

Espoused

Jean Marie Davis

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Espoused is a clever satirical novel whose approach to marriage, commitment, and love is thought provoking.

In Jean Marie Davis's satirical novel *Espoused*, marriages are legally dissolved after fifteen years, and those who wish to stay together must go to court to do so.

Gwen is a cynical spouse lawyer who doesn't enjoy her job. As she meets with couples who wish to stay together, fills out and files their paperwork, and appears in court, she feels only disdain for the process. She took her practice over from her husband, who's dealing with cancer, and whose own belief in love is unshakable.

Then Gwen is tasked with representing the Healys in their espousal proceedings. She's put up against a vindictive judge—her husband's first wife. Meanwhile, she deals with the death of her husband. In the process of these challenges, Gwen gains a new perspective on love and commitment and learns that there's more to uncoupling and espousing than is set forth by the law.

The cast's stories support and affect each other. Gwen meets the Healys, but also the Baums, who followed the law, were uncoupled, and feel regret; and the Passuds, who just can't seem to communicate with each other about their mutual reluctance to uncouple. Meanwhile, the judge overseeing the Healys' case—who's entertaining, edgy, and doesn't give a damn—comes to terms with how uncoupling colored her life and affected her objectivity.

Elsewhere, the couples' children describe their embarrassment, their anger, and their selfish concerns. Glimpses into these people's lives at work, at home, and in coffee shops are used to flesh them out; they interact with one another in a nuanced and self-critical manner, and their exchanges reveal their shifting alliances. Each chapter unveils another aspect of their world, in which the rules of the institution of marriage have been rewritten, and all of the psychosocial norms have been reversed.

Indeed, here, uncoupling—its effect on children, its financial and emotional tolls, and the challenges of separate households and joint custody—is ably reimagined. Still, not all of the novel's details are fleshed out—including why, if uncoupling is the norm, uncoupled parents feel obligated to buy their children's affections after the fact. And the book works toward a prosaic conclusion that's at odds with the subtlety of the rest of the novel, though it's one that speculates, in an interesting manner, on social conventions as they're seen from the outside.

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RANDI HACKER (July 23, 2021)

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