

CULTURE

Mr. Goodbar Redux

Illusions. Affectation. Lies. This is the insidious and incapacitating legacy of modern dating books

By Cristina Nehring

JANUARY 2002 ISSUE

SHARE AS GIFT  SAVE 

Lyndon McGill wanted to know how people fell in love. So he decided, he confides in *The Mating Game* (1992), "to take a field trip to a farm and observe the animals." He was soon witnessing the copulation of a cow and a bull. "Coupling continued for a few minutes," he reports, "and then, without warning, the cow suddenly pulled away and ran to the opposite side of the corral ... I recalled how our family dog had behaved similarly." McGill's conclusion? To keep a man's interest, a woman must rise abruptly after sex and leave the room, the city, or even the country. It rekindles the man's desire. As McGill explains with a flourish, it's "just like taking a bone away from a dog." Such is the state of contemporary dating research in America.

ADVERTISEMENT

If *The Mating Game* is a particularly unfortunate example of the proliferating genre of dating-advice books, it is not very different in substance from its companions. Its advice to women is that of the *New York Times* best seller *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (1998), by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider:

Make him miss you! Be mean to him so he'll be nice to you! It is the wisdom of John Gray's stunningly successful Mars and Venus series: Man is the pursuer. Make him pursue you. Although perfunctory contempt for such books is taken for granted among America's intelligentsia, guilty fascination with them is equally evident. Dating books are like traffic accidents: everybody says they're awful, and everybody sneaks a look at them.

Little is easier than poking fun at most of these seduction manuals—at their cartoonish view of human nature, their bulleted lists of proven ploys, their quadruple exclamation points, and their sometimes bludgeoningly repetitive self-promotion ("You're not doing *The Rules!* ... You have to do *The Rules!* We suggest you try *The Rules* for six months before doing anything else. You can't do *The Rules* and something else ... Just do *The Rules!*"). Nothing is easier than laughing at their gimmicks. Dilate your pupils, says *How to Make Anyone Fall in Love With You* (1996), by Leil Lowndes: the "copulatory gaze plays a big role in lovemaking." "Massage your neck with one hand," says *Date Like a Man* (2000), by Myreah Moore and Jodie Gould. "It has the effect of raising the breast ... which is erotic." Go to the bathroom in a restaurant, says Gray's *Mars and Venus on a Date* (1997): it gives men the chance to see you. "Read the obituaries," says *How to Meet the Rich: For Business, Friendship, or Romance* (1999), by Ginie Sayles.

If the gimmicks range from bizarre to morbid, the contradictions among—and within—these books go from insidious to incapacitating. Never let a man know you're interested, says *The Rules*. Rent a billboard and trumpet your love ("Bill Thomas, what are you waiting for? Give me a call so I can show you why we are made for each other! Love, Ginnie"), says *Date Like a Man*. Postpone sex, say *The Rules*, *Mars and Venus*, and *Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments* (2000), by Shmuley Boteach. "Men are businessmen," Boteach writes: if they're getting sex without a ring, they won't produce the ring. Unless they happen to be millionaires. "Sex usually begins soon with the rich," declares *How to Meet the Rich*. "Do you really think someone will marry you because he just has to have sex with you?" Ginie Sayles also provides my favorite contradiction of all—coming, as it does, from a book that suggests (among other gambits) that you invent an out-of-town job and fake a move far away to provoke a proposal: Don't play games. "If you play games, you have to be prepared to have someone play them with you."

In fact, no matter how deceitful these books urge you to be, a common denominator among them—and probably a key to American self-image in our moment in history—is that they also urge you to be "true to yourself"; they all tout "self-esteem," not merely as the highest of virtues in general but also as the source and end of their instructions in particular. Thus *The Rules* tells you that to suppress the urge to call your boyfriend constitutes "self-esteem" competitor, *The Real Rules* (1997), by Barbara De Angelis, says that "Old Rules" these "sabotage your self-esteem," and

intones that *real* self-esteem consists precisely in *making* that call. No matter what game they advocate, they want self-esteem on their team. Self-esteem is to popular psychology what God is to fundamentalism—the banner under which you fight, no matter for what desperate or cruel thing you are fighting.

