

Who Am I Really?

DONOR OFFSPRING CHARACTERS IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

► PATRICIA MENDELL AND PATRICIA SARLES

I wonder about my genes and if they direct me towards paints and palettes rather than field kicks and playing center forward. Somehow, imagining who could be out there, where I could have come from, and how my DNA will play itself out makes me feel less alone. I love my family. Of course I do. Only, I'm not totally connected to them . . . Mom and Dad were open from the beginning . . . the fact that my biological dad is Donor 142.

—From **The Other Half of Me** by Emily Franklin.

It is estimated that in the last twenty-five years more than one million donor offspring children have been born as a result of the growing success of assisted reproductive technologies. Donor-conceived offspring are those children who have been created with the help of a third party—sperm, egg, or embryo donors—and/or with the help of a traditional or gestational surrogate. In the last fifteen years, these “donor offspring” children and teenagers have increasingly been the subject of research studies in an attempt by investigators to quantify the influence that genetic bewilderment has on their identity formation, self-esteem, and connection with their genetic and non-genetic parents. Although some youth are told from birth or at an early age about the nature of their conception, others are not informed until well into their adolescence or adulthood. Studies have pointed to the fact that children are more likely to accept and successfully assimilate information about their donor/surrogacy origins if parents begin this discussion with them when they are young.

Although the first work of adult fiction with a donor offspring character, **The Sperm Donor's Daughter and Other Tales of Modern Family** by Kathryn Trueblood, was published in 1998, it was not until 2003 that a donor offspring character was introduced to young adult literature in Sue Stauffacher's **Donuthead**. Subsequently several other novels have been published with donor offspring characters, some of whom have known from birth how they were conceived and others who do not find out until adolescence. In her 2006 sequel **Donutheart**, the main character, Franklin Delano Donuthead, wonders:

“Sometimes I wonder what my own father looks like. We have never met him. He just . . . well . . . provided the ingredients. I don't know how to talk about this to people who don't already know. Some people think a child who is the product of a mom and a sperm donor is just plain weird. If only they knew—there are millions of us in schools across America!”

Franklin's ponderings are indicative of the type of questions that donor offspring teenagers have: Who do I look like? Who do I take after? What kinds of things does my father like? What's his family like? Would I like my father if I met him? Would he like me? Does my father have any other children? Do I have any half-siblings? How can I ever find these people that I am related to?

Yet, if a donor offspring teenager came into your library asking for a book on this subject, finding such a title would not be easy because a Library of Congress subject heading for “donor offspring” does not exist. Imagine being a donor offspring teenager seeking information on the subject and being told that the subject, at least according to the cataloguers, does not exist. Given the easy access that teenagers have to information on the Internet, many of these youth will end up seeking out information from Web sites that they are psychologically unprepared to understand and process, potentially causing lifelong identity and trust issues.

Parents and society need to understand that a donor offspring teenager's questions about their donor are not pathological in nature but a healthy and natural part of development and identity formation—who am I? In Laura Langston's **Finding Cassidy**, Cassidy first learns at age sixteen that her dad is not really her father, and that her parents used an anonymous sperm donor to conceive her. Cassidy is now full of questions about who she really is, and in a show of support, her mother agrees to take her to the sperm bank to see if they can find information about her sperm-donor father. The official there states, “All donors are kept confidential . . . [I]t's standard procedure.” Cassidy responds with, “Nothing about this was standard. I just want a name. A little information.” When he responds that he cannot help her and that the information was discussed with the donor and then conveyed between the doctor and his clients (her parents), Cassidy responds with, “The doctor, the donor, and the client. But what about me?” “The agreement wasn't made with you.” “No,” Cassidy answers, “the agreement just created me.”

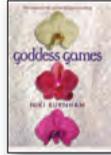
Repeatedly, because of laws governing anonymous donation, it is seldom possible for teenagers to discover the identity of the person who donated to their parents. Although changes are beginning to happen, with many donors now agreeing to meet the couple in advance of the donation or be open to meeting the offspring at eighteen, there is presently no single standard. Often parents, donors, and donor offspring are turning to other unregulated Web sites like the **Donor Sibling Registry** (<http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com>). This registry, established by a single mother of a child conceived by an anonymous sperm donor, is helping to connect teenagers to their half-siblings and donor fathers. For the adolescent who is in search of her identity, the question “Who am I?” becomes not just the quest of a normal teenager but raises larger, lifelong issues. For parents and teenagers seeking help from librarians to understand and normalize their donor conception, having the proper subject headings would be very important in their search for information on the subject. It is also important that those writing YA novels about this subject be knowledgeable, sensitive, and accurate in their depiction of donor offspring teenagers.

The following list of fiction was compiled to satisfy the needs of two audiences: donor offspring teenagers wanting to read books about characters conceived via donor sperm and librarians who would like to develop collections on this topic for their libraries.

**DONOR OFFSPRING CHARACTERS IN
YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

Burnham, Niki. **Goddess Games**. Simon and Schuster, 2007. 282p. \$15.99. 978-1-4169-2700-6. \$8.99 Trade pb. 978-1-4169-2772-3.

Teenage Seneca sometimes wishes she had a “real father” instead of the anonymous sperm donor whom her mother used to have her.



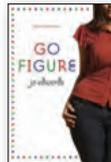
Chalifour, Francis. **Call Me Mimi**. Tundra, 2008. 178p. \$12.95 Trade pb. 978-0-88776-823-1.

