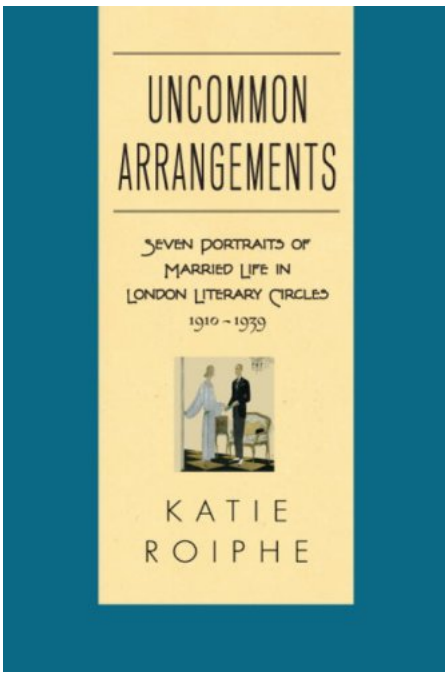

Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939

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Katie Roiphe's stimulating work has made her one of the most talked about cultural critics of her generation. Now this bracing young writer delves deeply into one of the most layered of subjects: marriage. Drawn in part from the private memoirs, personal correspondence, and long-forgotten journals of the British literary community from 1910 to the Second World War, here are seven "marriages à la mode"—each rising to the challenge of intimate relations in more or less creative ways. Jane Wells, the wife of H.G., remained his rock, despite his decade-long relationship with Rebecca West (among others). Katherine Mansfield had an irresponsible, childlike romance with her husband, John Middleton Murry, that collapsed under the strain of real-life problems. Vera Brittain and George Gordon Catlin spent years in a "semidetached" marriage (he in America, she in England). Vanessa Bell maintained a complicated harmony with the painter Duncan Grant, whom she loved, and her husband, Clive. And her sister Virginia Woolf, herself no stranger to marital particularities, sustained a brilliant running commentary on the most intimate details of those around her.

Every chapter revolves around a crisis that occurred in each of these marriages—as serious as life-threatening illness or as seemingly innocuous as a slightly tipsy dinner table conversation—and how it was resolved…or not resolved. In these portraits, Roiphe brilliantly evokes what are, as she says, "the fluctuations and shifts in attraction, the mysteries of lasting affection, the endurance and changes in love, and the role of friendship in marriage." The deeper mysteries at stake in all relationships.

From the Hardcover edition.

Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939 Details

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From Reader Review Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939 for online ebook

Cecily says

A multiple biography, looking at seven literary “marriages” in the Bloomsbury set (London literati of 1910-1939). At least one of each couple had other relationships with the knowledge and usually consent of the other. It includes HG Wells, Katherine Mansfield, Vanessa Bell, Ottoline Morrell and Radcliffe Hall. The book tries to dissect these relationships individually and in the context of their time. Things are further complicated by the fact that they all knew at least one of the other couples and had relationships with them in complex permutations. A Venn diagram would have been useful!

Reading it feels rather prurient, even though there are no graphic details and almost all of it is drawn from published material (though not necessarily intended for that when it was written). Even so, there is too much empty speculation for my liking, coupled with occasional confusion, contradiction and inaccuracy (“Oxford Cathedral” is never referred to as such; Malta has neither “dramatic cliffs” nor much in the way of “white beaches”, and Shirley Williams is far more famous for her role in the SDP and Lib Dems than the Labour party).

I’m not really sure who it’s aimed at: it’s too tame for those wanting really juicy gossip; if you love any of the writers covered, there are doubtless other books covering the same ground in more detail, and if you’re not particularly keen on any of them, it’s not especially relevant. Overall, it was moderately interesting – it’s not just modern celebrities who lead scandalous lives – but I only read it because I was given it.

Lavina says

It's probably more like 4.5 stars, but I so enjoyed and was fascinated by this book that I can't leave it at that.

The glimpses into the seven marriages between pre-World War II literary figures (including H.G. Wells, Katherine Mansfield, and Vera Brittain) seem, at times, *too* intimate (in the sense that I sometimes felt like I was prying into a life whose inner workings I shouldn't be privy to). Katie Roiphe, though, handles the relationships with care; she's not judgmental but, rather, in awe of the people involved and what they tried to do to, ultimately, be happy in their relationships and in love (whether that worked is beside the point). As Roiphe writes in her postscript, "What is exotic and refreshing about the people in the pages of this book is how ardently they tried. What is striking is how much they managed to commit to paper: how much nuance, how much detail, how much emotional substance they captured in writing." And later, "This is storytelling in its most challenging medium: life itself."