As a genre these books draw astonishing numbers of readers. Many of these doubtless consider themselves ironic and atypical; but ironic audiences are often the most faithful of all. Nor are they motivated, as one might suppose, mainly by curiosity about all matters erotic. In fact, the assumption in all this literature is that its audience is not pleasure-seeking but desperate; not confident, adventuresome, and looking for tips on how to have a good time, but frightened and looking for hints on how to avoid disaster—how to avoid further time as a single girl. Because, yes, 95 percent of these books are written to women. When men do the writing, they present themselves as avuncular advisers to panicking girls—the few good wolves helping the sheep. Men are bad, they seem to admit: they "use women for sex," declares the smiling threesome Bradley Gerstman, Christopher Pizzo, and Rich Seldes, in *What Men Want* (1998), and "if [they] didn't have to marry, [they] wouldn't." But the larger question that emerges from these books is not so much why men don't want to marry (supposing this were true) as why women want *so much* to marry. Or why these writers *think* they should want so much to marry, quickly and at any cost. Face it, say the self-styled "Rules Girls" Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, "most women want to be proposed to *yesterday*." Most women who begin dating an appealing man "bring up marriage or the future after a couple of weeks." Is this true? If it is, one cannot help thinking that men's much lamented "resistance to commitment" is thoroughly sane. What man could feel, under such circumstances, like anything but a convenient walk-on player in a drama whose substance and staging were established long before his arrival?

One of the most disturbing aspects of these books is, in fact, the extent to which they endeavor to squash women's penchant for pursuit, adventure, and choice. Rather than allow that women need excitement as much as men do (and can enjoy "conquest," and—yes—fear the loss of freedom in marriage), they vigorously pretend that the predator instinct is peculiar to men, and then alternately bewail it (Gerstman et al.) and instruct women to fashion themselves into fit prey for it (Fein and Schneider; Gray). After all, "men ... thrive on challenge, ... while women seek security ... This has been true since civilization began" (*Rules II*). Not surprised to trust in "civilization," John Gray

goes so far as to say that if a woman happens to bear a closer resemblance to "Mars" than to "Venus" (that is, proves more active than passive, more adventuresome than acquiescent), she must use her "Martian" initiative to cultivate "Venutian" passivity. "Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a woman expressing her Martian attributes," Gray offers disingenuously, "it will backfire"—unless she locks those attributes up in the closet when she leaves the office, and dons a Venutian mask at home. "While dating and finding a fulfilling relationship can be more difficult" for women who have learned to make things happen on their own in the workplace, Gray writes, "all successful women have an incredible ability for self-correction. All a woman needs is the complete awareness ... of the problem, and then she immediately sets out to fix it." In other words, she exploits her "masculine" determination to affect the "feminine" spinelessness that will presumably recommend her to men.

The tragedy here is not only the terrific gender essentialism but also that these books encourage the extinction of a quality that might allow women to feel independent and to take pleasure in their relationships—as opposed to fixing their hearts and egos exclusively on marriage. Women possess no more natural taste for boredom or lost opportunity than men do, and—beyond having to decide whether and when to bear children—they have no greater need for certainty and security. But books like these encourage the worst and weakest in them, playing to every fear. They put overwhelming pressure on women to put overwhelming pressure on men to "commit" at a moment and in a way that *nobody* really wants. "As a result of [my] experience," Shmuley Boteach tells women in *Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments*,

I now know exactly what it means when a man says he is not ready [for marriage]. He is directing it specifically at you and it is an insult. Don't take it from him. Preserve your dignity and break off the relationship. If he wants a plaything, he can buy a life-size blow-up Barbie doll.

Such testimony, coming from the witty and worldly rabbi who brought us *Kosher Sex*, is appalling. A confident young woman who may be entirely content in her relationship with a boyfriend who has not proposed now has a new way to see things: no proposal is an *insult*—gee. This we have from a man whose personal experience in dating seems somewhat modest: Shmuley (he likes to be addressed familiarly) was engaged at twenty. Such blithe assumptions of superior wisdom is, alas, in no way limited to rabbis. When Shmuley and  Girls met at a forum in New York in

2000, the main thing they discovered was how often they agreed. Fein and Schneider share his pity (and contempt) for women with no rings to show for their love lives. Indeed, in their books they essentially dismiss every woman who challenges their tenets by demanding, "If you're so smart, why aren't you married?" If she *is* married, the question becomes "How long did it take you to get married?" If the answer is much over a year, they strike back with disdain: "*Most* girls," Fein said to an audience member who admitted to a few years, "don't want to wait that long!"

One of the ironies here is that Fein and Schneider have some extremely gloomy things to say about the marital state. On one hand, they constantly repeat that "A *Rules* marriage is forever," and that once you're wed, you can relax their strictures without fear that the man who fell in love because you made yourself scarce will get bored when you become available around the clock—or that the guy who responded so positively to your provocative silences might recoil when you blather on about your daily life (unconvincing reassurances both). On the other hand, they make no bones about the fact that a *Rules* marriage frequently involves accepting your husband's lack of interest. In fact, it "means acting single ... all over again." It means doing without the attention and tenderness your courtship led you to expect. But what the hell, say the *Rules* Girls, don't despair: "after all"—and here comes the clincher—"he *married* you didn't he?"

