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Woody by Freedom? Why the Young Distrust Love and Fear Commitment by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting --- and Marrying edited by Amy A. and Leon R. Kass. University of Notre Dame. 630 pp. \$25.00.

One would have to be glib indeed to draw conclusions about society at large from isolated samples of popular culture, especially when dealing with something as coy and defiant, as fond of and agile with masks, as tantalizingly close and wickedly elusive, as commonly and crazily pursued, as love. Yet given the role the movies play these days, not only in satisfying our appetite for entertainment but also in forming tastes and in supplying cultural reference points from lowbrow to highbrow, one would have to be a fool to ignore the propositions about love that emanate from the silver screen.

It is a matter of some wonder that few films have captured the American public's imagination as forcefully and lastingly as Casablanca-for it is a peculiar sort of love story. It is not exactly a tragedy: neither Rick nor Ilsa dies, nor do fate and character flaws conspire to bring them low or destroy their love. And yet the film is certainly not a comedy either, because no storybook ending awaits the heroes, no happily-ever-after redeems their loss. Wishing to remain worthy, in each other's eyes and in their own, of the love they share, Humphrey Bogart's Rick and Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa give each other up-he to stay in Casablanca aiding the French Resistance, she to accompany and support her husband, a dedicated and courageous man, in his work as a leader of the underground. This is hardly a Hollywood ending, yet Bogart's last words to Bergman on the runway, which seal both their love and their separation, are enshrined in the memories of generations of moviegoers. Unforgettable, too, is the concluding shot: after he has gunned down the Nazi commander, enabling the plane carrying Ilsa and her husband to depart Casablanca, Rick, with Louis the French police captain, his new friend and co-conspirator, ambles off into the night fog, no trace of a broken heart discernible in his easy stride or wry words. Indeed, these moments belong among the most beloved final scenes in the annals of American movies.

Apparently we are romantics, for Casablanca would not retain the power to make grown men and women weep and then watch it again and weep some more unless we shared a deep conviction that love and nobility are linked, that great love may summon from us monumental sacrifices --- including, when fate is especially cruel, giving up the beloved for the sake of love.

Indeed, to be moved by such renunciation we must be romantics of a peculiarly enthusiastic breed.

And yet who could be less romantic than we are today? What could be more out of fashion today than renunciation? Television, along with the movies, is awash in adolescent farce, cheap vulgarity, and the feverish and calculating pursuit of casual sex. The Internet revolution and the stock-market boom enhance our already robust sense of entitlement: be a multimillionaire by the time you are twenty-five, or be a slacker or a drone. Owing in part to VCRs, the Internet, and now DVDs, pornography is flourishing as never before --- affordable, discreet, and available to almost everybody. One of the most popular sitcoms of the 1990s, *Seinfeld*, created a world devoid of happy couples, in which lasting love, when it came to dating and mating, seldom struck the characters as something interesting enough even to mock. Whereas in the sixties and seventies, at the dawn of the sexual revolution, radical college students referred to one of their newfound freedoms as the now quaint-sounding "making love" (a euphemism that emancipated sex from marriage but preserved its link to romance), and in the eighties we referred to "having sex" (which severed the biological drive from emotional attachment), today students adopt a mechanical metaphor, speaking of "hooking up," like railroad cars and computer docking stations (which may constitute a gain in precision, allowing for discrimination among forms of coupling). Even in *Shakespeare in Love*, the recent film that perhaps comes closest in spirit to *Casablanca*, Gwyneth Paltrow sacrifices more for her dream of acting on the all-male Elizabethan stage than for the love she finds with the struggling young playwright, and renounces her beloved-not, as in *Casablanca*, embracing duty because of love, but abandoning love in deference to duty.

Of course, for every anti-romantic trend in popular culture one can point to a countertrend celebrating romantic bliss: TV shows such as *Mad About You* and *Dharma and Greg*, both about delightful young married couples whose differences and disputes always confirm their perfect fit; the titanic success of *Titanic*, which owed more to the fairy-tale romance between Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet than to James Cameron's spectacular computer-generated special effects; the renewed interest in the classic courting novels of Jane Austen, reflected in the spate of film adaptations in the mid-nineties (including the clever *Clueless*); the abiding popularity of *When Harry Met Sally...*, which dramatizes the slow, fitful growth of love and marriage out of initial animosity, lingering lust, and unexpected friendship; the formulaic Harlequin romances that continue to be among the best-selling books in the United States; and the sentimental odes to broken hearts and undying love that gush forth around the clock from soft-rock and country radio stations across the nation.

>But the coexistence of the countertrends alongside the trends is just the point. Apparently we are romantics. And apparently we are anti-romantics as well. Which is not to say that we have somehow, without really thinking about or even noticing it, struck a healthy balance. The competition between these impulses sows powerful confusion in our souls, not least in regard to our conduct and understanding of love and marriage.

