

“At Long Last...Love?”

BOOK REVIEW

Lynette Berg Robe

Coontz, Stephanie, *Marriage a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (Viking, Penguin Group, 2005.)

Remember the popular song from the 1950's? Frank Sinatra had a version:

*Love and marriage,
Love and marriage,
Go together
Like a horse and carriage,
This I tell you, brother,*

You can't have one without the other.

(Words by Sammy Cahn and Music by Jimmy Van Heusen, 1955)

Current social convention, at least in Western countries, may accept that notion of love and marriage being inseparable. A recent book, however, by Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, opines that, historically, it was hardly ever so.

In fact, as the title implies, she says that marriage as an institution has changed more in the last fifty years than it did in the previous 5,000 years, and that, in the past, marriage was rarely about love. In the past, marriage was much more a practical arrangement for the ordering of society. Marriage was about rights to property, economics, politics and alignments, social advancement of families, production of children to ensure organization of inheritance rights, and care for elders. Although people did fall in love, they rarely had the choice to marry the person they loved. Love was something completely separate from marriage, and following a passion for someone rather than the dictates of the family or society was frowned upon, and even viewed as a form of insanity. Indeed, one need only look to Shakespeare's tragedies, with *Romeo and Juliet* as a prime example of a cautionary morality tale as to what happens to young lovers who marry against powerful familial interests and politics.

In an entertaining and inviting manner, Coontz traces



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the history of marriage in fascinating detail. She shows that marriage has been a fluid and continually evolving institution since the dawn of history. Ms. Coontz follows marriage practices from the Paleolithic era through the 20th Century and into the 21st through the customs and laws of many cultures and countries.

Among the interesting anthropological tidbits:

- “Polygyny,¹ whereby a man can have multiple wives, is the marriage form found in more places and at most times than any other.”
- “In Europe, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, adultery became idealized as the highest form of love among the aristocracy. According to the Countess of Champagne, it was impossible for true love to ‘exert its powers between two people who are married to each other.’”
- “In Africa, the Fulbe people of northern Cameroon do not see love as a legitimate emotion, especially within marriage, as it is seen as disruptive to the wider web of dependence that makes society work. Fulbe women ‘vehemently deny emotional attachment to a husband.’”
- “Eskimo or Inuit couples had a tradition of co-sposal arrangements, in which each partner had sexual relations with the other’s spouse. The Inuit also believed that a remarried person’s partner had an obligation to allow the former spouse, as well as any children of that union, the right to fish, hunt, and gather in the new spouse’s territory.”
- “Among the Rukuba of Nigeria, a wife can take a lover at the time of her first marriage. This relationship is so embedded in accepted custom that the lover has the right, later in life, to ask his former mistress to marry her daughter to his son.”

- “The Na people of China, a society of about 30,000 people in the Yunnan Province, is the only society in world history that did not make marriage a central way of organizing social and personal life. Among the Na, brothers and sisters live together, jointly raising, educating, and supporting the children to whom the sisters give birth, which result from casual sexual encounters.”
- In early Rome, there were two types of marriage concerning property rights and control over the wife. In a marriage under the “hand” or *manus*, a wife became part of her husband’s family and had inheritance rights. In a marriage *sin manus*, the wife remained under her father’s control after marriage. In marriage *sin manus*, a father gave a smaller dowry, because the husband’s family did not have to make the bride a coheir to their property. In a wealthy aristocratic family, a daughter’s marriage *sin manus* meant that the husband’s family would not get the daughter’s inheritance at her death, but it would go to her father or brother at her death. If the wife’s father died, however, during her marriage, it meant the woman gained legal autonomy because she was not under the “hand” of her husband.

Coontz also cites many intriguing statistics:

