

Marital Myths. Arnold A. Lazarus. San Luis Obispo, California: Impact Publishers, 1985, 168 pages, \$6.95.

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The thesis of Arnold A. Lazarus's *Marital Myths* is "most people don't know how to be married." Included in "most people" are "many marriage counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health practitioners." Certainly the skyrocketing divorce rate over the last two decades supports Lazarus's view, for even as marriage counseling has intensified and increased greatly, it has done little to slow the mushrooming phenomenon of disintegrating marriages. Over fifty percent of those entering into marriage today will be divorced eventually. Lazarus suggests that a major reason for this is that far too many people enter into marriage with "impossible dreams and unrealistic expectations." The two dozen marital myths he discusses represent many of these disastrous illusions.

Straightforward and very simple, *Marital Myths* is clearly intended for the layperson, and the "average" layperson at that. At first, the unadorned style is refreshing, especially as an alternative to the esoteric jargon too many therapists adopt and which, all too often, confuses clients. All too often meaning—and thus potential help as well—is obscured behind a tangle of specialized language. Unfortunately, however, the border between the simple and the simplistic is not easy to maintain, and after a half-dozen chapters or so, the excessively simple presentation begins to pall, and most educated readers will begin to resent being spoon fed the pre-digested prose.

To be sure, Lazarus's motives are sound and admirable. Dispelling these "mistaken beliefs," he assures the reader, has transformed disintegrating marriages into "good" marriages in his own practice. In fact, these twenty-four myths represent the most common from his case studies. Their publication in book form is intended as a means of self help, guidance to enable readers to attain or maintain a "good" marriage or a "successful" marriage. Certainly many of the myths are potentially destructive. Consider a few of the more common ones: "Husbands And Wives Should Be Best Friends," "If You Feel Guilty Confess," "Husbands And Wives Should Do Everything Together," "Good Husbands Do Household Repairs; Good Wives Do The Laundry," "Having A Child Will Improve A Bad Marriage," "True Lovers Automatically Know Each Other's Feelings," "An Unhappy Marriage Is Better Than A Broken Home," "You Should Make Your Spouse Over Into 'A Better Person.'" Doubtless many people do believe one or more of these myths, and doubtless, too, most should be disabused. Yet human experience shows again and again that any belief, strongly maintained, can create a working, subjective truth. Perhaps marriage itself is crumbling because it is a myth whose time has passed.

Lazarus does qualify his declarations. He notes that "there are no hard and fast rules that pertain to all marriages. People are complex and diverse." In other words, for some people these myths may work. Some marital partners confess and thrive, just as some have turned a marriage around with the birth of a child, though neither is generally a

productive practice. This suggests a hard question: can a self-help book, especially a simple book such as this one, be of much help in an area as complex as marriage when it is aimed at an audience of unsophisticated readers who, it is assumed, believe a number of these myths? Can such people help themselves, meeting in colloquy over a book? Surely it is more likely that at least one partner in any such marriage would need the guidance, the occasional nudge, that a professional therapist provides.

Were the therapist present, the thorny matter of definitions might be cleared up easily. As it stands, to read that "much emotional pain would be spared if more people knew how to replace romantic love with conjugal affection as the basis for a truly successful marriage" is to learn little of help. Not all people by any stretch of the imagination equate "romantic" with the movie, television, popular song notion any more than they equate it with the antiquated definition that emerges from Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* or de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*. What is conjugal affection? And must marital partners subjugate stronger emotions, such as love, and be satisfied with the milder "affection" in the interests of a "good" marriage? One of Lazarus's shortcomings is that he admits of no imagination in his readers.

He declares that "from a clinical perspective" the perceptions of the romantic idealist are "decidedly abnormal," and that "the very language of romantic love attests to the psychotic quality of the interaction. She is 'crazy' about him; he is 'mad' about her." Lazarus laments the fact that "in the throes of this all-consuming passion, otherwise rational and responsible people have been known to cast aside, quite recklessly, all obligations to family, friends, and society." Unfortunately, the picture of a "good marriage" that emerges from *Marital Myths* is insipid, boring, but secure and predictable. Humans inevitably pay for their excesses, but the hard truth may be that only excess can bring people close to ecstasy. Certainly to risk love is to risk greater pain than in risking affection, but just as certainly, the compensating joys are proportional.

The problem inherent in a book as simple as Lazarus's is that its very nature ensures that it must ignore the essential questions it raises. For example, a question at the heart of this book is never raised: does marriage still serve a useful purpose in American society? It may well be that changing mores and legalities have transformed marriage into nothing more than a vestigial social convention in the United States. The increasing divorce rates may be nothing more than social evolution, destroying a custom which hangs on much as other customs survive after their need has passed—from mere habit: such as men walking on the outside, or the reverse buttoning on men's shirts and women's blouses.

Is marriage anything more than a convenient or fairly permanent sexual union? Do marriages fail at such a high rate because marriage is no longer a viable or necessary social institution? Perhaps Lazarus's practice—as well as his book—are merely holding actions against the inevitable. These considerations are beyond the scope of Lazarus's book, but for the intelligent reader, the educated reader, the reader who has considered the interactionist perspective of marriage, such considerations cannot be ignored.

Marital Myths may well find an appropriate niche. It may be that the niche is as supplementary reading in college sociology courses, or as required reading for students concentrating in counseling psychology. Certainly Lazarus's book has the most potential for good in the hands of marriage-counselors-to-be or, indeed, in the hands of practicing marriage counselors.