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Women's Studies

The Secret Lives of Lawfully Wedded Wives: 27 Women Writers on Love Infidelity Sex Race Kids and More

Autumn Stephens, editor
Inner Ocean Publishing
978-1-930722-63-7
(June 9, 2006)

"The truth of this is both a burden and a relief," states Cheryl Strayed in "The Big Enchilada." "Ultimately we can only be faithful to ourselves, our own heart's desires … monogamy works best when it's a vow you make to yourself that just happens to include another." Resolutions such as these are the relief rather than the burden of truth telling in this collection of essays that are often testimonies to the transformation possible when secrets are shared.

The essayists' writing styles varying as much as their tales of "wedded" life, this book is a patchwork delight. Traditional vows, open marriage, and same-sex marriage; feminist backgrounds as well as a relationship born through letter writing before the "advent of e-mail"; women living with a spouse disabled by accident or disease; and even a woman who discovers "the man with five ex-wives … is a prize I don't want to pass up" all remind readers that life behind the neighbor's door is never predictable.

Refreshing about these relationship truths rendered by women, though, is their refusal to be simply tales of women wronged. *Secret Lives*, instead, shares narratives by women who in all their vulnerabilities can also admit to being perpetrators of pain or relationship dissolution. In "Letting Go With Love," for example, Miriam Decosta-Willis writes of the "powerful contradictory impulses" involved in living with and loving a spouse with a terminal illness. While sharing her "guilt and shame" over very human feelings, she reveals that once when feeling particularly stressed she told her dying husband, "I'm so tired of talking about cancer. I just can't take it any longer." It is this inclusive and brave truth telling that makes these tales noteworthy.

Nothing underscores the way one can confide with subtlety and grace like Laura Waterman's essay, "Point of No Return." Laura's husband, Guy, has "wanted to end his life" and "has been headed this way for years." Laura feels "an immense love, a desire to help him do

what he needs to do." Tough subjects—infidelity, suicide, or a spouse's slow demise from cancer—are rendered here, but all are told gently awash with love and humanity.

The editor, who previously edited *Roar Softly and Carry a Great Lipstick*, is a former book review editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. She is also a contributing editor and columnist to *Where* and *SF* magazines, and her work has been featured in the "Modern Love" column of the *New York Times*. Readers will be grateful that she encouraged so many "wedded wives" to share their secrets.