

BOOK REVIEW

The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution

Claire Langhamer. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN-13: 978-0-199-59443-6. Price: £20.00. Pages: 320 (hardback)

“Love and marriage, love and marriage – go together like a horse and carriage.” So run the lyrics of a popular song of 1955. Nearly 60 years later, most of us would still agree. Though many loving couples take years to tie the knot, the common belief is that love which does not eventually result in marriage is somehow unfulfilled, and that conversely marriage without love is probably doomed.

But it was not always thus. Up until quite recently in Western society, if love and marriage happened to coincide that might be the best of all possible worlds. But the norm was often to marry only for security, financial stability, offspring and status, while romantic emotion was seen as a sometimes dangerous distraction from the serious business of hearth and home.

However, as Claire Langhamer argues in her admirable book, all that changed in the mid years of the twentieth century. Because it was then –

between the end of the First World War and the breakup of The Beatles – that romance became seen as an essential part of marriage. And with that shift came the seeds of destruction for the traditional model of relationships. For romantic feelings between partners are highly likely to fade as they give way to more solid but less intense feelings of ‘love’; if marital commitment is seen as dependent on romance, then commitment can become fragile and vulnerable.

The English in Love tracks and analyses this cultural shift within the British Isles, explaining why and how it happened, and what impact it has – and is still having – on society and on individuals. The book’s subject matter is taken from a broad seam of social, cultural and media sources, with a solid underpinning of material from the Mass Observation Archive, a collection of first-hand reports of the experience of everyday people. The book’s author, a trustee of this archive, weaves all the threads together in an account that is impressive in its broad scope, and fascinating in its focused detail.

Is the book professionally useful? I believe so. To fully understand the patient with an unplanned pregnancy, the patient worried about a failing sex life, the patient whose depression has

been triggered by ‘losing the spark’ of partnership attraction, surely one has to understand the huge social shifts of the past 80 years that have led those patients to think, feel and act the way they do. Surely one has to understand how the foundation was laid for many of the relationship problems that we see today reflected in our consulting rooms, and which so impact on our patients’ physical, mental and emotional health.

Whether or not one finds the book professionally helpful, it will almost certainly prove personally rewarding. I found myself smiling in recognition at many of the anecdotes, but also nodding wryly in belated understanding of the mixed messages about relationships that I have witnessed over the years. Hence, to all of us living in the aftermath of the period Langhamer covers, this is a book likely to be not only highly entertaining but also deeply enlightening.

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