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In the wake of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's historic Goodridge decision, a reissue of the bible of the same-sex marriage movement

Will same-sex couples destroy "traditional" marriage, soon to be followed by the collapse of all civilization? That charge has been leveled throughout history whenever the marriage rules change. But marriage, as E. J. Graff shows in this lively, fascinating tour through the history of marriage in the West, has always been a social battleground, its rules constantly shifting to fit each era and economy. The marriage debates have been especially tumultuous for the past hundred and fifty years-in ways that lead directly to today's debate over whether marriage could mean not just Boy + Girl = Babies, but also Girl + Girl = Love.

What Is Marriage For?: The Strange Social History of Our Most Intimate Institution **Details**

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Kathryn says

Too long. Almost every chapter talks about same sex marriage.

I would not recommend this book. The content should have been distilled into fewer pages and the topic kept drifting needlessly back toward gay marriage so much so that I think it was unfair to the reader to not mention gay marriage in the title or subtitle of the book. I most enjoyed the parts talking about the history of marriage in Rome, German tribes, etc.

Ellen Taylor says

What a fascinating, insightful journey through the history and various purposes of marriage as a social institution! Amazing how we take for granted the cultural experiences of today, as if things were always "this way"! The author is a lesbian, arguing for same-sex marriage rights, and concludes this way: "... Changing a given rule changes the very definition of marriage.... Define marriage as a lifetime commitment, and divorce flouts its very definition. Define marriage as a vehicle for legitimate procreation, and contraception violates that definition. Define marriage as a complete union of economic interests, and allowing women to own property divides the family into warring and immoral bits. Define marriage as between one man and one woman, and same-sex marriage is absurd. But define marriage as a commitment to live up to the rigorous demands of love, to care for each other as best as you humanly can, then all these possibilities - divorce, contraception, feminism, marriage between two women or two men - are necessary to respect the human spirit." Recommend this to anyone questioning the issue of same-sex marriage.

Heather says

This book was written by a gay-marriage advocate seeking a better understanding of what she is fighting for, but any thinking person, gay or straight, should be interested in the answer to her central question:

"Is marriage a worthy goal-- or a way of forcing people to squeeze their lives and dreams into too-small boxes? Is civil marriage, which locks private affections into an intimate relationship with the state, an institution I want to enter? Is marriage a patriarchal hangover, useful only to those who want to assign each womb to some male owner? What, to put it simply, is marriage for?"

She divides the book into sections -- money, sex, babies, etc. -- and spends the vast majority of each examining the history of how marriage once served that function. The history lessons are interesting and often amusing, but if you're more interested in finding out what purpose marriage serves TODAY, the relevant passages are few, especially if your question, like mine, is more specific: What purpose does marriage serve for a couple without children?

One answer is on page 38, at the end of the money section: "'Married' is a shorthand taken seriously by banks, insurers, courts, employers, schools, hospitals, cemeteries, rental car companies, frequent flyer programs, and more--a word understood to mean that you two share not just your bedroom but the rest of your house as well. In the United States, the General Accounting Office issued a January 31, 1997 report listing 1,949 'federal laws in which benefits, rights, and privileges are contingent on marital status.'"

Another answer was on page 115, in the section about order: "The public institution of marriage, in Western democracies, is for applying a just consensus to private disputes, a consensus to treat each individual bond with respect and equality."

Overall, this was an interesting, readable book and one I would recommend to anyone interested in a better understanding of the history of marriage, but be forewarned that the title is deceptive -- the author seems more concerned with poking holes in the "sanctity of marriage" rhetoric and justifying her own desire for it than looking objectively at the value of marriage today.

Aubrey says

Recommended by Dan Savage

Ulrich says

A fascinating and frequently hilarious tour through the history of "traditional" marriage, or rather, why exactly the phrase "traditional marriage" is an utter oxymoron. Ms. Graff shows how at every advance in the freedom of marriage, from the people actually getting married having a say in the matter at all to interracial marriage, fundies have cried that civilization should surely end. Today women can turn down suitors even if their fathers like them. Today people with differently pigmented skin can marry. As can barren people. So... Why can't gay people? Graff shoots down every objection one by one with portraits of historical marriage. This is just a fun book! "Free love" originally meant the freedom to monogamously marry someone you actually liked as opposed to whoever is most economically advantageous. The world has changed so much, things like this make me excited to be alive and see changes happen right before me.

Devorah says

Graff lays out chapters on marriage to transfer property, preserve family connections, legitimize children, provide religious sancification, and even for love with lots of historical detail. I wish she'd mentioned marriage outside of the Western European model -- especially in Judaism, Islam, and the East.

Kate says

I picked up this book for the history-of-marriage value rather than the same-sex-marriage value, and found the history and debated "reasons why people have historically married" to be slightly less helpful than I'd hoped. Still an interesting read, though.

As a side note, I now live in a place which allows same-sex marriage and also makes common-law marriage status relatively easy to attain and also allows a lot of the same benefits of marriage to people in same-sex or heterosexual relationships who have achieved this status. Hooray!

Mariana Ferreira says

A fascinating account on the history of the marriage institution and an argument for gay marriage that is every bit as resonant today as when it was written.

