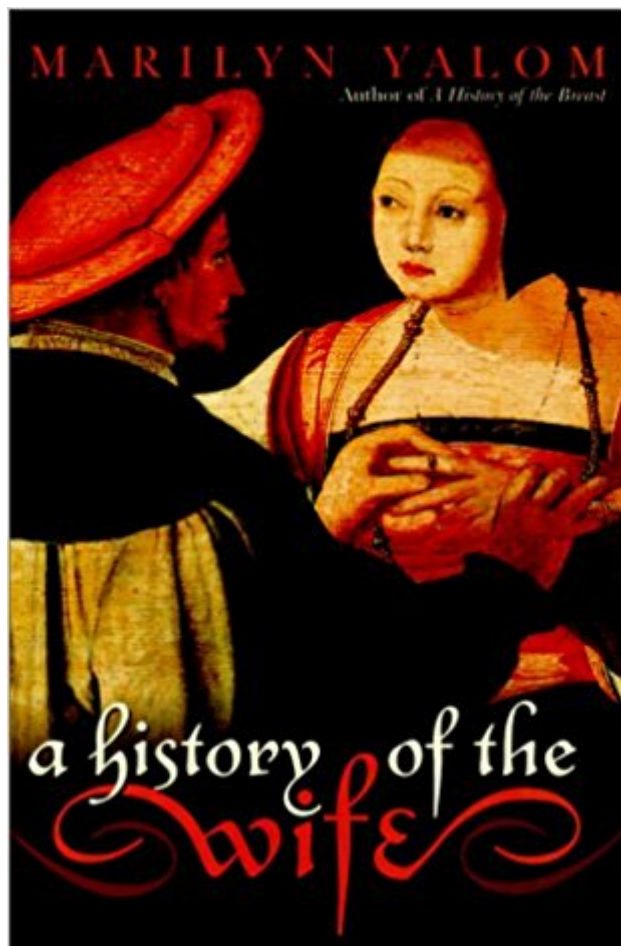


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A History Of The Wife



Synopsis

A woman coming of age today has good reason to wonder what marriage will mean to her. Certainly, it will no longer imply that her husband will provide for her, as an ability to earn a living is commonly expected of both men and women. Also, marriage will no longer offer a woman a unique gateway into sexual and domestic pleasures, since premarital cohabitation has long ago ceased to be a taboo. Marriage will not be a woman's indispensable passage to motherhood -- up to 40 percent of American first babies are being born out of wedlock. And, since one in two marriages will end in divorce, it will no longer guarantee a woman permanent protection in a world that has traditionally been unkind to unmarried women. In this atmosphere of high ambiguity, it is instructive to look to the past, to see what it meant to be a wife from the earliest days of civilization to the present, and to explore how the contemporary wife came into being. From the perspective of modern marriage, the distinguished cultural historian Marilyn Yalom charts the evolution of marriage in the judeo christian world through the centuries and shows how radical that collective change has been. For example, how did marriage, considered a religious duty in medieval Europe, become a venue for personal fulfillment in contemporary America? How did the notion of romantic love, a novelty in the Middle Ages, become a prerequisite for marriage today? And, if the original purpose of marriage was procreation, what exactly is the purpose of marriage for women now? *A History of the Wife* is a study of laws, religious practices, social customs, economic patterns, and political consciousness that have affected generations of wives: in ancient Greece, where daughters were given by fathers to husbands to create legitimate offspring; in medieval Europe, where marriage was infused with religious meaning; during the Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment, when ideals of companionate marriage came to the fore; and in twentieth century America, where a new model of spousal relationships emerged. This rich, lucid chronicle of the turning points in a History of the Wife includes unforgettable stories about married women who have rebelled against the conventions of their times, from Marjorie Kempe to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, from Heloise to Margaret Sanger. Drawing extensively from diaries, memoirs, and letters, *A History of the Wife* also pays tribute to the ordinary wives who over the centuries changed with and against the currents they encountered, quietly affecting the legal, personal, and social meaning of marriage. For any woman who is, has been, or ever will be married, this intellectually vigorous and gripping historical analysis of marriage sheds new light on an institution most people take for granted, and that may, in fact, be experiencing its most convulsive upheaval since the Reformation.

Book Information

Hardcover: 464 pages

Publisher: Harper; First Edition edition (February 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0060193387

ISBN-13: 978-0060193386

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.4 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 35 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,012,469 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #127 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Gender Studies > Women in History #370 in Books > Parenting & Relationships > Parenting > School-Age Children #1656 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Marriage & Family

Customer Reviews

The cultural historian who gave us *A History of the Breast* takes stock of the wife from her conception by the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans to her 20th-century manifestation as the New Woman. Beginning with the charter myth for the Judeo-Christian wife (Adam and Eve), Marilyn Yalom explains the religious, legal, and social practices of ancient civilizations that provided the template for the idea of wife as property of and subservient to her husband, with a role limited to mother and housekeeper. What she discovers is that the recent transformation of wifedom from sexless stay-at-home dependent to sexy supermom is actually the distillation of changes that have been going on for a long time, say a couple of thousand years. In fact, what makes Yalom's passage through time so fascinating is the steady rise and fall and rise again of the status of the wife and her struggle for greater autonomy. There are plenty of surprises: the first reciprocal marriages were actually had in Roman times; divorce became popular around the same time that monogamy was instituted; and while it's true that Puritans punished adultery harshly, it was they who brought the concepts of mutual love and lovemaking (other than for procreation) to America. The growing tension between women's impulses towards emancipation and the reaction against it was a quickly repeating theme in the 20th century, best exemplified by a WWII ad of a working woman pledging to "guard every bit of Beauty that he cherishes in me." The wives in this revelatory genealogy resonate with the aid of illuminating stories and the lively voices found in letters and diaries. Through these, Yalom lithely demonstrates that the fantasy of the selfless devoted wife has always had an ineluctable twin, the archetypal powerful woman--and vice versa. While college

