

The New Wife: The Evolving Role of the American Wife

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Nonetheless Press (Feb 14, 2004)

Unknown \$24.95 (280pp)

978-1-932053-08-1

In spite of a divorce rate pegged at nearly 60% by the US Census Bureau, 75% of those divorced do remarry. Since nearly half the population is a wife one or more times, this researched discussion will be of interest to a wide spectrum of readers. The author, an expert in women's and gender studies, explores the rapidly evolving role of wife over half a century, examining the predominant cultural assumptions that wives reckoned with in each decade from the '50s into the twenty-first century.

The wives' issues come alive as Barash coaxes out the voices of women who married in each decade. They recollect the challenges they faced regarding motherhood, working, sex, finances, and communicating with spouses. For those whose relationships did not fit into the norms, other anecdotes shed light on what it felt like not to follow the crowd. As the prescribed role of '50s wife, homemaker, and mother segued into the brave new world of the '60s with all its turmoil, the tools of self-reflection combined with larger social events (Vietnam, the pill) to plant the seeds of change that wives still harvest today.

Each generation reacts to the perceptions of their mothers' strengths and weaknesses as wives. "Many younger women are cynical in response to their mothers' less than successful marriages," Barash notes. The exhaustion of "having it all" (and doing it all) in the '70s gave way to the '80s where wives faced "the unrelenting challenges of balancing their lives."

Issues shifted in each decade, so that divorce received widespread attention in the '80s. By the '90s, wives were dealing with infertility, career competition, and issues like domestic abuse.

Barash strikes an admirable balance, including stories of women from all spheres, from socialite wives to professionals to working class women. Even as the challenges differ, the commonalities emerge, both across class boundaries and across time, as she discusses military wives of the '60s and the present. While statistical evidence leads to the author's unrelenting repetition on the theme that "all women yearn to be wives," the "most glorified and sought after" role-it came across as over-emphasized.

Ever hopeful that they have learned the lessons of the past, Barash acknowledges the goals held by current wives: "Becoming a twenty-first-century wife means a marriage of parity, hope, and a kind of utopianism ... able to discard the complexities and errors of the past and draw only upon the success of previous decades."

Though the cycles of reaction and response are likely to continue, this book is solid testimony to the evolution of women as wives over more than five decades.

BOBBYE MIDDENDORF (March / April 2004)

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