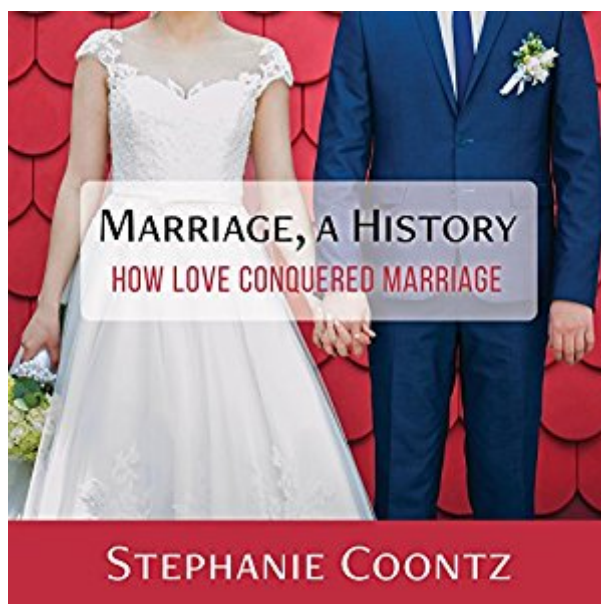


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Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage



Synopsis

Just when the clamor over "traditional" marriage couldn't get any louder, along comes this groundbreaking book to ask, "What tradition?" In *Marriage, a History*, historian and marriage expert Stephanie Coontz takes listeners from the marital intrigues of ancient Babylon to the torments of Victorian lovers to demonstrate how recent the idea of marrying for love is - and how absurd it would have seemed to most of our ancestors. It was when marriage moved into the emotional sphere in the 19th century, she argues, that it suffered as an institution just as it began to thrive as a personal relationship. This enlightening and hugely entertaining book brings intelligence, perspective, and wit to today's marital debate.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Stephanie Coontz has devoted her career to waging war on ahistorical understandings of the family. She first came to national notice with her now classic book *THE WAY WE NEVER WERE: AMERICAN FAMILIES AND THE NOSTALGIA TRAP*, which attacked naive attempts to make what she termed the Ozzie and Harriett marriage as somehow normative, a family in which the father worked, the mother stayed at home, both stayed married for a lifetime, and their two lovely children completed an ideal, caring unit. Though massive sifting of historical and statistical materials she was able to show that this picture of the family--a picture that determines even today a vast amount of political debate about "family values"--was even in the fifties largely a myth. Nostalgia, a phenomenon that has long driven right-wing movements, is by its very nature ahistorical, referring to

a past that never existed and would be undesirable today even if possible. In *MARRIAGE, A HISTORY: FROM OBEDIENCE TO INTIMACY OR HOW LOVE CONQUERED MARRIAGE* Coontz fights nostalgia further by a fascinating and far-ranging study of the history of marriage in Western civilization. What is shocking is learning that so far from being a static, traditional relationship with a fundamental shape and form, marriage is instead a constantly evolving institution that has altered numerous times in the past thousand or so years in response to various social needs or pressures. Changing societal values, alterations in the material conditions at a particular point in time, or even changing ideas about romance have all exerted enormous influence on the understanding and practice of marriage at any particular time. Her discussion essentially renders virtually all right wing rhetoric about the need to protect "family values" or "marriage" utter nonsense.

After reading this book, it is abundantly clear that for almost the entire history of mankind, marriages have not been based on love, let alone equality. Marriage was basically a necessity, serving both political and economic purposes, in contrast to the many choices for living arrangements that have appeared in the last fifty years or so. In addition, marriage in the past was all about male domination, a wife having no legal standing whatsoever. Divorce in most settings was nearly impossible. But the introduction of love into forming marriages has been transforming in many ways. In the absence of formal legal rules and governments, powerful families or tribes generally ruled over territories. Marriages were used to forge alliances among rulers. In the lower classes marriage was an economic necessity - a solitary individual found it almost impossible to survive. Marriages were not formally sanctioned, though the Church in the Middle Ages attempted to impose some control. Fundamentally, the intent of two consenting adults established a marriage. With the rise of constitutional governments and individual rights, women gained some ability to withstand forced marriages, but were still seen as subservient to husbands - not equals. Women because of their "differences" were seen as being suited to the domestic sphere only, but many women chafed at that arrangement. There is no doubt that the twentieth century saw more changes in marriages and other living arrangements among adults than in all previous eras combined. The changes were uneven, often depending on the state of the economy. The changes of the 1920s, in which potential partners followed their feelings, somewhat regressed during the Great Depression of the 30s.

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