Clare says

This was a fascinating and informative read. Graff explores the way in which marriage has changed throughout history, particularly the different methods people have used to evaluate whether a relationship is a marriage or not. The book deals almost exclusively with western cultures, but Graff does explain that it is because the book's purpose is largely to argue for the legalization of gay marriage in the culture that has grown out of those traditions.

The only time I really got annoyed at the book was when she discussed polygamy and group marriage. I felt she was kinda (ironically) forcing her own standards of what a relationship should be onto the situation. There was a lot of drawing up of false dichotomies. Either monogamy or polygyny where the man reigns supreme. Either monogamy or a group marriage where there is no real commitment to any individual. This is definitely counter to what I and others I know have experienced. However, she doesn't get full on judgmental or condemning, so I can handle it.

Kate says

Picked it up at the Library book sale and dived in to this accessible and fascinating history of marriage in the Western world for the past 2000-ish years. Graff specifically examines each of the traditional things marriage is "for", and how the understanding of those things changed over time and ends each section on why exactly the contemporary understanding should not rationally exclude same-sex marriage.

Originally written on the eve of the Vermont court decision that paved the way for same-sex marriage, it's still well worth the read for its clarity and breadth (and humor).

Kirby says

I read this a) because Dan Savage recommended it as one of the essential books re. same-sex marriage arguments and b) because I often ask myself that titular question: what IS marriage for? This book is definitely a very comprehensive, informative history of marriage in the Western world and its many purposes and evolutions over the years, and after reading it, you can come to your own understanding of what marriage is for, which is the point, I guess.

I would say this is not an awesome or mind-blowing read, though, simply because it's a little textbooky. For something as juicy and emotional as marriage, I didn't think this book had much of an emotional or narrative pull. The tone is also a little dorky because the author will go on for pages upon pages about something sort of boring, like marital land acquisition, then make a really dumb joke to lighten the mood or whatever (ie. after explaining that birth control was once regarded as more sinful than incest, she writes, "Oedipus, stop

agonizing: as least you didn't wear a condom!" Wah WAH - sad trombone music)

But in general, I liked this. The chapter on children was particularly interesting - especially the section on whether or not children need fathers, which I wondered about a lot when I was teaching in a school with a lot of kids raised by single moms. Overall, the book proves there is no such thing as "traditional marriage," as the institution has changed in such extreme and fundamental ways in nearly every generation. Thus, a little old thing like two guys getting married is not going to cause the downfall of society or anything stupid like that.

Andrew says

"What Is Marriage For?" is, on the surface, a brief overview of the history of marriage. Underneath, a case for marriage equality, particularly with respect to gender and orientation. The author, E.J. Graff, describes when and how religious institutions have been involved in marriage, the relation of marriage and family structure to work and how that changed relation due to the Industrial Revolution, and how closely the evolution of marriage has been tied to the struggle for women's rights and equality.

Graff starts with a very personal perspective in approaching the problem, trying to answer for herself what the relevance of marriage is---specifically, is there still value in marriage, particularly as a structure that has institutionalized gendered power dynamics (in heterosexual form) or discriminated against participants (by class, race, and sexual orientation) for most of its history? The conclusion is a resounding "yes", justifiable from multiple angles. In particular, economically and legally, Graff shows how (at least in American law) one cannot replicate the same protections that marriage offers via extramarital approaches.

Graff also addresses the history of changes that marriage and familial institutions have gone through: patriarchal families that included women, slaves, and children all as dependents (Rome); family as a feudal work unit (medieval Europe); marriage becoming a legal institution (driven by Protestantism); women becoming housewives as work moved out of the house (Industrial Revolution); marriage transitioning to being considered based in love, emotion and personal commitment (late 19th century); women gaining equal legal status within marriage (last ~100 years and ongoing). Using this narrative, Graff makes a convincing case that same-sex marriage is the logical next step---and as of 2015, one that has now occurred.

The book's weak points are largely due to its organization: trying to split highly-intertwined facets of marriage into individual, focused chapters is necessarily a difficult task, and some chapters accomplish that focus better than others. By the end, the reader has seen some of the same historical data points multiple times, repeated between chapters---relevant in each case, but tedious to read. An inclination toward skimming, particularly in the latter half of the book, makes this a more pleasant read.

In overview: Graff takes an accessible, rather than academic, approach that undercuts rhetoric about "traditional marriage" with a simple journey through the history of marriage as a social, religious, and legal institution. Highly recommended as a strong introduction to the subject.

TL;DR for the book: Q. Why is marriage _____? A: Protestants.

Chris Antonsen says

Every American should read this. Having a modicum of well-informed grasp of social and cultural institutions we mostly take for granted makes you stronger and more powerful as a citizen and neighbor.

Kelly says

This was a great historical and sociological look at why various groups in western culture have or have not believed in marriage, and whether or not those reasons are still valid today. It provides a very biased but encouraging argument that same-sex marriage should be legalized in the west based on the [interesting and humorous:] historical and present day evidence in the book.

D says

The author begins by answering the question "what is marriage for" rather bluntly: Marriage is always about money. The rest of the book supports that thesis, and traces the shifts from marriage for money, for procreation, and its current flavor: for love. The definition of marriage allows possibilities of divorce, contraception, feminism, and same-sex unions. The book ends with a call to pay rigorous attention to -- and believe in -- each individual spirit.