Christina says

I enjoyed immensely this examination of several literary couples in the early part of the twentieth century trying to break the traditional mold of marriage (i.e., two people committed solely to one another for life). The book is an interesting examination of what happens when people--smart, intellectual, passionate people-

-try to redefine the most traditional of relationships. The various couples in the book are more or less successful and more or less happy with the results. Given what we know independently of the subjects of the book--HG Wells, for instance--it's fascinating to take away the veil and see what was driving the man or woman behind the words. Fundamentally, I think the only answer is that there is no simple answer. None of the couples in this book found a radical new form of marriage that resulted in ultimate happiness. All of them muddled through life like the rest of us, sometimes moving together or apart in some new constellation of relationships, sometimes achieving lasting happiness, but often making the same errors of judgment we all make. That said, one thing I took away from all the relationships is that marriages do not stand alone. All marriages, and the individuals within them, are part of a community. That community fundamentally affects how you approach your own relationship and, to a large degree, sets the "norm" for what is acceptable behavior within a marriage. As such, the community can be both a strength and a detriment.

As much as I enjoyed the book, though, I'm taking away one star for the writing itself. While the writing is engaging and easy to read, Roiphe has a sometimes tenuous understanding of proper comma usage. Further, she often employs several words where one would do. A good copy editor would improve the readability of the book. As it was, I was often distracted with the desire to get out a red pen and start editing instead of reading.

Maggie says

A fascinating look at the marriages of prominent artists and writers in the years between the wars. Featured are H.G. Wells (who was crazy about the ladies), Radclyffe Hall (famous lesbian author who is sadly is only remembered for "The Well of Loneliness"), Virginia Bell and all her gentlemen and her gentlemen's gentlemen, and Vera Brittain.

The work opens with a fascinating introduction that touches upon the author's method and the nature of marriages today. Roiphe seems intent on learning something from these historical (and often well-documented) marriages. How did they try to stay equal and free? How did they succeed and, perhaps more importantly, how did they fail?

Roiphe's devotion to staid gender norms guides the work and while it remains effective throughout most of the book (since these couples were fighting against/still desiring traditional marriage norms), but falls flat when she takes on the one lesbian relationship in the book. While it is true that Hall attempted to cultivate a very butch/femme sort of environment, there's a level of nuance there that Roiphe seems to overlook. There is a decided lack of nuance throughout the entire work, perhaps since Roiphe tries so hard to cram so much in a tiny space. Yet I cannot really fault her method since I too tried to see what I could learn or take away from the presented marriages.

Despite the flaws, it's an enjoyable read with fluid prose, appropriate for scholarly work or reading on the bus.

Sylvester says

Mixed feelings on this one. Excellently researched and written. Marriage is an almost impossible state to examine, I mean an *individual* marriage. Relationships that are mystifying from the outside often make

perfect sense to the persons within it (or not, as the case may be). I can't say that I am less mystified by these relationships after reading this book, but I don't know that that was the point anyway. I certainly don't *like* some of the people involved - Katharine Mansfield really breaks my heart, I love so many of her short stories (At the Bay? A masterpiece) but, as a person? And yes, that matters to me. It made me sad, that's all.

(Lady Ottoline Morrell was apparently the inspiration for Hermione in "Women in Love" by D.H. Lawrence, and her relationship with her gardener for "Lady Chatterley's Lover, also, Aldous Huxley satirized her in "Chrome Yellow".)