All seventeen-year-old Mimi knows is that her father was a sperm donor in Toronto, but this information doesn’t stop her from calling him “Dad” and being obsessed with finding him.



Edwards, Jo. **Go Figure**. Simon Pulse/S & S, 2007. 271p. \$8.99 Trade pb. 978-1-4169-2492-0. VOYA April 2008. 3Q 4P S

Seventeen-year-old Ryan finds it “creepy” that she is the “product of specimen cups, test tubes, and dirty magazines,” and wishes that her mother wasn’t so proud of the fact that she didn’t need a man to make a baby.



Fraiberg, Jordanna. **In Your Room**. Razorbill/Penguin, 2008. 272p. \$8.99 Trade pb. 978-1-59514-193-4.

Charlie and his moms were “one of the first ‘planned’ nontraditional families in Boulder,” using a sperm bank in order to conceive him.



Franklin, Emily. **The Other Half of Me**. Delacorte, 2007. 256p. \$15.99. 978-0-385-73445-5. \$6.50 pb. 978-0-385-73446-2. VOYA February 2008. 1Q 1P M J

Sixteen-year-old Jenny has always known that her father was donor number 142, and she goes online to consult something akin to the **Donor Sibling Registry** to find out if she has any half-siblings.



Halpin, Brendan. **Donorboy: A Novel**. Villard, 2004. 209p. \$12.95 Trade pb. 978-1-4000-6277-5.

Fourteen-year-old Rosalind, conceived via a known donor and IVF to her lesbian moms, goes to live with her donor father when both her parents are killed in an accident.



Hogan, Mary. **Perfect Girl**. HarperTeen, 2007. 196p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-084108-9. \$7.99 Trade pb. 978-0-06-084110-2.

Fourteen-year-old Ruthie’s mom assures her that “no child was wanted more than you,” when she told Ruthie how she was conceived.



Kasischke, Laura. **Feathered**. HarperTeen, 2008. 272p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-081317-8. PLB \$17.89. 978-0-06-081318-5. VOYA October 2008. 4Q 4P J S

Teenage Michelle, knowing how she was conceived, longs to meet her father and wonders every time she sees a man with blue-green eyes or curly dark hair.

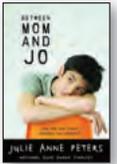


Langston, Laura. **Finding Cassidy**. HarperTrophy Canada, 2008. 237p. CDN \$15.99. 978-0-00-639581-2. CDN \$7.99. 978-0-00-255316-2. Available through <http://www.amazon.ca> or the author’s Web site at <http://www.lauralangston.com>.



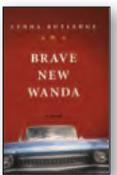
When her father is diagnosed with the genetic Huntington’s disease, sixteen-year-old Cassidy is afraid she will get it too, until her parents reveal to her that her dad is not really her father and that she was conceived via an anonymous sperm donor.

Peters, Julie Anne. **Between Mom and Jo**. Little Brown, 2008, ©2006. 240p. \$7.99 Trade pb. 978-0-316-06710-2. VOYA February 2006. 5Q 4P M J S
Fourteen-year-old Nick is the son of two moms and the product of sperm donation. Now his two moms are breaking up and he is wondering who his sperm donor father is.



Rutledge, Lynda. **Brave New Wanda: A Novel**. WordFarm, 2004. 191p. \$13 Trade pb. 978-0-9743427-5-7.

Thirteen-year-old Wanda learns upon her mother’s death that her Daddy is not her real Daddy, and goes in search of the medical student who anonymously donated sperm to her mother.



Sheinmel, Courtney. **My So-Called Family**. Simon & Schuster, 2008. 208p. \$15.99. 978-1-4169-5785-0. \$6.99 pb. 978-1-4169-7942-5.

Leah loves her family but feels disconnected from them because she has known since birth that she was the product of artificial insemination and, now thirteen years old, feels compelled to find out who her other relatives might be.



Stauffacher, Sue. **Donuthead**. Yearling/Random House, 2005, ©2003. 160p. \$5.99 pb. 978-0-440-41934-1.

Raised by a single-mother, fourth-grader Franklin has always known that he was conceived via anonymous sperm donation.



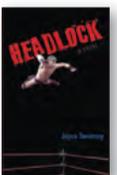
_____. **Donutheart**. Yearling/Random House Children’s Books, 2006. 160p. \$15.95. 978-0-375-83275-8. \$5.99 pb. 978-0-440-42065-1. VOYA December 2006. 4Q 4P M J

Franklin, now in middle school, has to deal with growing up and falling for the perfect girl.



Sweeney, Joyce. **Headlock**. Henry Holt/Macmillan, 2006. 214p. \$16.95. 978-0-8050-8018-6. VOYA October 2006. 2Q 2P S

Eighteen-year-old Kyle hates “being so different” because his mother didn’t need a man to have a baby when she “picked him out of a catalog,” but now she has abandoned him and his failing grandmother.



Trueblood, Kathryn. **The Sperm Donor’s Daughter and Other Tales of Modern Family**. Permanent Press, 1998. 166p. \$24. 978-1-57962-006-6. \$16 Trade pb. 978-1-57962-053-0.

Twenty-year-old Jessie’s mom reveals the truth to Jessie about her origins and Jessie goes on a quest to find her sperm-donor father. Although Jessie is a young adult, this is an adult novella. ■



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