

INTRODUCTION

American husbands. Fifty years ago, it seemed the best of times for them. The heroes of World War II and other adventures, they married their hometown sweethearts and busied themselves with the American Dream. The GI Bill educated them, corporations lavished job offers upon them, and their role in the American family was clear-cut and advantageous: bring home the money, discipline the children, and keep the lawn looking as good as the Jones'. In exchange, they got security, sex, and their meals served up. With their wives economically dependent on them, some husbands even felt free to probe outside the marriage for sexual or emotional "add-ons," convinced that their wives wouldn't do the same.

A half-century later, this portrait has gone the way of the Edsel.

Today, American husbands no longer dominate. And we know it. Twenty-first century wives seek equality in their marriages, and often exit those relationships if they don't get it. And the legislatures, courts, and media increasingly back up the women. At the same time, men no longer need to walk the aisle in order to have sex with a woman, live with her, or even have children with her.

And yet, American men keep marrying. We may wait a little longer than we did in the fifties; we may wed for different reasons; the dynamics of the marriages may be vastly altered from the past. But those who argue that man's natural state is promiscuous detachment, serial monogamy, or some other erstwhile form of isolationism, haven't listened closely to the American husband. Despite fifty years of gender-role havoc, a husband's relationship with his wife remains the most important aspect of his life.

I come to this conclusion after fifteen years of researching and interviewing men, and writing about their personal lives. My first book, *FatherLoss*, focused on how sons of all ages come to terms with the deaths of their fathers. I found that contrary to the stereotype, men grieve profoundly. We may not grieve like women, who tend to cry and talk when they grieve. But men's style of coming to terms with loss – a style that emphasizes action and thinking – seems to fit our character, and get the job done.

Likewise, men's perspective on marriage has often been misunderstood. While hundreds of books have been written on marriage, virtually all come at the topic with a woman's sensibility, using female-oriented language, focusing on issues that mostly concern women and wives. Few authors seemed to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of the male perspective.

This book aims to remedy that. Traveling from coast to coast, to cities and farms, ivy towers and factory floors, I have surveyed nearly 360 married American men of all ages, classes, religions and ethnic backgrounds. To these men, I asked every question that I could muster; with them, I explored every detail of marriage we could imagine.

And, again, the stereotype falls: Rather than the “checked-out” male, I found that most husbands are keenly aware of, if at times utterly perplexed and chagrined about, the state of their unions. While some men I interviewed acknowledged that they'd never before spoken about their marriages in such depth, virtually all had thought about the issues, and many had wrestled intensely with them.

They'd also wrestled, sometimes literally, with their wives. Husbands report that they disagree with their wives on issues ranging from money to in-laws to housework to children to sex. Physical violence – against husband or wife – had touched nearly one in

five marriages. A third of husbands reported that they had considered getting a divorce from their current wife, and almost one in ten had actually separated from her for some period of time.

And yet, in one of the many striking findings of my survey, more than 90 percent of currently married men said that if given the choice today, they'd marry the same woman again. The vast majority of husbands consider themselves happily married. They recognize that marriage takes work, and work pays off. From unimaginable low-points, for reasons practical, emotional, and prideful, American husbands seem determined to weather the rough times of their relationships, and keep their marriages intact.

I'm one of those men. Born in the dead center of the post-war Baby Boom, I am, in matters of marriage, a member of "The Straddle Generation."

One of my feet is planted in the era of "Father Knows Best." My parents married in 1953, just days after graduating from college. My father's military service, education, and career choices dictated my parents' travels in their early years together. When their kids were young, my father made the money, my mother the meals. He left home each morning; she stayed home all day. Thus, I got a taste of the traditional American family that in some circles is so lovingly remembered today.

But as I came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I found myself stepping into a fresh, feminist world. My mother returned to graduate school, then launched a professional career. My female classmates in high school and college competed with me for grades and jobs. "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," one popular bumper-sticker trumpeted at the time. And I found it occasionally hazardous to disagree.

It was in the echo of this era that I met my wife Kelly. We crossed paths on the job in 1983, both in our mid-20s. I was lured by her luminous smile and optimism. Our differences in personality, sexuality, and family background made for a tumultuous courtship. But something told us not to give up, and after four years of struggle, we pledged ourselves to each other for life.

And then our troubles *really* began.

I remember a particularly rude awakening in the first year of our marriage. The bedside clock blazed 3:02 a.m., but it was Kelly who was in a state of alarm. Pushing at my shoulder, I heard her say: “We’ve got to talk *right now*.” I extracted myself from the arms of sleep, and rolled to face her. It was the third night in a row she’d awakened me this way. As before, she was sitting back against the headboard, sheet pulled to her waist. “I realize now that we have to get divorced,” she said steadily. And then she concluded: “The sooner the better.”

I have never been a morning person. But I tried nonetheless to catch on to the rhythm of this conversation. Yes, we’re having problems, I thought to myself. We’d been sex-less for weeks. Finances were tight. And worst of all, I was not meeting her standards of affection; cuddling, hand-holding, and little nothings, it turned out, did not come readily from the married me.

Despite my haze, I knew that my response in that bed would be momentous. And so I paused before I launched. “It may be so,” Kelly remembers me finally saying. “It may be that we’ve made a huge mistake. It may be that our life together is over. But” – and here is where I got to the crux of my response – “I am not going to talk about it right now. I’m not going to talk about something this important in the middle of the night.”

Then I dove back into the mattress, and fell asleep.

Eighteen years of marriage later, Kelly and I can look back and smile at that moment. Since that wake-up call, we've grappled with our physical needs, spending habits, household chores, and a laundry list of other differences and disagreements. Some of these issues could actually be labeled as "solved." The great majority of them have resulted in hopeful accommodations, wobbly compromises, and agreements to disagree.

And yet, buoyed by my research on this book, I've learned to trust those compromises, to celebrate those temporary agreements. They're really all a married couple has. While marriage may be a venerable institution with a history many thousands of years old, each bond remains fragile.

It appears to be wives who most often call attention to this fragility, to the struggles and shortcomings of their marriages. But most husbands are well aware that difficulties exist. In the past forty years, they just haven't felt comfortable to speak. My hope was to change that. From mid-2003 until late-2004, I criss-crossed the country, determined to talk about marriage with as many and as varied a collection of husbands as I possibly could.

Using my contacts from years of writing about men, I found husbands in their living rooms, kitchens, backyards, dens and workplaces. I met with jobless men in downtown parks, and inmates in jail. Sometimes, we talked for hours in our first meeting as I explored the man's "relationship history": the marriages they saw as children; their own early love relationships; their initial meeting with their wives; the decision to marry,

and the arc of the marriage itself. After this initial conversation, we often spoke or e-mailed frequently in the months that followed.

Not surprisingly, many men were wary at first. I assured them of anonymity (the names used in this book are pseudonyms, and some details are changed), but most did not know me well enough to trust me at first. Some wondered aloud whether it was appropriate to reveal details of this most intimate relationship in their lives. But in the end, virtually all of them did. Ultimately, they came to believe that I was not there to judge them, but to listen to their stories. They also recognized that they might be able to help other couples by sharing those stories in detail.

As I listened, I was struck both by the vulnerability and astuteness of their responses. We've been led to believe that men are emotionally disabled, relationally inept. Yet most of the husbands I interviewed were nothing like this stereotype. They could identify the troublesome dynamics in their marriages, their marital strengths, and the series of tradeoffs they made to maintain their relationship.

I also heard about one of the pervasive differences between them and their wives: the way they experience intimacy. Women, having grown up with talking as the currency of communication, often define intimacy as face-to-face conversation on important topics. "How do you feel?" is a common conversation-starter for women. For many husbands who hear those words, they are a conversation-killer.

Men grow up in a boy-culture that emphasizes action and teamwork, so it made sense to me when they said they felt closest to their wives when they were not face-to-face, but side-by-side. Working on a home project, attending a ballgame together, sitting

in the front seat of a car on a long drive – these (along with the activity of sex) were the men’s most commonly mentioned moments of marital closeness.

In my in-depth conversations with seventy husbands, I also was struck by some trends and tendencies among them. I noticed, for example, that men who spoke highly of their fathers tended to be in good marriages, a connection that had rarely been analyzed. It also emerged from these in-depth interviews that husbands who felt that housework was shared fairly – and whose wives felt the same way – had happier sex lives.

In an effort to objectively test these and other observations, I contracted with Dr. Ronald Langley at the University of Kentucky’s Survey Research Center to conduct a national telephone survey of close to 300 husbands. The results of the HusbandSpeak Survey confirmed the connection between good fathers and good marriages. It confirmed the relationship between housework and sex. And it offered scores of other insights into men’s attitude and activities in marriage. (See A Note on the Research, at the end of the book, for more details.)

In the following pages, you will find the results of both the HusbandSpeak Survey (288 husbands) and my in-depth interviews (seventy husbands) blended together through four sections. In Part One, **Why Men Marry**, you’ll learn what men are looking for in potential wives, why they make the decision to marry, and what impact the wedding itself has on them.

In Part Two, **The Arc of the Marriage**, you’re invited to follow the husband’s perspective through four major phases of marriage: the honeymoon phase (the first three years of marriage); the family phase (years four to twenty); the empty-nest phase (years twenty-one to thirty-five); and the mature marriage phase (years thirty-six and beyond).

Part Three of the book, called **HusbandSpeak**, will focus on several of the most important findings from my survey, including the link between sex and housework; the impact of fathers on shaping men into husbands; the willingness of husbands to change; the impact of affairs; and how a man's second marriage tends to differ from his first.

Finally, in Part Four, **How Men Do Marriage**, I'll share what I came to see as the masculine style of loving. It's a style that emerges from the combination of men's biology and training.

In the course of the chapters ahead, you will meet, up-close, husbands of all ages, races, religions, and backgrounds. You will hear words that will both inspire and appall you. You will see couples in the throes of love-making, and mischief-making. You will smell the anger, feel the blows. And, if you are like me, you will be uplifted by the time you finish this book. That's because you'll discover that despite our many differences – in expression, aggression, and emotion – most husbands and wives ultimately want the same thing: a safe, caring, fellow traveler in their journey through life.

■ N.J.C.