Paul says

Katie Roiphe has decided here to analyse marriage by looking at a number of unconventional marriages covering the years 1910-1939 and all moving in literary circles. The marriages were H.G. and Jane Wells, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry, Elizabeth von Arnim and John Francis Russell, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Ottoline and Philip Morrell, Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge (not a legal marriage at the time obviously), Vera Brittain and George Catlin. There is a chapter on each relationship. This inevitably means that it feels like you are reading several potted biographies with inevitably limited information. In actuality everyone in this book I think has had a biography written about them (in some cases quite a few biographies) and so there is a feeling of glossing over detail.
There is nothing particularly new here; it is a retelling and there is a great deal of information available in a variety of forms. There are however quite a few little details that do add something; for example when Elizabeth von Arnim left her husband, John Francis Russell, he sent her a copy of the Bible with each mention of faithless wives underlined! The inhabitants of this book in themselves were often radical, unconventional and bohemian (and in some cases Bloomsbury). If you don’t like love triangles then this book is not for you; it’s full of them; however there are lots of other variations. No one seems particularly happy (apart from H G Wells who moved from mistress to mistress with monotonous regularity) and it does feel a little voyeuristic, but that’s the nature of biography.
It is interesting looking at how ideas about love and marriage which were unusual for the time, actually worked in practice. Inevitably the answer is a very mixed one and there are some spectacularly bad examples of parenting. Rebecca West and H G Wells stand out here; packing off their son to a Montessori school before he was four. Anthony West grew up to be a writer and very publicly fell out with his mother when he wrote about his childhood. Angelica Bell’s thoughts about her childhood are also well documented.
This was interesting enough, but its focus is very narrow and I don’t think it tells us much about marriage in general; a good deal perhaps about the foibles of the literary middle classes in England.

Zen Cho says

Celebrity gossip with a patina of literary scholarship. I enjoyed reading it and found the writing fluid and reasonably intelligent. But it was from a staunchly heteronormative, conventional viewpoint; you kind of know from the outset that Roiphe's not going to say anything challenging or useful about marriage or gender roles, when she describes marriage as something "most of us" experience in the preface. Slightly boggled by her offhand dismissal of the discrimination faced by lesbians in early 20th-century Europe; less boggled, because unsurprised, by the whiteness of the narration (black South African guests at a dinner party described as "exotic"; no comment at all on Radclyffe Hall's habit of referring to her Russian girlfriend as

"chinky eyed").

Still, it was precisely what I wanted to read -- something like Hello! but more interesting. Also confirmed the fact that I need to pick up Virginia Woolf's diaries/letters; she's so deliciously gossipy. One of those people who thinks of interesting ways to describe other people.

Sarah says

punches Katie Roiphe in the face

Though I like Roiphe's writing style and adore her subjects, I can't get past my feeling that this is tabloid literature. You can almost see the wicked gleam in her eye as she reduces her idols to comic figures in a narrative of her own.

I give this two stars: one for *being* a book and a second for its vibrant cast. Catty Roiphe gets no stars from me!

Kate says

well, you certainly put me in MY place, all you who complained that this book was merely "tabloid," too full of previously published material, not idea-rich enough. I liked it. Quite a lot.

In fact, I would call it a must-read for anyone who has a strong interest in any of its principal characters. Not being a big fan of any of them, I was nonetheless fascinated by the ways in which they chose to live their conjoined lives. So unique, so artful, so wise-- if you ask them. So just-as-messed-up-as- anyone-else-maybe-more-so as you read the details in this book.

Those details are pretty fascinating. (Okay,"tabloid" if you will, but be honest: even YOU take a peek at the National Enquirer headlines when standing in the grocery line, DON'T you?) Sometimes they seem as poignant as the misbegotten marriage of a dear friend, but when these couples' behavior is at its most crash-and-burn, the interest level really ratchets up. They consider themselves oh so superior, and just look at the messes they made for themselves. It's a schadenfreudefest-- in the most engrossing way.

Note to self: never EVER get romantically involved with H.G. Wells.

Danielle Morrill says

I love this, and see so much of myself and my friends in the stories. In the age of social media we are all memoirists and this is an exploration of what it means to be a married couple — a public institution. How many times have I been asked what it is like to be a married cofounder? And yet, the inner life of marriage is rarely discussed even with our closest friends.

Evie says

I'm giving this two stars because clearly the author did a lot of research and wrote well and compellingly about her subjects. However, the subject matter is awful and makes for a terribly depressing book. Don't read this! What a bleak perspective on marriage. Glad to put this one behind me.

Dorian says

I can't rate this book, in good conscience, because I couldn't finish it. Terrible drivel. The problem isn't that Roiphe relies almost exclusively on already published material, nor that her prose is lumpy and dull. The problem is that she hasn't an idea in her head. She wants to say something about how these early twentieth-century literary relationships (be they marriages or affairs, or something less easily definable) show the very idea of sexual and affective relationship being cast into doubt, or transformed. But in what way and to what end? At least in the first half of the book, Roiphe is unable to articulate what is at stake for her in this investigation. One key problem is that her examples are historical, but the framework she examines them under (marriage, love, the idea of relationship) is unhistorical and undertheorized. That is, she bases her reading of these particular arrangements according to a nebulous idea of personal satisfaction that she presents as necessary and unchanging when in fact it's particular and, especially, economic.