- “In states that adopted unilateral or ‘no fault’ divorce, afterward, the suicide rate of married women decreased by 20%. There was also a significant drop in homicides against women and domestic violence against both women and men.”
- An American who reaches age 60 today can expect to live another 25 years. The average married couple will live for more than three decades *after* their kids have left home. No previous generation has ever been asked to make such a long-term commitment.
- One-third of the 50,000 children adopted in the United States in 2001 went to single women.
- Population experts predict that 50% of children in the United States will spend part of their lives in a household that does not contain both their married, biological parents.
- In Germany and Japan, they are worried about the low birth rates in their countries in or out of marriage. Japan’s population is expected to plunge by almost one-third by 2050.
- In Spain, more than 50% of women aged 25-29 are single.
- Japan shares with Scandinavia the distinction of having the highest percentage of unmarried women between ages of 20 and 40 of anywhere in the world.
- In Italy, people are concerned about the growing numbers of *mammoni* or “mamas’ boys,” educated men with good jobs in their 20’s and 30’s who do not marry but live at home where their mamas cook for them and do their laundry.
- Even in Saudi Arabia, the government is concerned about the high bride prices that make it impossible for young men to marry.
- In China, the one-child policy has resulted in more boys being born, due to the abortion of female fetuses. There are now 117 boys born to every 100 girls, and, of course, many Chinese girls have been placed for adoption in other countries. It is anticipated that by 2020, China will have between 30 and 40 million men who cannot find wives.

In the last third of the book, Coontz focuses mainly on American marriage and how it has evolved in the past roughly 300 years. She describes that a major transformation began in society in the 18th Century with the convergence of the Industrial Revolution and the spread of the market economy, together with the Enlightenment ideas of individual rights, egalitarian principles, reason, justice, and the right to the pursuit of happiness. This convergence began to lead to democracy in society and, eventually, in marriage as well.

In Victorian times, the model of marriage with the male breadwinner and female homemaker family became the ideal. Although Victorians also espoused the concept of marriage based upon love and companionship, the greatest obstacle to achieving that was that women still needed to marry in order to survive.

Finally, the 1950's and the era of "Ozzie and Harriet" emerged. During this singular decade, the cultural consensus became that everyone should marry and form a nuclear family based upon a male wage earner and a child-rearing, home-managing housewife. Then came the 1960's. As Coontz tells it, it took more than 150 years to establish the love-based, male breadwinner marriage as the dominant model in North America and Western Europe, and it took less than 25 years to dismantle it. "Women's lib," Betty Friedan, the "pill," the "sexual revolution," Hugh Hefner, inflation, drip-dry shirts, pre-packaged foods, and the personal pursuit of happiness, among many other influences, worked to change the marriage landscape at the end of the 20th Century.

Coontz postulates that the divorce rate began to rise when people began to marry only for love. Now, individuals are looking for their one "soulmate," the person who "completes" them. With women capable of making their own living, marriage is no longer an economic necessity. Single parenthood is also common. This high aspiration of having marriage be a partnership that is each person's single most important relationship, where the spouse must be the lover, best friend, confidant, co-parent, and co-breadwinner has created more pressure on the institution of marriage than it ever has had to support before. It is no wonder that couples can become disillusioned with each other and decide to keep on looking for the perfect "love."

Coontz says:

The democratization of marriage has been messy. People with more choices have more chances to make bad decisions as well as good ones. When a couple has to negotiate because the husband cannot simply impose his will, there is a chance that negotiations will break down. When both partners can have equally important but conflicting career trajectories or life goals, even the most loving couple may come to a parting of the ways. The bad news is that the institution of marriage will never again be as universal or stable as it was when marriage was the only viable option. But that is also the good news.

If Coontz' analysis is correct, anyone considering marriage, or staying in one, is burdened by extraordinary

expectations. A person assessing a relationship must weigh the pros and cons, trying to ascertain if it is "true love" before taking the leap into or out of marriage. To end with the lyrics from a Cole Porter song:

*Is it an earthquake or simply a shock?
Is it the good turtle soup or merely the mock?
Is it a cocktail this feeling of joy,
Or is what I feel the real McCoy?
Is it for all time or simply a lark?
Is it Granada I see or only Asbury Park?
Is it a fancy not worth thinking of,
Or is it...At Long Last, Love?
(Words and Music by Cole Porter 1938)*

Sadly, those who end up knocking on our office doors have answered "No" to that final question. ■

*Stephanie Coontz is the Director of Research and Public Education at the Council on Contemporary Families, and she teaches history and family studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. She has written extensively about marriage and family issues, including a prior book titled *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Her current book, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, is currently available in both hardback and paperback editions.

Endnotes

¹ According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, "polygyny" is marriage where a man has multiple wives, "polyandry" is where a woman has multiple husbands, and the term "polygamy" is the generic term that describes a marriage where one spouse has multiple spouses of the opposite sex.