



Kinfolks: Falling Off the Family Tree - The Search for My Melungeon Ancestors

Lisa Alther

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In this dazzling, hilarious memoir, best-selling author of *Kinflicks* Lisa Alther chronicles her search for the missing--often mysterious--branches of her family tree.

Most of us grow up thinking we know who we are and where we come from. Lisa Alther's mother hailed from New York, her father from Virginia, and every day they reenacted the Civil War at home in East Tennessee. Then one night a grizzled babysitter with brown teeth told Lisa about the Melungeons: six-fingered child-snatchers who hid in cliff caves outside town. Forgetting about these creepy kidnappers until she had a daughter of her own, Lisa learned that the Melungeons were actually a group of dark-skinned people--some with extra thumbs--living in isolated pockets in the South. But who were they? Where did they come from? Were they the descendants of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony, or of shipwrecked Portuguese or Turkish sailors? Or were they the children of European frontiersmen, African slaves, and Native Americans? Theories abounded, but no one seemed to know for sure.

Learning that a cousin had had his extra thumbs removed, Lisa set out to discover who these mysterious Melungeons really were and why her grandmother wouldn't let her visit their Virginia relatives. Were there Melungeons in the family tree? Lisa assembled a hoard of clues over the years, but DNA testing finally offered answers.

Part sidesplitting travelogue, part how--and how not--to climb your family tree, *Kinfolks* shimmers with wicked humor, illustrating just how wacky and wonderful our human family really is.

Kinfolks: Falling Off the Family Tree - The Search for My Melungeon Ancestors Details

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JulieK says

I picked up this book because I didn't know anything about the Melungeons and was curious to learn more, so I was impatient with the larger-than-expected portion of the book that was straight (non-Melungeon-related) memoir. I wasn't particularly interested in what club the author was in during high school or whether or not she saw a sea monster in Lake Champlain, and wished she'd stayed more focused on the Melungeon aspect. It felt a little self-indulgent on the author's part, I guess.

Dlmrose says

3.5

Maitri says

....woman searches for her DNA ancestry in Appalachia and discovers roots to Portugal, Jewish, Native American heritage - which is not expected since her family culturally identify as Scottish protestant.

I love the way this is written and the humor. It reads so quickly and comes across as an honest re-telling of her experience at each step of the way. It helps me to find surprises and interesting turns in my own DNA ancestry - and that there is no need to try and figure out "how" or "why" information got lost...just focus on your own findings and mostly this brings joy and satisfaction.

And for Lisa Alther -a book!

I initially picked up this book because there was a review by Doris Lessing and so I knew it had to be good. I was concerned about reading a memoir that was going to drag me into the mud of someone else's confusion (claiming universal insight along the way); but nope! This was enjoyable, fun, and i definitely recommend to others to read this book.

Jane Irish Nelson says

Author Lisa Alther never quite felt like she fit in. Not in Tennessee where she grew up, as did her father. Nor in New York/New England where her mother came from. So she decided to find out more about her ancestry, especially since she wondered why they never visited her father's relatives who lived only twenty miles away across the state border in Virginia. Hints and comments made her wonder if any of her forbears might belong to the mysterious Melungeons, but to begin with any mention of them stopped conversation cold. They are many theories about their origins, and Alther examined all of them, including enlisting her

father into an early DNA study. As time went by, however, many people became more receptive to the possibilities of mixed-race ancestry, not matter what races might be included. This is an interesting and intriguing account of the author's search and her discoveries. However, since it was published ten years ago (2007), more discoveries may have been made since (I have not checked).

Jeanne says

This is a non-fiction book by a successful fiction writer. She has a nice sense of humor. The book is interesting for its history, social commentary, and also to see how DNA research is helping to clear up some of history's little mysteries.

Colleen Andrews says

One of the most interesting books I've ever read.

Jennifer says

What a wheeze of a memoir. A young Tennessee woman who feels rather out-of-place no matter where she goes latches on the the Melungeon people of her region as a metaphor for her own identity. Her searches are fascinating, her droll and wonderful family are a delight, and her storytelling--punctuated by the sayings on church signboards she sees on her travels through the South--is so original and just plain fun. Of course, I too have been contacted by researchers wanting to know if anyone in the family had extra thumbs; I think it's inevitable you'll be asked if you have certain last names in your ancestry and your family lived in certain regions of the South. And, like Ms. Alther, I had a grandmother who worked diligently to obscure and tidy the family tree.

Gwen says

I expected to love this book, since it's written by a transplanted Southern woman and looks at her family and some of the secrets of her heritage and the way that race plays into that. I was surprised that not only did I not love it, I actively disliked it.

The whole book struck me as an example of self-involved "who AM I?" reflections. If she was looking into the history of her family, and their possible Melungeon ancestry, just because it's interesting or to know more about her family, I would have no problem with that--I've done the same thing. But she seems to really *want* to be Melungeon, and that wish appears to spring from a feeling that it would be neat or would make her family more special or interesting. I don't have a lot of patience with ethnic identification being used to try to make claims to your family's historical significance or to make the person feel unique and interesting. When initial testing doesn't conclude that she'd Melungeon, she doesn't just find that to be an interesting fact, she's disappointed. Being Melungeon seems to have become to her not just because of a connection to her family's past, but because being Melungeon is desirable, in and of itself.

