

FOOLS RUSH IN

Are you tying the knot – or a hangman’s noose?
Emily Simpson speaks to some marriage sceptics.

It was a nice – if humid – day for a white wedding. The bride was willowy and poised, the groom clearly ecstatic. There were sermons and songs, bored wriggling children, vows, of course, and later a vineyard, a gentle mauve dusk, plastic tables in a marquee, fairy lights, prawns, champagne and speeches, both the bride and groom tearing up a bit as they spoke of their journey towards each other. “The rest of our lives is not enough,” said the groom.

We – the guests – cheered and raised our glasses, and some of us struggled with a steady stream of inappropriate thoughts.

With ill-timing, I had that week read a paper by American academic Professor Eli J Finkel entitled ‘The Suffocation of Marriage’, as well as the new book by British journalist Helen Croydon, *Screw the Fairytale*. In their different ways, each likens at least some marriages to a slow, panicked death from lack of oxygen. Croydon, in particular, asks whether many of us simply shoehorn ourselves into marriage because we’ve been sold on the myth of happy-ever-after; and because we’re running from an even more powerful force – the stigma of singledom.

If the growing crowd of single people in the Western world needed a mascot, Croydon, 36, would be the

ideal candidate. Blonde and elfin, she has established in her regular newspaper journalism that she’s both a romantic and a sexual adventuress with a high libido. But her main message – that she far prefers living alone and enjoying “low maintenance lovers” to sharing her life with a partner – is a hard one to impress on a world obsessed with coupling. “I went on TV today,” she says down the phone from London. “And I was in the green room with a woman who’s well-known over here. And she just kept looking at me and saying, ‘Why is a beautiful sparky girl like you single? *Why?*’” The implied question, she sighs, not being why she had chosen to be single, but how she had failed to attract a man.

Popular culture treats singledom as a temporary state marked by hilarity and awkward sex, with marriage the natural, happy ending. Whether it’s lovable English stuff-up Bridget Jones or her bony US counterpart Carrie Bradshaw, fiction’s single heroines are essentially waiting for a white knight and a big fluffy wedding. And in real life, too, most of us view finding The One – who’ll love us forever despite our flaws, who’ll turn with a shrug of sexual indifference from all others, and who’ll share all of their income and secrets with us and us alone – as the happy ending, and the



beginning. The beginning of proper adulthood as we grew up believing it should be.

Croydon, though, writes of relationships with such distaste you might seriously question the point of being in one: “It just feels like I wilt when I’m in a relationship. I’ve always felt that my thirst for life, my spark, my energy, my *joi de vivre*, my productivity, my career, my health, my sleep, my gym routine, my friendships, my libido... have been best when there’s just me.” She picks up this theme on the phone: “Even in a healthy relationship there’s still this pull on your sense of self and your independence,” she says. “When you’re single you’re more adventurous, more open to new friendships and experience. Relationships close doors.”

Photographs: Getty Images, supplied

She paints a grim picture of married people – extinguishing any sparks of flirtation between their spouse and another, reacting with rage over infidelity by a spouse who “they probably don’t even fancy any more”, branding other married people who stray as “immature” rather than questioning the sanity of life-long monogamy. As for the beauty of motherhood, here’s Croydon on the local ‘Buggyfit’ class she sees in the park on her daily run to the gym: “A group of about 20 women with puffed cheeks pushing prams in a funny trot in circles, round and round the bandstand,” she writes. “Always one or two are under the gazebo in the middle, tending to a soiled baby on his back screaming... Every time I jog past I think,

“EVEN IN A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP THERE’S STILL THIS PULL ON YOUR SENSE OF SELF AND YOUR INDEPENDENCE.”

‘Please God, don’t ever let me be one of them!’

Croydon refers to her single, childless life as a kind of lucky accident. She first gained attention in the UK when she wrote a best-selling memoir *Sugar Daddy Diaries*, about the years she’d spent in her late 20s and

early 30s perusing websites that cater to attractive women seeking rich older men, and vice versa. “I hope I become better known for this latest book,” she says nervously. But those years had a deep impact on her, establishing her in the unattached lifestyle she learned she loved, while also throwing a cold light on the compromises and deceptions of marriage – most of her wealthy benefactors had wives at home whom they claimed to adore, if not desire.

“Until I was about 30 I believed that I would probably get married and have kids,” she says. “It wasn’t until I developed a niche writing about relationships that I had the opportunity to actually question it. So many people I interviewed described how they had sort of



Screw the Fairytale author Helen Croydon.

sleep-walked into marriage.”

