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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

20 Questions for a Stronger Marriage

David F. Mullins
CreateSpace (Sep 23, 2013)
Softcover $13.85 (94pp)
978-1-4909-6841-4

Folksy wisdom from long-married couples offers old-fashioned words of inspiration about how to keep a marriage going through the years.

In *20 Questions for a Stronger Marriage*, couples with decades of experience offer brief, conversational advice on loving "the one" throughout the challenges of marriage. Questions covered range from the basic "Do you respect each other?" and the pragmatic "Do you appreciate each other's sacrifices?" to the rhetorical "Do you really, truly love each other?" The result is a slim volume of folksy wisdom.

David F. Mullins, a doctor of sociology and university professor, interviewed dozens of heterosexual couples across socioeconomic classes to determine which qualities strengthen marriages. Including baby boomers and older pairs, the respondents were raised at a time when divorce was more uncommon than it is today. Most reveal traditional—though not explicitly stated Judeo-Christian—beliefs in sacrifice, forbearance, and forgiveness.

Each three to four page chapter employs the same formula. The author introduces the couple, includes a brief observation from the wife followed by comments from the husband, and concludes with a quick summary that leads to a take-home statement beginning with the phrase "If you want a stronger marriage…" With advice that remains playful, such as "Strive to be the perfect dance partner for your spouse, and you'll be telling your own love story 50 years from now," and generalized, such as "Strive to always be willing to talk," the work is light and inspirational.

Allowing the plainspoken words of the couples to prevail leaves little room for thorough analysis, therefore, the author's expertise is overly muted. For example, communication repeatedly emerges as a crucial component, often under the umbrella of maintaining love and respect. This assumes, however, that readers will already have their own definitions for healthy relationships and will know what successful communication entails. Setting aside practical, readily applicable skills, the text encourages readers "to open [their] heart[s] and mind[s] to the love stories in this book" and provides assurance that in doing so, they will "'just know' the secrets to living a long, happy, loving marriage too." It is an optimistic—yet perhaps unintentionally sweeping—perspective.

As an earnest glimpse at everyday men and women surviving adultery, health problems, and other adversities, this is a nostalgic portrayal of the type of love that evolves in stages. Here, love is accomplished instinctively, without fanfare or intensive reflection, by simply doing. This book is best taken as an anecdotal distillation of the timeless, pick-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality.

KAREN RIGBY (November 26, 2013)

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