



The Marriage Gift

Stephen Evans

Time Being Media

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Beneath wordplay, double entendres, dry sarcasm, and pop culture references is a sweet and meaningful novel about love at every stage of a relationship.

A couple discovers the true secret of a happy marriage in Stephen Evans's novel *The Marriage Gift*.

James and Paula have been invited to the wedding of a cousin, Angela. There is only one problem: neither of them has a cousin named Angela, at least not that they can recall. Their ensuing search for a wedding present (and for information about which side of the family Angela comes from) forces them to reckon with their own humdrum relationship, which is now dominated by well-worn routines and mundane, roundabout arguments. They question what it means to be a happy couple.

Each chapter begins with an outrageous and untrue “fact” about a subject of relevance. These set the tone for the entire text as it explores James and Paula’s marriage through scenes of understated, relatable humor. Told in script format, the story captures the insignificant, circular discussions that characterize close, long-term relationships, as exemplified by a debate over whether to get dinner from “that place” with “those little” items that devolves into two separate conversations, with neither spouse paying full attention to the other. They may not be struggling, but they are not thriving, either—and they are all too aware of it.

James’s inner conflict becomes evident when he is asked if he is happy: his declaration that “[his] marriage is the best thing that ever happened” to him rings true, but he is slow to respond, indicating in a clear but subtle way his confusion over how a relationship that he appreciates so much can inspire such conflicting feelings. And what should be a straightforward task—purchasing a generic wedding gift—becomes a delicate operation fraught with emotional landmines and unexpected twists because of this ambivalence. Unhelpful advice from James’s odd brother Frank and Paula’s lonely friend Iris complicates the situation in amusing ways, as when Iris laments how a toaster ruined her marriage. In the first chapter, it is unclear why James must leave the house to speak to his relatives in person rather than calling them on the phone, though.

A wild encounter with a shopping mall fountain sees James and Paula confront their worries head on and realize that they have not drifted apart as much as they may have feared. Beneath the story’s wordplay, double entendres, dry sarcasm, and pop culture references is a sweet and important message: though the excitement of the honeymoon phase does not last forever, being in love can be just as fulfilling at every stage of a relationship. This mix of tenderness and humor is satisfying, suggesting that it is okay to have doubts and slumps, so long as one doubts and slumps with someone one cares about.

The Marriage Gift is a quiet, fun novel about what happens to a romance as it matures over time.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May 6, 2024)

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