In *Screw the Fairytale*, Croydon investigates the lifestyles of various groups who live outside the norm. There are women having babies without men, asexual couples who cuddle with clothes on, couples who live in separate houses, men who have separated from their wives and now get along with them better than ever, swingers, polyamorists. But Croydon is at her best when writing about those such as herself, who she believes have a metaphoric ‘single gene’, and lamenting the patronising that particularly single

women endure: ‘Have you met anyone yet?’ ‘You’re too fussy!’ ‘What about when you lose your looks?’ ‘Be careful – you could wake up and realised you missed out,’ etcetera.

With huge inconvenience, in the midst of writing *Screw the Fairytale*, Croydon fell in love. Suddenly, she had a bona fide boyfriend. She worried this would ruin the thrust of her project, but gradually decided it allowed her to write about love from a more empathetic standpoint.

And then... “My affection and care for the ‘proper boyfriend’ didn’t wane, but excitement for the relationship did, as well as my tolerance to operate as a half of a couple instead of as an individual.” The relationship ended.

Now she speaks with passion on the pleasure of coming home to an empty flat, her hat cupboard organised just so, the heating turned up high. “My ex’s house was freezing; I could never live in that temperature. And the thought of someone else’s dust mingled with mine – I find it destructive. I don’t think that I’m unique in feeling this way.”

Croydon has recently launched a dating website called Part Time Love (parttimelove.co.uk), which operates in the US, Australia and the UK and promises “meaningful romance without every day commitment”. “There’s a real market for it,” she says. “Single parents, people who travel through their jobs or are just out of relationship... They don’t want a meaningless fling, but neither do they want to feel obliged to have the phone call every night before you go to bed.” It is not – the homepage clarifies – a “no strings” site.

Because that’s another cliché about single women Croydon would like to dispel – that when they’re not at home singing into a wine bottle, they’re out having frequent and random sexual encounters. She shudders at the thought of one-night stands and also laments that none of her part-time lovers were available to help last time she moved flats.

It’s as if, I suggest, she’s calling for a new middle ground – not just loosening the rules of marriage, but raising our expectations of casual affairs as well. “Absolutely!” she says. “This is something I believe very strongly. I hate that expression ‘f*** buddy’: the idea of no emotional attachment, no friendship even, nor continuity. But then there’s this expectation of coupling: we’re together, we have to meet each other’s friends, see each other x times per week... I wish you could have that care and affection, but

not that conventional relationship which just eats into your life.”

There have been some similar calls lately from the other side of the equation – the married side – for an opening of the window for a little fresh air. Alain de Botton and Christopher Ryan are two married writers who Croydon points to as having recently written in favour of infidelity; and then there is Professor Finkel and his widely reported paper ‘The Suffocation of Marriage’, which examines the evolution of the institution through the centuries. Once a means to shelter (and maybe a few goats and chickens), he says, marriage has become in the past 50 years a union we look to for everything, including “self-discovery, self-esteem and personal growth”.

Such high expectations, says Professor Finkel, when people have the time and psychological skills to meet them, can make for the most satisfying marriages in history. But those same expectations possibly explain why fewer people now get married – because who could measure up? (New Zealand figures reflect those in the US and the UK, with 45 marriages per every 1000 New Zealanders in 1971 – dropping to 12 in 2013.)

Finkel has caused a stir by suggesting that establishing “consensual non-monogamy” might be a healthy step in a long-term relationship. But this was, he emails me

DIVORCE RATES - THE FACTS

Do half of all marriages really end in divorce? Actually, no. According to Statistics New Zealand, “There are roughly 10,000 divorces and 20,000 marriages in New Zealand each year. Ten thousand over 20,000 equals half – so one-half of all marriages end in divorce, right? Wrong! The couples divorcing in a year are not the same couples who marry in that year, but a subset of all those who married in preceding years and have not yet divorced (a much greater number than 20,000).”

Rather, about one third of marriages are legally annulled, although the number does appear to be creeping upwards: “Analysis of divorce statistics by year of marriage shows that just over one-third (35 percent) of New Zealanders who married in 1987 had divorced before their silver wedding anniversary (25 years). This compares with 30 percent for those who married in 1977, and 26 percent for those who married in 1967.”



THE MARRIAGE COUNSELLOR

Jill Goldson, Director of Auckland's Family Matters Centre, has been counselling married and de facto couples for more than 20 years. She says she has noted an overall dissatisfaction from her clients in regards to what marriage "offers" them, but senses that this is due – at least in part – to the pressures unique to modern day life.

"It's difficult for people to separate unhappiness in their marriage with [the stress of] high house prices, demanding jobs, difficulties with childcare, lack of extended family to help, and so on."

What's more, if clients also look to marriage as the all-encompassing path to happiness, the impact of life transitions – the first child, the death of a primary family member, a job loss – "can hit even harder than usual".

Goldson says there are some key sentiments she hears

repeatedly from those who claim to feel suffocated by marriage: "I still love him/her but I'm not in love with him/her." "It feels like we're just flatmates, not lovers." "This isn't what I expected."

Her starting point? "I always ask about the initial attraction," she says. "Someone might say, 'Well, she always made me laugh,' but it's that same person who is then complaining that their partner is a loudmouth and overly dominant, socially. Often, what you most loved about your partner initially is the very thing that eventually grates. That doesn't necessarily mean you're 'over' your partner; it might just mean you need to start meeting some of your own emotional needs – the ones you originally felt your partner could help balance out. Like getting over your shyness."

In other words, when feeling like you've found your 'other half' turns into feeling like only 'half a person' – and a stifled one at that – it pays to look at your own self-esteem issues, to ensure

you're not projecting them onto your relationship.

Think about your family and relationship patterns, too, says Goldson. "Sometimes we 'marry' a 'parent' who was problematic in our lives. This is a transference issue and something you have been looking to solve since childhood. Can you detect any patterns with romantic partners – personality types, or patterns of conflict? You may have sought out those who are unable to let you be yourself, much like you experienced in childhood."

None of which means you should stay in a relationship that's destructive or simply not functional, she says. Just that it pays to be "very conscious" of why you're considering leaving – as ultimately this is the only insurance against later regret. "If you're getting nowhere, talk to a professional. They can help you untangle your thoughts and bring some relief to the agony of indecision at a time when change of some sort is obviously needed."

from Illinois, "egregiously mischaracterised by the media... I've never argued that adultery is a good thing [but I have argued that] couples who are struggling to achieve a fully satisfying marriage have several options... One of those options is to make decisions about specific things they will *not* ask their marriage to accomplish for them... In special cases – such as those in which the marriage is generally deeply fulfilling but the sex and passion are currently too low – it *might* be wise to consider a conversation with your partner about whether you should relax your sexual-exclusivity requirements."

Croydon is less afraid to jump right in there. "I think we know deep down that long-term partnership is separate from passion," she says. "But the fairytale gets in the way."

The author certainly found couples open to the idea of "relaxed sexual exclusivity", but when I put it to a range of my partnered female friends, it was unanimously rejected. "It would destroy us," says Beth*, 41, a Wellington lawyer who has been with her partner Matt for three years. "I wouldn't be able to avoid focusing all my thoughts and misery on what he was doing. The chase and the thrill are fleeting things that are lovely at the beginning of a relationship, but when you've built something, it's like an investment.

"I've had all the danger and great sex with unreliable men that I want," she says. "And I've no desire to be back out there."

"Look at Woody and Mia," says Kate, 43, referring to the most famous relationship train wreck of our times. "There was a couple who lived apart, and see what happened?" Kate works in advertising in Auckland and has been single for several years, but I found her views on relationships to be as black and white as my married friends. And I saw her point: blurring the distinction between being together and not could result in confusion along the lines of, 'Yes, but I assumed it would be okay to sleep with her because she's *your* adopted daughter, not mine.'

When it came to talking to men about these things, I realised just how closed relationships are. Among couples I knew, asking the man to share his honest feelings about monogamy with me seemed disrespectful to his wife. Then I remembered an ex-colleague who spoke to me last year about his relationship with his wife, who, helpfully, I didn't

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know. Despite adoring his young son and feeling happy that he and his wife were almost in a financial position to buy a house, Andy, 36, felt frustrated and bored – even depressed – about his relationship, and was struggling with attractions towards other women.

Recalling this chat, I felt confident that his views on monogamy would differ from those of my female friends. But when I gave him a call he surprised me. "Is monogamy a natural state for men?" I asked. "Define natural," he replied. "Natural doesn't always mean good or helpful. If I ate every chocolate bar I thought looked good, I'd be in a terrible state. I mean, I think as a guy you're programmed to have a wandering eye – did you see that magazine cover with [former cricketer] Adam Parore and his hot, new wife, 20 years younger? That tells you a lot about men."

What about a mutually open relationship? I asked. "My wife joked about that the other day," said Andy. "And part of my brain went, 'What, really? Awesome!' It has such an appeal on the face of it, but in my heart I know it would be disastrous, risky and emotionally disruptive. It would ruin what we have. Imagine saying to your wife: 'Oh, she was nice; let's get her around again...'

"No," he said, pulling back from the window and closing it for good. "It's impossible. It's impossible." ●

*Some names have been changed to protect relationships.