

Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage

By Stephanie Coontz

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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 readers 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 nineteenth 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.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Politics, economics, greed, sex, cars—without them, matrimony wouldn't have caused the historical revolution ensuing today, concludes social historian Stephanie Coontz, in *Marriage, a History*. Modern marriage is in crisis; but don't pine for a return to "the good old days," when men earned money and women kept house. Don't even assume the crisis is all bad. For as Coontz reveals in this ambitious, multi-century trek through wedlock, marriage has morphed into the highest expression of commitment in Western Europe and North America; and though assumptions no longer exist regarding which partner may say "I do" to work, childcare, or other shared responsibilities, a clear set of rules about saying "I don't" (to infidelity and irresponsibility) rings loud as church bells.

"This is not the book I thought I was going to write," Coontz admits. She intended to show that marriage was *not* in crisis; merely changing in expected ways. But her exhaustive research suggested the opposite was true. Tracing matrimony's path from ancient times (when some cultures lacked a word for "love" and the majority of pairings were attempts to seize land or family names) through present day, she closely examines the many external forces at play in shaping modern marriage. Coontz details how society's attempts to toughen this institution, have actually made it more fragile. Her rich talent for analyzing events, statistics, and theories from a myriad of sources—and enabling the reader to put them all in perspective—make this provocative history book an essential resource.--*Liane Thomas*

From Publishers Weekly
Starred Review. When considered in the light of history, "traditional marriage"—the purportedly time-honored institution some argue is in crisis thanks to rising rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, not to mention gay marriage—is not so traditional at all. Indeed, Coontz (*The Way We Never Were*) argues, marriage has always been in flux, and "almost every marital and sexual arrangement we have seen in recent years, however startling it may appear, has been tried somewhere before." Based on extensive research (hers and others'), Coontz's fascinating study places current concepts of marriage in broad historical context, revealing that there is much more to "I do" than meets the eye. In ancient Rome, no distinction was made between cohabitation and marriage; during the Middle Ages, marriage was regarded less as a bond of love than as a " 'career' decision"; in the Victorian era, the increasingly important idea of true love "undermined the gender hierarchy of the home" (in the past, men—rulers of the household—were encouraged to punish insufficiently obedient wives). Coontz explains marriage as a way of ensuring a domestic labor force, as a political tool and as a flexible reflection of changing social standards and desires. She presents her arguments clearly, offering an excellent balance between the scholarly and the readable in this timely, important book. *Agent, Susan Rabiner. (May)*
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From The New Yorker
Coontz confirms what many traditionalists have claimed: the fifties were the Golden Age of marriage. She also confirms what many progressives have claimed: the conditions that made the Golden Age possible were so fragile that they could not endure. Rising educational levels for women made it impossible to confine feminine ambition to ever more spotless floors, and the postwar boom made single-earner households less viable. More broadly, Coontz stresses the historical specificity of marriage based on love, tracing it from its emergence in Western Europe some two hundred years ago to modern manifestations like single-sex marriages and stay-at-home dads. Less successful are her attempts to provide an anthropology of spousal

strategies across cultures. Current divorce statistics notwithstanding, Coontz sees marriage as an infinitely adaptable human achievement.
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Users Review

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John Parish:

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