

CULTURE

# Of Sex and Marriage

Stop it, you're killing my libido



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Everything good is bad for you. That, in so many words, is the theme of Esther Perel's little red book on how to achieve sexual bliss in marriage. And the bad news—or the good, depending on your priorities—is that it's probably true.

Communication? Forget it. Destroys the libido.

Equality? A turnoff.

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Kids you cherish? A death sentence.

One might reasonably make the argument that if good sex comes at so high a price, *who wants it?* Or at least, who can afford it? If it comes at the price of intimacy, honesty, security, harmony, openness, and trust, shouldn't we just *pass*? Of course, Esther Perel would claim that I'm distorting her argument. She is, after all, to judge from *Mating in Captivity*, an extremely upbeat person and backs off constantly from the disturbing nature of her contentions. Where Denis de Rougemont, the author of the mid-twentieth-century classic *Love in the Western World*, might say, "Passion is a death drive: stay away from it!" Perel says, "Passion demands you discard all that's dear to you—so *what are you waiting for?*" And she smiles.

Even though she was born in Belgium and schooled in Israel, and speaks eight languages, she is fundamentally, deeply American—indeed, announcing that you speak eight languages is a deeply American thing to do. (As I write, I am living in Crete, where half the people who wash floors in hotels speak eight languages and *don't* tell you.) Perel is American in both the best sense and the worst in which Europeans use the term: She is American in her can-do conviction that people will live happily ever after. She is American also in her self-promotion ("My husband is the director of the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University ... My parents were survivors of Nazi concentration camps," she tells us, as though this bore on her thesis). She is American, finally, in her unquestioning assumption that we should *work like hell* on our sex lives.

Perel practices couples therapy in New York, and her book's organizing principle emerges in a series of clinical vignettes. A typical one might go like this: One spunky young couple has it all. They adore each other. They have wonderful times, wonderful families, spectacular careers. But they are *in despair over what's happening to them*." "We are terrified," they confess. Why? Because their sex together is good, dear reader, but it is not *great*.

Incalculable woe. Part of us wonders if Perel might best advise such couples to *get a life*—i.e., *care about something more in*  *to help the homeless or the victims of war, and let your libido rebound on its own time.* But the advice Perel proffers her

“distressed” clients is not to help others; it is to destroy themselves. Do you, she asks them, express physical affection? “Do you cuddle? ... Do you touch each other?” Yes, they say, in unison. Well, announces the doctor, *it’s got to stop.*” She gives them an assignment: Stop being nice to each other. Stop kissing. Stop hugging. It is sapping your sexual energy. Treat each other like trash, and you might notice a discreet rise in sexual tension. Or just tension in general, one is tempted to add: “About a month into it,” he says, “I wanted nothing more to do with her.” Dr. Perel considers this plan a success. “I knew I was onto something,” she intones.

It’s easy to make fun of this sort of thing—and it’s important to do so. For the suggestions Perel offers are repellent, as are the assumptions that underlie them—that sex is our only *raison d’être*, and that it’s great to forfeit emotional contact for an extra erotic tickle. That said, Perel *is* onto something. The ironies of intimacy she discusses in her book are real. The paradoxes to which she points—that the cozy closeness of marriage does not often promote unruly desire; that children, the fruit of eros, are sometimes simultaneously its end; and that knowing everything about a person domestically or psychologically does not always make one crave that person biblically—are real. And they are worth talking about.

Sexuality is all about bridging distances—but to bridge distances, you must *have* distances. And for all our sentimental talk of seeking an “other half” (perhaps the only expression to loom as large in Plato’s *Symposium* as it does in the cursives of Hallmark), most of us do *not*, in fact, seek “a part of ourselves.” We do not long for our left leg. We do not desire our brother, nor usually even our best friend. Erotic love—for all of its attraction to what it recognizes and identifies with—is drawn at least as strongly to what it does *not* recognize. In truth, it is drawn toward the distant and dangerous more than it is to the sweet, the solicitous, the familiar.

Is this as bankrupt a state as it appears? A reflection of our inability to love long or well; to appreciate what we have come to know? Or might it be construed not as the *frailty* of eros but, rather, its *generosity*, its largesse, its ambition and strength, that it burns more brightly for a stranger than a sibling, a foreigner than a friend—that it yearns not for its mirror image but rather for an Authentic Other: the man outside the gate, the woman untamed, the interloper?