Instead we get plenty of fatuous psychologizing about what Katherine Mansfield, say, must have felt when John Middleton Murry said or did x to her.

Cari says

Uncommon Arrangements seems a simplistic title at first, until the reader begins to realize how very complicated and uncommon the subjects are. Though the era she focuses on overlaps with WWI, some of the unions author Katie Roiphe details may seem shocking or odd, even to modern readers. There is a general feeling today, what with skyrocketing divorce rates, people living together but not married, and the question over gay marriage, that marriage and relationships in general are more complex, harder to maintain, and more unorthodox than in the past. In her magnificent book, however, Roiphe makes it very clear that such an assumption is naive and, as assumptions usually are, incorrect.

Seven marriages (or "marriages," as some, for various reasons, were never legal) from the turn of the last century are all brought together with themes that still resonate in the 21st as society confronts a divorce rate of nearly half. Stable domestic life inevitably creates a routine to sustain it--laundry, homemaking, coffee making, the familiarity of the body next to you in bed--which can lead to boredom. It is no easy task to keep up lovers momentum and to maintain an active engagement in one another. The couples she highlights--

- Vera Brittain & George Catlin, and Winifred Holtby
- Katherine Mansfield & John Middleton Murry
- H.G. Wells & Jane Wells, and Rebecca West
- Elizabeth von Arnim & John Francis Russell
- Vanessa & Clive Bell, and Duncan Grant
- Ottoline & Phillip Morrell
- Radclyffe Hall & Una Trowbridge

--believed, or at least one in the partnership believed, that human happiness should come of a marriage, and that belief left the way clear to toss aside monogamy in the marriage bed. Communication is vaunted today as the cornerstone of a healthy relationship, and these couples agreed--to the extreme. They believed that as long as they were *honest* about their affairs and indiscretions, then everything was all right. Many times, it was this same honesty that destroyed what they were trying to create.

In bohemian circles in pre-WWI through WWII circles, to be artsy was to defy convention. (That same belief is alive and well today, though the context is very different. At the turn of the century, to turn one's back on conventional society and financial stability in order to pursue the arts was tantamount to ruin. One had to succeed; that was the only option. There was no welfare and no government programs designed to help the impoverished, let alone those who chose that poverty. The term "starving artist" has a very real basis in fact.) In nearly everything they did, these individuals were challenging the social and cultural mores of their day, consciously, purposely, as a matter of principle, and with varying degrees of success. Born in the Victorian age and straddling the post-WWI era, Roiphe's subjects were tossing off the conventions and rules of the old, straight-laced society in favor of a new, looser, more creative way of being. Naturally, their efforts extended into their marriages, manifesting in a multitude of ways. Vanessa Bell managed to create a "family" of friends, lovers, ex-lovers, her children, and her husband with success that would boggle the minds of many of today's blended families. In other instances, there were menage a trois, multiple affairs, jealousies, broken hearts, new loves, and new ideas sprouting all around. Roiphe manages to weave the intricate workings of these relationships--with such large casts of characters--into a coherent, thoroughly enjoyable read.

One aspect of the book I truly enjoyed was the way in which the individual subjects, all contemporaries more or less, were observers of and commentators on each others' relationship dramas. For instance, Roiphe draws on letters of the time to give Ottoline Morrell's opinion of the affair between H.G. Wells and Rebecca West; later, Ottoline herself is studied. Virginia Woolf, sister of Vanessa Bell, lends commentary to every single segment, her voice charming, witty, opinionated, and woven neatly throughout the text. Moving from one household to the next, familiar voices of the period comment through letters and memoirs, and names crop up repeatedly in chapters that aren't necessarily their "own." There are myriad ways these figures are all related to one another, and one of the joys of Uncommon Arrangements is realizing this. Brilliantly, Roiphe manages to keep the reader from being overwhelmed by these complexities of relationships with a knack for clarity and story-telling that keeps the reader moving along with her.