It's easy to scoff at the now divorcing Ellen Fein, but it is more important to note that most of her ring-mongering colleagues never harbored blissful visions of marriage in the first place. John Gray informs us, chasteningly, that "Stage Five" of his multiple-stage dating program is vital, because it provides good memories that allow a couple to survive "the stress of marriage." The memory of this stage, he says, permits a wife to "reach back and reconnect with the [presumably forgotten] part of her that trusts, accepts, and appreciates her partner ... By remembering the ... loving feelings she experienced" in the past, she will be better able to sustain the unloving present. Is it worth mentioning that John Gray has been through a divorce?

Illusions. Affectation. Lies by omission. Lies by invention. This is the legacy of the majority of modern dating books—and it is a violence to human relationships. With the exception of Shmuley's *Dating Secrets* and De Angelis's *The Real Rules*, which advocate a circumscribed honesty, all the books I examined supply advice that explodes whatever trust your partner might feel in you and whatever comfort you might feel with him. Sometimes the suggested deceit is quite flamboyant: an invented expatriation, a fake rival. More often it is a subtle matter of mis- or under-representing yourself in such a way that you end up feeling that if your mate *really* knew you, he would sicken or tire of you. *The Rules* rec  for example, that you set a timer

so that you can "sweetly" end a phone call with your boyfriend in less than ten minutes and "leave him wanting more"—hardly a morally reprehensible deed, but corrosive in that it forces you to falsify your feelings, to feign a breeziness and busyness that aren't yours. ("Do not affect a breezy manner," wrote Strunk and White, style moguls for generations of college composition students. Better advice this, I say, than *The Rules*.) When you start pretending, however incidentally, to be something you're not (bright and bushy-tailed when you're pensive, cool when you're warm), you build walls between yourself and your partner. You feel at once inferior and superior—inferior because your natural instincts are presumably not good enough to please him, superior because you are pulling the wool over his eyes, and we always feel superior to those we fool. This is not a sound basis for intimacy; it's rather like communicating from different floors of a high-rise.

Worse, you grow dull. That may be the greatest problem with disingenuousness—not that it is unethical but that it is boring. It precludes thinking aloud and thereby precludes conversational discovery. It keeps us from talking about what we know best—our real experience, our present concerns—and instructs us to talk instead about the experience and concerns that we imagine nice people like us *should* have. If "men were entirely honest," someone once said, "every man's autobiography would be fascinating." Since we're not, even the ten-minute phone chat the *Rules* Girls recommend is likely to be dreary.

In our compartmentalization-happy culture we have separated everything: social from professional relationships, therapeutic from social conversations, lovers from friends, friends from therapists. One of the noisome results of such compartmentalization is that relationship "experts" warn us incessantly, "If you have to talk, see a therapist." *Maybe* call your mom. *Don't* call your boyfriend. An evening with someone you love is no time for a confidence. You must never "use" your desired mate as a "therapist." We think this with the same misguidedness that prompted Victorian men not to "use" their wives as sexual companions; just as they thought their sexuality sullied their honorable spouses, we think our psychology burdens our healthy partners.

More banal, our dating becomes incredibly arduous. All this putting your best foot forward and never revealing a true or a troubled thought makes dating as one long triple back flip. Dating books admit this—"The Rules are difficult!" one says. Dating is hell, another confesses. The authorities would have one believe that going to a bistro is like heading to boot camp: "Make sure you get a good night's sleep," *Date Like a Man* advises. "Call your home number and fill up your voice mail with compliments," suggests Nailah Shami, the author of *Don't Talk to, Touch, Marry, or Otherwise Fiddle With Frogs: How to Find Prince [redacted] by Finding Yourself* (2001).

"I often take a long bath beforehand and enjoy a glass of wine or a cup of mint tea to calm my nerves," Myreah Moore reveals. "While in the bath, take some deep clarifying breaths and start imagining yourself having a good time ... Repeat 'I'm going to have fun.'" "The only people who think dating is fun," Nita Tucker counters in *How Not to Stay Single* (1996), "are married people who haven't done it in years." She herself found it abominable—but worthwhile, since it secured her a husband.