women in the 1970s may have declared that "the idea that a woman's place is in the home is nonsense," Yalom points out that society still acts like every breadwinner has a stay-at-home wife, and the anxieties that are raised in advice columns today are not that different from those a hundred years ago. Greater independence and equality have not, as feared, led to the abandonment of the marital institution, nor many of the issues that haunt it. --Lesley Reed

The voices of ordinary women speak volumes in this sweeping history of women and marriage in the Western world. As with her well-received *A History of the Breast*, Yalom, a scholar at Stanford's Institute for Women and Gender, moves easily among several fields—feminist history, religion and myth, anthropology, personal narratives, literature, pop culture and sociology—to trace the changing role of wives from ancient times to the present. The general direction of change—from subordinate toward more egalitarian roles—comes as no surprise. What may be unexpected, however, is Yalom's evidence that, while generally conforming to cultural norms, individual marriages throughout history have been more complex than law and tradition may have dictated. Barren wives were sometimes favored over fertile ones, arranged marriages sometimes encompassed deep love and wives' personal "power" could vary considerably. Nevertheless, marriages were hardly egalitarian, even after late-18th-century political ideals proclaimed women to be "co-creators of... new republican societies" in America and Europe. Wives had little legal autonomy; they could not control their own money or even have access to their children in the event of separation or divorce, until equal rights began to be won during the 20th century. Yalom discusses the push for birth control rights, the impact of the depression and World War II and today's two-spouse-income economy and 50% divorce rate. She excels in presenting personal perspectives, including those of working-class wives, immigrants, African-Americans and lesbians. Yet she is less successful in examining wider societal effects, including the impact of high divorce rates. "To be a wife today when there are few prescriptions or proscriptions is truly a creative endeavor," she concludes; true enough, but it's an insufficient explanation for how egalitarian marriages might actually work. (Feb.) Forecast: Stunning cover art, a topical subject and the title's echo of Yalom's previous book should attract many readers in addition to this book's obvious audience of women's studies majors. If Oprah did history, this might be her kind of book. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It's very well written, entertaining and informative without being the least bit dry. I highly recommend it even if you are not particularly a history buff...this book will open your eyes to the realities of life as a wife since the earliest written records up to today. Rarely do I

immediately re-read a book, but I am this one! Loved it!

I really enjoyed this book. I have to give it four stars as it really only includes Anglo Western women. This gives little detail for women of the East, African nations, or even indigenous people of the Americas. With that being said the book is highly informative and goes through marriage through times. Attention is given to the Greek, Roman, Western European wives, then off to America and how American women's lives have changed. This book explores what typically was an arranged marriage for family prestige and gain, until it became a love match. Wives' roles were more than simply taking care of the house and children through out time. Wives often ran a husband's business, and was even a requirement for some careers. While this book may have been written from a feminist point of view, I believe this book can be read by all who want to know about the role of a wife from a historical standpoint. It's a wonderful thought provoking read that will leave you thankful you live in the modern age.

I truly enjoyed reading about the history of married life throughout the years. This was quite an interesting look at the way marriage has changed since antiquity. Marilyn Yalom wrote this in a very easy to read way and made it interesting.

"A History of the Wife," by noted Stanford scholar Marilyn Yalom, is a delightful trip across many centuries. As the mother of three twenty-something unmarried daughters, I'm thankful for the perspective it offers. Yalom writes with balance and humor, and her work will enable the reader to learn in-depth about the varied attitudes toward courtship, marriage, and the role of the wife, in other times and places. As a Lay Carmelite, I was especially intrigued by the Puritans, who placed a high value on mutual love, but emphasized that love should not be confused with romantic passion, and was never meant to rival the love of God. Yalom calls their approach "affection in harmony with duty and reason." As a veteran of a marriage of more than thirty years' duration, I would heartily concur with that description, and would hope that my daughters enter into such satisfying and enduring unions.

Marilyn Yalom's narrative voice is perfectly suited to her chosen subject material. Yalom is no dry historian; she is obviously emotionally invested in what she has to say, and is not shy about presenting her message. I had hoped for a more global perspective on the role of the wife, but I realize that such a project would be fairly cumbersome for a popular publication. Yalom's focus is

the direct history that leads to the contemporary American wife, and she builds a history towards that end. I occasionally found it hard to remain objective in the face of biased prose, but overall I found *A History of the Wife* to be very interesting.

The book contains some interesting information, but not much in depth. Also it concentrates mainly on Western societies (Britain and US) so the scope of the book is rather limited.

I haven't finished it, but find it fascinating to read about how wives were treated and what were expected of them through the centuries. Definitely easy and interesting to read.

I found this book to be both an expose and celebration of wifehood. It opened my eyes to some notable and courageous women that I would have otherwise never heard of. My best friend is getting married in a few months, and I am going to give this book to her as a present. I also liked the book's balance. It gives us a look at conventional Western wifehood starting in ancient Greece and leading up to the present. At the same time, Yalom writes about many wives who defied those conventions.

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