With such an intimate subject matter, it would have been quite easy for Uncommon Arrangements to have a creepy, voyeuristic quality. Roiphe has done a fantastic job in avoiding that, making a concentrated effort to keep the the subject matter from being distasteful or exploitive. She's straightforward and factual without being judgemental, and the lightness of the writing helps keep things moving along without getting bogged down in potentially gossipy-type moments. Very nicely done.

Roiphe has done excellent research for this book, putting forth a huge amount of primary material--journals, memoirs, letters, etc.--without getting bogged down in the sheer amount of names, places, and facts. She also does a decent job of setting the social and political context of these times and relationships out for the reader, so as to make the study more full. As I said before, she completely avoids judging her subjects, and she tells the story in such a way that one never forgets they are reading a history. There is sheer enjoyment in these pages, and I was pleasantly surprised just how much I loved this book.

One thing of note:

During the section on Vanessa and Clive Bell, the author gently handled the subject of their children...and she did so honestly. Many biographers and idealists (see Virginia Nicholson's "Among the Bohemians" for

an example) tend to gloss over the children, especially how growing up in such an environment affected them. Roiphe is direct and honest about how poorly the Bell children were tended by their parents and the Bloomsbury circle.

Incredible book with incredible writing. Well done, Katie Roiphe! Highly recommended.

Cera says

I admit that I read this book in a rather uncongenial setting -- sitting in a doctor's waiting room while my husband got stitches after a bike accident.

But even after making allowances for that, I'm still disappointed in this book. As the title explains, it examines seven different marriages from a specific time & social mileu, looking at how the couples met, the ways in which they lived together or apart, took lovers or remained faithful, had children or avoided them. It's a fascinating subject, very near and dear to my heart, but Roiphe seemed determined to study these marriages without taking into account the cultural-historical background of the people involved. She keeps asking questions about individual motivations -- and suggesting answers -- while seemingly ignoring economic and social factors that would have influenced the issues. Surely some of these women whose behaviour so puzzles her were motivated by an emotional sense of economic dependence (however different the reality might be) or a desire to avoid the possible stigma of divorce? Or simply the belief which abounds even today, that a woman who can't make a success of marriage is a failure?

Furthermore, Roiphe seems unaware of commonly held cultural beliefs of the period, such as the Freudian-inspired fear of over-mothering, or the assumption that art created by men was inherently more 'important' than female art. She puzzles over Katherine Mansfield's best writing being done while separated from her husband, while seemingly blind to the evidence in Mansfield's journals that when her husband was present he expected her to act as a domestic manager, organising his comfort at the expense of her creative work. Indeed, for a book mostly about relationships between men & women, I found it peculiar that Roiphe never addresses the gender ideologies that told people how men and women were supposed to behave towards one another. Expressing surprise that Ottoline Morrell would prefer writing passionate love letters to actually having sex, she overlooks Morrell's high-Victorian upbringing, which might well have convinced her that sex _as such_ was inherently uninteresting to women, or incompatible with the sort of romantic-artistic transcendence Morrell seems to have craved.

All of that being said, I'm not a scholar; Roiphe may well have thought through all of my objections and have fantastic answers for them. But they're *not in the book*, and so I am profoundly dissatisfied.

Beth Bonini says

This is a quick, entertaining read about some fascinating people - and their rather unconventional marital arrangements. If you are interested in the period between the wars in England, and if you are intrigued by the unconventional Bloomsbury set, you will probably find this worthwhile - although it is not particularly scholarly or insightful. There is a truism that no one really knows what goes on in another marriage, and

perhaps that's why marriage as subject matter is endlessly intriguing . . . such a normal thing, and yet so mysterious. There is definitely a gossipy element to this book, partly because it describes a 'set' which were very intermingled - and quite gossipy, even bitchy, themselves. H.G. Wells is one of the 'players' - I use that word conscious of its various associations - and not only does he have a long-term affair with Rebecca West, but he is also involved with Elizabeth von Arnim (another of the book's subjects), all while maintaining an apparently happy home life with his wife Jane. Virginia Woolf is a friendly acquaintance to both of these women, and a closer friend still to both Katherine Mansfield and Ottoline Morrell, whose marriages also feature. None of the marriages could be described as particularly healthy or highly functional, but I suppose that the truly fascinating thing about marriage is that it can be emotionally binding - that it can serve at least some of the couple's needs - even while being quite strange. Maybe every marriage is strange in its own way.

Don't read this book thinking you will get any kind of comprehensive biography, but you may well learn a bit - and then become intrigued to learn more. 3.5 stars

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