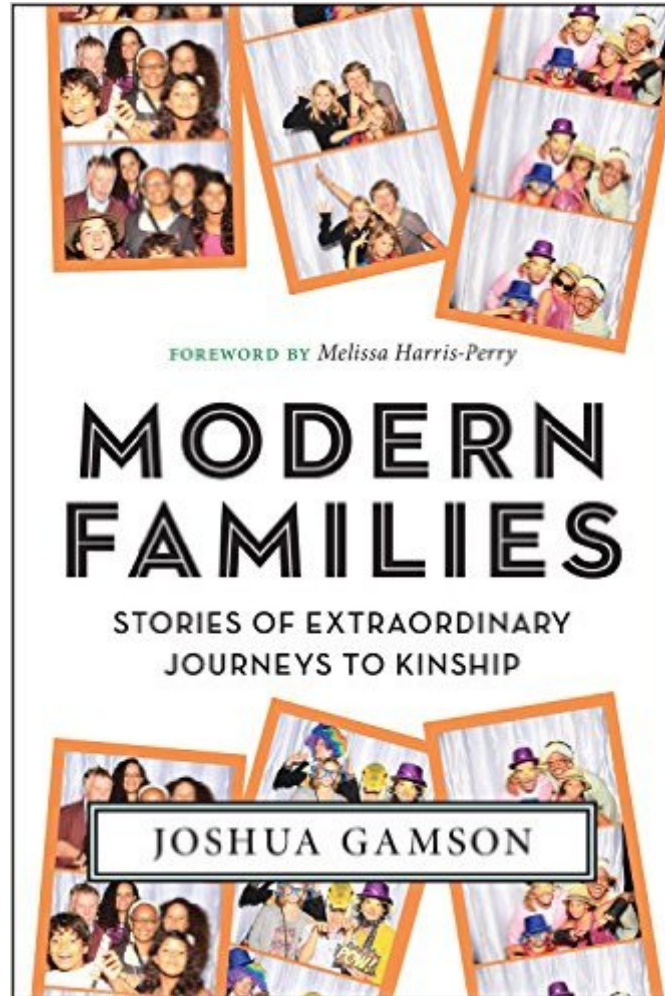


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# Modern Families: Stories Of Extraordinary Journeys To Kinship



## Synopsis

The kinds of families we see today are different than they were even a decade ago, some fantastically so, as paths to parenthood have been rejiggered by technology, activism, and law. In *Modern Families*, Joshua Gamson brings us extraordinary family creation tales—his own included—that illuminate this changing world of contemporary kinship. We meet a child with two mothers, made with one mother's egg and the sperm of a man none of them has ever met and carried by the other mother; another born to a man and a woman in Ethiopia, delivered by his natural grandmother to an orphanage after both his parents died in close succession, and then to the arms of his mother, who is raising him solo. We hear the story of a girl with two dads, conceived with one father's sperm and eggs donated by a friend and carried to term in the womb of another close friend who becomes their surrogate; and of two girls, one born in Nepal and the other in India, legally adopted by a woman who is co-parenting them with her girlfriend and a gay male couple. These are not your grandparents' creation stories. These tales are deeply personal but also unavoidably political. Combining personal memoir and ethnographic storytelling, *Modern Families* tells a variety of unconventional family-creation tales—adoption and assisted reproduction, gay and straight parents, coupled and single, and multi-parent families—set against the social, legal, and economic contexts in which they were made. In these stories, family creation was painstaking and sometimes difficult. Often, parts of biological reproduction took place in a different body than that of the parents raising the child; sometimes, the model of kinship was made up virtually from scratch, often in tension with legally and socially sanctioned versions of family. Becoming parents involved jumping tremendous hurdles—social conventions, legal and medical institutions—with heightened intention and inventiveness, within and across multiple inequities and privileges. It's a bumpy and potholed landscape, as institutional change lags behind the creativity of everyday living, as breaches of family norms remain controversial, and as inequalities haunt the most intensely loving acts. Yet each of these families, however they came to be, shares the same universal joys that all families share. Mapping the large, complex terrain of the modern kinship, *Modern Families* presents a personal, intimate account of social change from the inside out.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Joshua Gamson, a sociologist, has written a compelling book titled *Modern Families: Stories of Extraordinary Journeys to Kinship* (New York University Press, 2015). It is a fascinating combination of sociological text, memoir, and gripping and suspenseful stories (Will the technology work? Will the surrogate change her mind? Will the legal issues be overcome?). It is also both thought-provoking and moving. Gamson looks at the topic of today's various ways of forming families, focusing on several lesbian and gay parents who created their families through technology, surrogacy, adoption, and other ways now available. The sociological observations are woven throughout a series of extended true stories. One of the stories is his own; he and his partner, with the help of friends, kind strangers, technology, and some good fortune, have two daughters together. The path was not easy for them or for the other parents and their families described here. There were hesitations, discussions, money spent, trips taken, legal issues overcome, setbacks, disappointments, hope, hope dashed, and fear of others changing their minds, but finally, there were children and there were families. Gamson outlines many of the issues from a sociologist's point of view and approach. He also addresses issues of equity, exploring the possible inherent moral issues in, for example, using a surrogate who is doing it partly for the money, or in adopting children from a faraway country and/or a different race than the parents. Also discussed are the political issues and fights that have led to the possibilities of these "modern families." And of course there are still fights to fight, in society and with the law.

These fascinating, fast-paced accounts of humane, alternative ways to have or adopt children are especially important given the backdrop of secrecy that has surrounded assisted reproduction and adoption.\* Joshua Gamson's true stories of his own family and those of some of his friends provide readers, including prospective parents of various sexual orientations, a new way to look at

their options. Instead of the dehumanizing notion of renting anonymous wombs or buying the cells of life (aka "surrogacy" and egg or sperm donors), Gamson, a gay man, sociologist, and now father of two, describes people who meet the birth family of an adoptee from Ethiopia, or the surrogate who carried their child, rather than taking the easiest and most anonymous path to parenthood. He acknowledges the extra cost and legal complications of having children this way, including his and his spouse's own economically privileged positions as compared to the woman who carries their second child, though he sometimes had to put the extra expenses on a credit card. In writing about the industry of anonymous gamete donors, in contrast to people who do want to meet their child's genetic or original family, he concludes, "You can erase the histories and humans that are part of your family's origins, or you can refuse to do so; the choice is not just a literary one but a political one." As an adoptee and a feminist myself, two decades ago I urged people of all sexual orientations to choose family-building methods that would allow their children to learn their genetic identities if they want to "as I wanted to" not because genes are everything, but because they are one important part of everyone's self-concept. Adopted or not, we are all a combination of nature and nurture, and all parents are "real."

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