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Cris Beam, *To the End of June: The Intimate Life of American Foster Care*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2013). \$27.00 (hardcover). David Tobis, *From Pariahs to Partners: How Parents and Their Allies Changed New York City's Child Welfare System*. Oxford

University Press (2013). \$29.95 (hardcover).

David Liederman, the late Chair of the Child Welfare League of America, once said, "Child welfare work isn't rocket science. It's harder." *To the End of June* and *From Pariahs to Partners* are two recent books that prove the veracity of this statement, each in its own way. Beam's is the more artistic of the two, etching a memorable, evocative and ultimately sad portrayal of life in today's foster care system. Tobis chips away at a different story—one of transformation that tells the tale of change in New York City's child welfare system in a more logical, deductive fashion. What is common to both, and the true gem of each of these excellent books, is their privileging of the client voice. In *Pariahs*, it is parents and advocates outside of the system who speak, and in *June*, it is the children and foster parents themselves.

A writer and teacher whose introduction to foster care came through impulsively rescuing one of her students, Beam brings to full color the portraits of six families and 22 young persons caught up in the maddening machinery of American foster care. Beam's work is thoroughly researched and un- apologetically subjective. She has the reader rooting for foster parents and youth to succeed against all odds—until we realize, through her clear and perceptive narratives, that all human beings are fallible. In fifteen well-paced and beautifully crafted chapters, Beam weaves stories of do-gooders whose own chal- lenges in life blind them to the true needs of the children they care for; of teenagers who are shuffled along the game of life like tokens, expected to behave as if they have been treated fairly and make decisions as if capable, when neither one is true or possible.

This book is highly recommended, not for its thorough view of today's foster care, but for its sensitive, nuanced and infrequently told view. Segmented in

three aptly titled sections (“Catch”, “Hold,” and “Release”) but by no means linear, Beam introduces the ironies and incredulities of a system serving foster children and the families who take them in. She skillfully and deftly moves along each of their narratives, then (sometimes confusingly) doubles back, updating the reader on the all-too-often dismal conclusions of their lives together. Each story offers the foibles and redemptions of what it is to be human, though it seems the cost is always—in the end—the child’s.

To the End of June leaves the reader moved by its intimate portrayals, bewildered by the complexities, ambiguities and mistakes Beam points up, and nearly incapable, by its end,

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of seeing anything right about today’s child welfare system. And that’s when David Tobis comes to the rescue. In his energetic, if at times redundant, documentation of the many ways parents and their allies changed the child welfare system in New York City these past two decades, we find some room for optimism. Fueled by his own charismatic and forward thinking leadership, Tobis articulates the inside story of change in a system seemingly incapable of transformation. Through vivid, nearly reportorial observation, Tobis highlights how parents and various child welfare advocacy groups offered a countervailing force to the powers that be in New York City. Starting with his first person descriptions of meetings that led to the creation of the Child Welfare Fund and other initiatives, Tobis is the ultimate insider, providing the spark for much of the reform’s momentum. His unwavering belief in the power of (birth)parent participation is the main thread woven throughout the book’s eight chapters.

Tobis writes convincingly of how mainly poor, disenfranchised women (mostly of color) are seen by those inside and outside of the child welfare system—as demon-mothers, parent pariahs, criminals in a society that is quick to disregard their rights and needs. Through numerous case examples, he highlights agency-based practices that too often victimize the very families they are supposed to help while cogently, unflinchingly baring the underlying abuse and neglect that drew the attention of child welfare authorities to these mothers in the first place. He devotes several chapters to the initial context of the reform central to the book; another to lucid portrayal

of four mothers whose children were placed in foster care; another to the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), the country's preeminent organization run by and for parents in the child welfare system; and several to profiles of other parent-led or parent-focused organizations in New York City and nationally. He finishes with his take on the lasting effectiveness as well as the future of child welfare reform.

Of equal value to his very real and personal descriptions of the change agents are Tobis's illustrations of the underlying organizational dynamics at play in the reform movement. As a trained sociologist, he deftly analyzes both supporting and countervailing forces in the fight to change a system that is fundamentally political. Throughout, Tobis describes the

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complex interplay of economic, political, legal, and sociological factors that, when combined with the power of the media, inevitably leads to the cyclical nature of opportunity, change, and backsliding that has accompanied every reform effort. Rarely do we see as finely written a story by one who lived and led a social change movement.

By the end, Tobis acknowledges the difficulty of changing a system whose focus is on those without a voice: children. He counts on people like Beam to bring those voices to the fore, while empowering parents and advocates to continue working toward child welfare reform. Beam and Tobis write from two very different perspectives—the former primarily that of the foster child and foster parent, and Tobis, from that of the (birth) parent. Yet, if they were in the same room, they would likely agree on many things, primarily that change should focus on working to prevent family problems in the first place.

In reading both books, I occasionally found myself defensive, arguing on behalf of the agency's perspective, or, as a social worker, privileging the social work voice. I wanted to point out the progress we have made, of the evidence we continue to amass on its sometime effectiveness. I wanted to scream that most of its shortcomings are the result of underfunding, and many of its inefficiencies an outcome of its unavoidable scope. That each book left this me unsettled, agitated, and deeply affected is evidence that the

seeds these authors have sown can cultivate longer lasting reform.

Julie Cooper Altman, School of Social Work, Adelphi University