We must be two before we can be one, said Ralph Waldo Emerson. To merge most passionately, we must first be defiantly distinct. The question becomes how to maintain such distinctness in a long-term relationship. “Make space enough between you,” Shakespeare’s soothsayer says to  and Caesar—and we might say to lovers. Many of the most ardent couples, like Pyramus and Thisbe, retained a

barrier between them—whether that barrier was a city block, as with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, or a garden and a monkey pen, as with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.

The one thing these couples did *not* put between them—and *shouldn't*, according to Esther Perel—is a spoiled child. “Overzealous parenting,” she declares, is a

recent trend that has, one hopes, reached the apex of its folly ... Childhood has been sanctified so that it no longer seems ridiculous for one adult to sacrifice herself entirely in order to foster the flawless and painless development of her offspring.

Bad as this is for children (who emerge with a sense of entitlement that unfits them for social life), it is worse for parents. The mother who spends all day arranging playdates for her toddler is the mother who has no time for her own dates. She is the woman who no longer knows what her husband looks like without a child in a satchel on his back and a second in a sling across his chest (“Kinder-trees,” Milan Kundera has called such unfortunates). He is the father who dresses his child in Armani and himself in sweatsuits. They are the men and women who have been desexualized, deindividualized, dehumanized. Tools of their offspring, they have ceased to live for themselves—and if eroticism needs one thing, it needs a sense of self. It needs a sense of greed and want, aggression and emotion, desire and agency. Tools don't make love. People make love.

On this matter, as on others, Perel is brave and right. She is adept at pinpointing problems; less so at proposing solutions. Her recommendations for retaining the distance in which passion can flare are at once gimmicky and tragic. We do better to seek pointers in *Love in the Western World*. “If it is true that passion seeks the Inaccessible,” says de Rougemont, “... is not every *Other* the Inaccessible?”

Too quickly we assume we understand the persons we love, and put them into categories. Because we know how they take their coffee or turn over in bed, we think we know their emotional or moral turbulences, their secret judgments, recurrent temptations. It is revelatory—because re-estranging—to encounter our closest companions in contexts unlike those in which we usually confer. The novelist Siri Hustvedt writes of the thrall that overcomes her when she sees her husband, Paul Auster, at a public ceremony. Many a tired husband is shocked when he suddenly sees his wife dance—or flirt, or fight, or take command, or write a poem.

We all, as Walt Whitman said, contain multitudes. It is salutary to remember this, salutary to encourage this, salutary—even—to know this *is* encouraged, so that we remain unafraid to surprise. (Those w  best are often the worst enemies of our self-reinvention—and thus the enemies, ironically, of their own serendipitous

delight.) This is an oblique strategy indeed, compared with Perel's. But in its obliqueness lies an advantage. For in love we miss the things we aim at directly. To strike a target, Love's archer must aim to the side. When sex becomes the subject of self-improvement, when couples monitor the frequency and intensity—the regularity and reciprocity—of their erotic contact, it becomes as dull a drudgery as their day job, as boring a routine as biceps curls.

I am no judge of Perel's practice, but I am a judge of our sexual culture, and it seems to me that we are talking ourselves to death. We are talking our desire to death. Rather than make stilted little shows of transgression (Perel enjoins us, among other things, to act "ruthless" in bed, and to imagine adulteries if we don't commit them), perhaps we could regain some of sexuality's transgressive energy by *remystifying* our eroticism rather than by *demystifying* it, by *reveiling* our desire rather than by rehearsing it ad nauseam, by rediscovering the power of wit and suggestion, sublimation and caesura. Nobody rushes to see what is spread out on the sunny asphalt like a dried fish or a flogged octopus. What the crowds on the Cretan waterfront I presently call home clamor to see is not the fat fish in the display case but the flash of fin in the foam, the glint of gold in the waves, the fleeting copper that the ocean swallows again as quickly as it reveals.

It is not by flaying our erotic impulses into banality and duty that we fortify them. It is sometimes by averting our eyes that we see most clearly, and feel most strongly. The 1960s freed us to look squarely at sex. Our own decade might free us to look at something else besides—to look not more, but deeper.

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## **Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic**

By Esther Perel

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