A strange flip-flop has taken place in Western clichés about relationships: once upon a time *marriage* was seen as the arduous obligation and dating (pre- or extra-marital) was seen as the easy, free, and romantic pleasure. Look at Casanova, George Sand, La Rochefoucauld—or at Ovid. Not one of the relationships celebrated in his *Art of Love* is between spouses: marriage, to him and to writers for centuries afterward, involved duty and discipline; dating was where the fun and the liberty lay. If Ovid's contemporaries dismissed marriage, at least they had marvelous visions of affairs. In our day we are moving toward a point where we have positive views of neither—where everything in our love life is grim, everything is *work*. Dating is hell, we think; but its reward is marriage. Marriage is "stress," but its consolation is the memory of dating. What with our fear of singlehood, our Puritan work ethic, our endurance of game playing, and our knowledge of the high divorce rate, we have arranged it so that eros in all its manifestations provokes fear and trembling.

Is it any surprise, then, that so many of today's ambitious university students have no time for relationships until these explicitly serve their career-and-life-advancement programs? Is it any surprise that by the time they do cast a tentative look around for potential partners, they no longer know how to start a relationship, sometimes already feel biologically "behind schedule," and—with gender wars seething on college campuses—may have assimilated a severe mistrust of the opposite sex? Such mistrust is abundantly evident, time and again, in the very books presumably designed to reduce it in the name of relationship building. Take Nailah Shami's *Frogs*. Here is a book that proposes to help women find a loving mate but that actually speaks such bitterness against men, and proves so eager to displace them with "teddy bears, a vibrator ... and girl power records," that it accomplishes precisely the opposite.

Off-putting though it is, this book highlights a problem well: On one hand, women feel that they can and should be responsible for their own "power," both professional and personal; for their own self-esteem; and even for their own sexual satisfaction. On the other, they can't help feeling, somewhere down the line, that vibrators and even good careers and friends are not enough. Is it any surprise, then, that they ultimately funnel the same drive, determination, organizational prowess, and even, to some extent, the same willingness to play by "the rules" into relationships which they previously funneled into educational and professional achievement? "My success came," writes the high-end career woman Nita Tucker, "when I ... began thinking of [falling in love] as a project ... I applied [my] skills that had made me successful in

other areas of life to finding a relationship." Is it any surprise that, conflicted as they are about men, and disenfranchised as they are in many cases by their lack of romantic experience, young women revert nervously to the "hard-to-get" (but easy-to-follow) ploys of their great-grandmothers?

As women reassess their roles in society; as both sexes work together more and more and trust each other less and less; as everyone brings careerish determination to sentimental accident, there is a space—nay, a cry—for intelligent reappraisals of romantic love. What we have instead is fearful repetition of romantic cliché—tired and retired romantic cliché. The great minds of our moment steer clear of the great questions. Once upon a time it was Ovid and Montaigne, Stendhal and Balzac, Hazlitt and Emerson, who tried their hands at treatises about how to love. Now it's aging, self-congratulatory frat boys like Gerstman, Pizzo, and Seldes; failed farmhands like Lyndon McGill; and peevish spice girls like Nailah Shami who hold the floor and set the tone of the discussion. The dearth of commanding commentary gives audience to idiots.

Turn from them back to the ancients. Love, Ovid wrote, "is no assignment for cowards." Safe sex, fine; but safe *love* is impossible. Love that manifests itself in considerate questions designed to rule out mates with family problems (as we find in *The Real Rules*)—no. Love as "project," as a kind of postdoc undertaken after our real goals have been attained—no. Let us allow boldness to prevail where rules make cowards of us all. Let us allow magic to reign where we find it, lest we color the world gray.

How Not to Stay Single

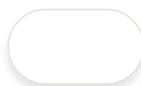
By Nita Tucker

[Buy Book](#)

Do Not Talk to, Touch, Marry, or Otherwise Fiddle With Frogs: How to Find Prince Charming by Finding Yourself

By Nailah Shami

[Buy Book](#)



What Men Want

By Bradley Gerstman, Christopher Pizzo, and Rich Seldes

Buy Book

The Real Rules

By Barbara De Angelis

Buy Book

Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments

By Shmuley Boteach

Buy Book

How to Meet the Rich: For Business, Friendship, or Romance

By Ginie Sayles

Buy Book

Mars and Venus on a Date

By John Gray

Buy Book

Date Like a Man

By Myreah Moore and Jodie Gould

Buy Book

How to Make Anyone Fall in Love With You

By Leil Lowndes

Buy Book

The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right

By Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider

[Buy Book](#)

The Mating Game

By Lyndon McGill

[Buy Book](#)

When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.



[About](#)

[Contact](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Subscription](#)

[Follow](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) [Your Privacy Choices](#) [Advertising Guidelines](#) [Terms & Conditions](#) [Terms of Sale](#) [Responsible Disclosure](#) [Site Map](#)

[Manage Preferences](#)

TheAtlantic.com © 2026 The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply

