

When the wedded bliss has cooled

Marriage Confidential

by Pamela Haag

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The chances are, this book describes your marriage. And not in a good way. Its subject is what Pamela Haag – academic, mother and self-confessed ‘ambivalent’ wife – regards as the prevailing condition of modern marriage: a nagging, low-level melancholy.

There’s no crisis. The spouses are ‘sad more than miserable, disappointed more than chronically unhappy’. In fact, they function well as a day-to-day partnership and value the stability that marriage brings. They hate the idea of divorce, yet often they end up drifting into it.

This is a particularly modern phenomenon. Unlike the ‘Stick It Out’ marriages of the Fifties, ours lack the glue of social or religious convention. Divorce is no longer seen as impossibly wicked.

Thanks to feminism and the sexual revolution, we no longer need to marry for sex, financial

security, social status or even procreation. Neither, really, do we believe in romance any more, at least not in the star-crossed, made-for-each-other sense.

This, says Haag, is the age of the Post-Romantic Marriage. Most of us have been in love at least once before we choose a mate for life. We know from experience that sexual passion peters out. Our reasons for marrying are largely practical: we want companionship; someone with whom to share the daily grind; a partner in parenting.

We choose spouses increasingly like ourselves, selecting a partner similar in class, education, career and earning potential. Online dating, which allows us to screen potential mates from a distance without the ‘haphazard’ influences of pheromones or personal charm, has exacerbated this. Compatibility has taken precedence over passion.

Within marriage, too, there is less and less difference between the sexes. More often than not, both spouses earn, and both do chores and childcare. This can have a deadening effect on romance. It is hard to get into a lusty lather about a mate who is basically yourself in Y-fronts.

Haag, a feminist, has no desire to roll back the social revolutions that brought us to this point. Nor does she believe we should give up on marriage as an institution. Rather, she wants us to rewrite the rules in order to save it.

Marriage Confidential might not have the answers, but it does raise interesting questions. It’s also a very entertaining read; for an academic writer, Haag has a lovely light touch. Reading the book is, in itself, a consolation of sorts.

At best, you’ll come away thinking your marriage is happier than most; at worst, there’s safety in numbers.

Jemima Lewis