I also find the way she talks about race really annoying. She discusses on several pages the social construction of race, and the way that "race" doesn't exist in a purely biological sense (there's no one gene that determines your race, there's no such thing as a "pure" race of people, the vast majority of human variation is between individuals of the same so-called race, not across racial lines, etc.). But in the rest of the book, she talks about race in this essentialized biological sense, as though we can really define what % of this or that race/ethnicity a person is, and as though these %s are in any way meaningful.

I also felt like it was a really self-pitying book. Boo hoo, I don't know who I am, but if I can find out this history of my family, it will give me an identity and a sense of self. Guess what? Unless she's going to throw herself into being Melungeon (in a way similar to how new religious converts often become super hardcore), finding out one way or the other isn't some magical solution and is unlikely to change anything about her life.

And she uses words like "halfbreed" in a non-ironic, uncritical way at some points that I find very bizarre.

So. I didn't like it.

Sarah Beth says

Lisa Alther's memoir explores her family roots, as she goes on a exploration to discover what her grandparents wouldn't tell her and what other family members never knew. Alther discovered that she likely had Melungeon ancestors, and set out to find out exactly who the Melungeons were. Multiple theories about Melungeon origins abound - members of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony, descendants of shipwrecked Portuguese, descendants with mixed race including Native American and African ancestors.

I chose this book to read because of an interest in learning more about the Melungeons. Although the book does deal with the Melungeons, it's not solely about this aspect of Alther's family tree. Alther spends the first half of the book relaying childhood anecdotes and describing her family. I particularly enjoyed reading about her experiences facing prejudice as a Southerner in a very Northern college. However, that is not what I anticipated from this memoir going in, and I felt somewhat led astray by the book jacket.

It was interesting reading about traits peculiar to Melungeons - dark skin, blue eyes, oftentimes with extra fingers. However, because of the many theories as to Melungeon origins, at times I felt the narrative and historical pondering became too vague and open ended. Alther throws in summations of major historical events including colonization, slavery, Native American populations, and racism in America. At times the thread of the narrative felt a bit overboard in its scope, and also elementary in trying to quickly summarize vast and complicated issues. Yet this is a memoir, and it is Alther's family story, so it's her history to tell.

Alther repeatedly references her feeling that she isn't a "fun" person, yet this is ironic to me because her memoir is written in a pithy and witty manner. For example, "What I was growing up, we split a cow with them every year for meat. I remember the year we ate the cow named Lisa. So do my therapists" (54). I suspect that Alther is a funny conversationalist, and one who isn't afraid to poke fun at herself. I also appreciated her candid summation of childhood in a Southern culture, and her bravery in defying her grandmother's wish to not look into her family heritage. Like Alther, I would absolutely want to know where I had come from. I liked that the memoir concluded with Alther and her father finding out their genetic ancestry, because I felt like it finally gave some conclusions about where the Melungeons originated from. Although we're unlikely to ever know the full story, it appears that they likely represent a true American

melting pot, albeit one shrouded in mystery, suspicion, and prejudice for generations.

Sara says

Yet another dollar store purchase that I was pleasantly surprised by. I only picked it up since it had a genealogy/history slant. She writes about her decades long search for "melungeons" that she supposedly belongs to. Thankfully she keeps her very liberal opinions short & few as she travels to discover what she calls an American history that she didn't learn in school (I did so I don't know how she didn't know that this continent was already heavily populated pre-Columbus). Yet I did learn lots about how 'races' really intermingled prior to the 1880's. It reinvigorated my interest in figuring out how my mother's side has Algonquin in it since this book gives a good overview of how that might of happened. But the best part of the book are the last 3 chapters: First she really condenses the history of names and words to give a good argument of the source of the melungeons, and the modern day way of tracing your ancestors: DNA. IF you like memoirs, history or genealogy give this book a read.

Liz Pardey says

Lisa suspected that her family might be descended from Melungeons, a six-toed dark skinned group in rural Tennessee. She does DNA tests for herself and some of her relatives, she researches her family tree, visits Melungeon areas. Her quest results in no links to the Melungeons, but it was certainly an enjoyable and educational journey. Is she relieved or disappointed? What about her father? Glad or sad?

Janna says

Liza with an S! We met at the Appalachian Writers Workshop. A memoir as charming as the author! I laughed out loud at times. A fun read.

Alex Bledsoe says

A fun romp through the genealogical jungles of American society, particularly in the South, more particularly in East Tennessee (where my father's family also originates). Ms. Alther wrote the best-selling novel KINFLICKS, and this is a memoir-ish companion piece, a first-person narration of her attempt to find out if she is a Melungeon. Her voice is droll, funny, and perfect for the topic.

Dana says

I like how she focused on parts of life other than her romantic life. And hey--that monster in Lake Champlain

is real--her family all saw it while at a family reunion.

Naomi says

Really wonderful and funny exploration of self-discovery and identity.
