



A History Of Marriage

Elizabeth Abbott

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What does the "tradition of marriage" really look like? In *A History of Marriage*, Elizabeth Abbott paints an often surprising picture of this most public, yet most intimate, institution. Ritual of romance, or social obligation? Eternal bliss, or cult of domesticity? Abbott reveals a complex tradition that includes same-sex unions, arranged marriages, dowries, self-marriages, and child brides. Marriage—in all its loving, unloving, decadent, and impoverished manifestations—is revealed here through Abbott's infectious curiosity.

A History Of Marriage Details

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Jacqueline says

I enjoyed the first half (a European and N American history) much more than the second (an analysis of modern marriage, gay marriage, step families, divorce, etc.). Appreciated her taking a good amount of space to discuss slave marriages and the effect of residential schooling on Aboriginal marriages and family ties.

Lindsay Elliott says

A History of Marriage is a very interesting and educational book. The perspectives of each time period and how they reflected on society is extremely well presented throughout the numerous chapters. I enjoyed the progression of the book as it started with a very early history of marriage and gradually worked up to the modern age and how marriage is viewed and handled now, as well as how it touched on the future of marriage and where it might be headed. Marriage has become an extremely curious thing as the reasons for marriage are so varied now and not standard for strictly financial and political gain or social acceptance.

Deodand says

There are some interesting tidbits in here, but no new information to me. I felt that the prose read as statement after statement - almost as if Abbott could footnote each sentence of the book. There should be more citations in the text to support her arguments. Perhaps this was done to keep the book more approachable to a pleasure-reading audience?

Mike Cross says

This is more than just a book on the history of marriage, it's really a history of the family and the current state of families, however you want to define each. Very well researched and presented. Would have preferred more of a focus on history and less on present-day. The author also had an admitted biased feminist view of most subjects.

Martine says

I really enjoyed this book. It's interesting, well-researched and spiced up with a lot of individual stories. It's suited more to discussion or introspection than education or study. This is due both to it's structure, which is rather open and flexible, and it's subjectivity.

The first part, historically oriented, is divided into chapters based on different aspects of marriage. For instance how one selected a spouse, the wedding itself, etc. Within each chapter, different options, from various time periods and countries, are mentioned, both as broad patterns and individual stories. This lets you

focus intensely on one aspect of marriage, but does not easily lend itself to constructing a complete picture of the whole experience of marriage in a single time period and place.

The second part, ostensibly about now and future marriage, still shows quite some historical musings. It also clearly states the author's point of view.

I do wish the book was more diverse, both geographically and historically. The first part focusses on Europe from the Middle Ages onwards and North America. The second part is almost exclusively about North America.

amanda says

like man, idk, this is the kind of problem i have with a lot of pop history. it reads well in parts. it drags in parts. but it's the authorial voice intruding all of the time in such a chatty way that i really can't stand. sometimes it works, if you're a mary roach or a melissa mohl, but mostly you're a todd mcleish or a robert sullivan, or in this case, an elizabeth abbott.

it was obviously well-researched so the parts where she chose just not to put a footnote or a cite stuck out especially and again got in the way of just reading it. but this may be slightly nitpicky. overall i think it's a quite decent breakdown of the general history of marriage, the way social mores at various points in history shaped the way marriage was conceived and conducted, and general trends marriage has been taking recently.

i can't say i'd recommend you go out of your way to read this one but if you're interested in the topic you could do worse.

Softness says

I enjoyed this book. Following the history of humans through their relationships and marriage dynamics was quite an eye opener. It was also a little depressing to see the same mistakes repeated over and over with each new century. This book covered more issues than just marriage. It dealt with racial issues, gender issues, children's rights, human rights, divorce, family living arrangements, family issues during war time, treatment of immigrants, and many other topics. It covered European history and North America.

Steve Watson says

Really interesting overview of how marriage has and hasn't changed over the centuries in North America and before that, in Europe. Moves toward some pretty incisive review and commentary regarding contemporary debates and discussions of marriage.

A number of random things that interested me:

-Rings have been worn on the fourth finger of the left hand since the 16th century or earlier because that was where "a vein connected to the heart, just as the couple was sexually and emotionally united." (55) True?

-Love and tranquil domesticity increasingly became ideals in the 19th century in part because of increased

lifespans. England, 1711 - men's average death is at 32. By 1831, 44, and by the 1890s, the late 50s.

Marriages go from lasting about 15 years to more than double that. (106)

-The Roman Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity tended to tie marriage, and certainly sex, to the bearing of children. But the Orthodox church taught that marriage was first for love and assistance, second for sexual restraint and childbirth. (155)

-Breastfeeding and economic inequity in the 19th century: "Those who toiled long hours in fields, mills, or factories suckled less frequently, before and after work. To quiet their little ones during the long intervals between feedings, they relied on laudanum and other opiates, and herbal concoctions, though this kind of child care resulted in a very high mortality rate." (168)

-The progressive crusade against alcohol that climaxed in Prohibition was fueled by an interesting blend of both condescension toward the poor, non-WASP immigrants, and women and genuine concern for women's welfare. It wasn't easy for women to get divorces, and domestic violence definitely wasn't an divorce-worthy cause for poor women (although, interestingly, for rich women it was.) But rich WASP men thought that if they could get poor men to stop drinking so much, there'd be less wife beating.

-A key step forward in women's rights came in 1869, as a result of a court case involving a woman (Elizabeth Packard) whose husband was so jealous that she was a better Bible study leader than him that he (legally) locked her into an insane asylum. As a woman, under the laws of coverture, Elizabeth wasn't a person. She was "covered" by her husband, tied to his person. Later, upon her release, she advocated to equalize the rights and responsibilities of husband and wife, particularly regarding property and child-custody rights (which almost always went to men.)

-War's toll in human life tends to be obvious. Less obvious are all the physical and psychological injuries that plague veterans of war. Even less so are the failed marriages that apparently always follow wars. Drug addiction, what we'd call PTSD, and divorce rates have spiked after every war, since the Civil War. (think the drugs and the trauma, the prostitution and STDs, the injury-related impotence, and so much more...)

-"Today, policy-making about marriage is grounded in romantic, companionate ideals leavened by egalitarian principles that demand respectful gender relations, accept homosexuality, abhor violence, and worry about children." (380) And interestingly, ALL of this would have been foreign to discussion of Western marriages prior to the 19th century.

-Principles that dominate contemporary marriage discussion and policy debate: egalitarianism first, secondly romantic love and male angst. Then gay marriage. Also, divorce (with questions of fairness, religion, personal responsibility, and parenting that it raises.) Not discussed enough: matchmaking, though helping people match well should be a "key component of thinking about marriage." (399)

-The author's personal conclusion: "...despite its patriarchal origins, marriage is a flexible institution that can provide a strong framework for raising children, for pooling resource,s sharing necessary duties, obtaining security and extended family and social connections, and I am for such marriages. I am also for marriages that, on an individual basis, satisfy, comfort, and provide care for their inhabitants. But I do not believe that marriage is the right way of life for everyone, and I am against coercive, exploitative, deeply unhappy, and unsatisfying unions." U believe that children's welfare is paramount." (402-403)

-Final conclusions about strengthening marriage are interesting: include policy about childcare, living wages, ending mass incarceration, focusing on child welfare, and legalizing gay marriage uniformly. (403-4)

Ahmad Saidullah says

Elizabeth Abbott, a writer of intelligence and grace who wears her learning lightly, has penned a masterpiece that deserves a pride of place on any bookshelf. Her *History of Marriage* is a wide-ranging account of how the social intersects with many forms of the personal. The book is full of insight, openness and style. An outstanding work that deserves as many readers as can be found. If only all scholars were as deep,

unblinkered and wrote half as well...

Tiffany says

This was a fascinating and very thought provoking book. The title does not reveal the wide range of subjects that are tackled: the history of marriage traditions (where that white dress came from!), the struggle of women for their rights (in the past, once married a woman was no longer a legal entity and became the possession of her husband... makes you realize that marriage was never very romantic at all until recently), history of spousal abuse, contraception, attitudes towards sex, divorce, gay marriage, gay-parenting, inter-racial marriage, the singles movement... quite fascinating, really.

Rich Mccue says

A good overview of how western culture has arrived at it's current conception of marriage. The transformation that marriage has undergone over the centuries is fascinating. It was interesting to see the reaction of my children when I told them that marrying for love is a fairly recent innovation. I recommend this book.

Ingeborg says

Now that I have read this one, I Don't: A Contrarian History of Marriage seems waaay better then when I read it this summer. It is all a matter of expectations. Or lowering them, as you go along ... If I compared the two - I Don't: A Contrarian History of Marriage would definitely get 2 stars, but now it's too late.

The problem of Elizabeth Abbott's book is a complete lack of focus, the fact that the intended audience is not clear (who are the meant readers of this book?), or the overall purpose (is it meant to inform? Amuse? Something else - what?). It lacks references, and is full of vague statements. It is definitely not for experts in social history or any related field, but it is giving too little serious information to the general interested reader. It has no serious conclusions or statements, since it is made up of many minor details - some of which are very interesting - but still they don't seem to make up a bigger picture about the history of marriage, as well as about marriage today. What am I going to remember from this book? Probably nothing.

I am sorry, I really wanted to like this book. I even bought it!! :)

Sara says

the past was horrible, the end.

Emma Sea says

Here's my problem with this book: not enough references.

When Abbot tells me that in the 19th century anal sex was "common" between married het couples (p. 161) I want a reference. Please.

While there are references in the book, and a large bibliography, these are somewhat lacking in the first half, on the historical evolution of marriage. I just don't know how much of this book I can trust.

It's very comprehensive and wide-ranging, but the writing isn't that enjoyable. I wouldn't suggest reading this for pleasure: but as an academic text it would be useful. Just check the references on the bits you cite.

Jenny GB says

I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads.

Abbott writes engagingly about both the history of marriage (primarily in North America specifically America and Canada) and the current status of marriage in recent decades. I would have liked to see a more global perspective, but I understand her hesitation about expanding her scope due to what that would do to the size of the book and her lack of personal immersion in those cultures she would be discussing. Her subject material is far ranging and touches on many issues and aspects of married life. Many chapters are accompanied by great pictures of people or things under discussion. Personal stories or interesting anecdotes are scattered throughout to add interest in between facts and figures. For something that could be a textbook, the reading is great and it kept me interested. I liked how she treated both sides of many issues and concludes with some personal thoughts about whether marriage will survive and whether marriage is a good thing. This would be a great book for a course about gender studies or cultural studies. I think regular people with an interest in learning more about our history in marriage would find it a good read, too.