Wife and husband Amy and Leon Kass, who teach at the University of Chicago, are thoughtful romantics alarmed by the anti-romantic tendencies of the time. Indeed, they first undertook work on their "Readings on Courting and Marrying" in response to what they regarded as a crisis in romantic relations among young adults. Their students, they found, were increasingly skeptical of marriage and family and at the same time, especially the women, dissatisfied with what they called (in the instructively abstract and antiseptic term of choice) "relationships," in and out of which they frequently and unceremoniously wandered. Saddened by this state of affairs, the Kasses were also convinced that there was and remains a better way. But our primary access to it --- and this, they point out, is a measure of our loss --- is through acts of recollection and retrieval.

The Kasses' volume is, "quite frankly and unapologetically, a pro- marriage anthology, intended to help young people of marriageable age, and parents of young people now and soon to be of marriageable age, think about the meaning, purpose, and virtues of marriage and, especially, about how one might go about finding and winning the right one to marry." It contains a distinguished array of literary selections whose sources range from Homer and the Bible to Rilke and Robert Frost, contemporary cultural criticism of a largely conservative cast, a brief introduction by the Kasses to each of the readings, and a substantial introductory essay by them on the leading themes of the book. Although this is not its sole or even its principal purpose, the anthology does aim to articulate the features, defend the dignity, and bring out the continuing relevance of an older ideal, according to which the man woos and pursues, the woman keeps her distance and discriminates carefully among suitors, and both play their roles in an ancient dance that seeks to combine sex and love and the rearing of children in a monogamous and permanent union.

Many will find it mighty tempting to dismiss the Kasses as conservative moralists out of touch with the contemporary scene --- old fogies oblivious of the charms and the justice of the new dispensation. But the questions around which they organize their book are fundamental and do not prejudge the issue: What is distinctive about the contemporary situation?

Why marry? How does sex bind men and women and set them at odds? How can love be distinguished from lust or friendship? How does one find and win the right love? Why are weddings important? What can married life be like? Nor do they rest the case for marriage --- which they build patiently, question by question, reading by reading --- on an appeal to authority or tradition or religious faith. Rather, the Kasses start from the dissatisfactions they have observed in their students. Their contention is that courting with an eye to marrying and marrying with a view to forever offers genuine goods (so their own experience and studies have persuaded them) that respond to the enduring longings of the human heart.

One would, for example, be hard-pressed to detect anachronism or political partisanship in the final reading, Robert Frost's "The Master Speed," written in celebration of his daughter's wedding, whose romantic last line supplies the Kasses' book with its evocative title.

| No speed of wind or water rushing by  
But you have speed far greater. You can climb  
Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,  
And back through history up the stream of time.  
And you were given this swiftness, not for haste,  
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,  
But in the rush of everything to waste,  
That you may have the power of standing still ---  
Off any still or moving thing you say.  
Two such as you with such a master speed  
Cannot be parted nor be swept away  
From one another once you are agreed  
That life is only life forevermore  
Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

It is a beautiful and timeless image of triumph over the rush and ravages of time: husband and wife side by side, sharing friendly winds or propelling themselves through resistant waters.

Yet the obstacles to the attainment of Frost's sublime vision of marital love are timeless too. Selfishness, greed, lust, pride, envy, jealousy, resentment, and the hankering after power and pre-eminence have ever roiled the souls of men and women and have kept the stage set for spite, deceit, and betrayal. More: the machinations of rivals, the mandates of parents, the dictates of religious authorities, the laws of the state, the vagaries of fortune, the pressures of economic necessity, and the barriers of prejudice forever conspire to drive lovers apart and tear marriages asunder.

These realities hardly come as news to the Kasses. They are far from viewing the past through rose-colored glasses --- or the present through ash-tinted lenses. They know that the majority of men and women still marry, "though," they insist, "later, less frequently, more hesitantly, and by and large, less successfully." They fully appreciate that attaining the ideal --- falling in love, marrying happily, and journeying together through a lifetime "wing to wing and oar to oar" --- has always been a blessing reserved for a few. They are well aware --- indeed, they emphasize --- that although marriage is an ancient institution, the notion that it should be based on love, a meeting of hearts and minds, is of relatively recent vintage and perhaps imposes on marriage, which answers to a variety of social, political, and religious needs, more weight than it can bear.

Still, the Kasses contend, we are witnessing something new. What distinguishes contemporary experience, they fear, is not that we expect too much from marriage but that we expect too little --- not our despair over the impossibility of attaining perfection in marriage but the growing incredulity with which we view the ideal as both enriching love and furnishing the cornerstone of a well-lived life.

Consider the Kasses' enumeration of the challenges that social life today poses to hope for the achievement of love in a lasting marriage. It is worth quoting at length, because of its stunning juxtaposition of the Kasses' precise, morality-tinged descriptions with the skeptical voices of their perceptive students.

| . . . the sexual revolution, made possible especially by effective female contraception ("Why court a woman for marriage when she may be sexually enjoyed, and regularly, without it?" "Why wait for marriage, now that there is no risk of getting myself pregnant?"); the ideology of feminism and the changing educational and occupational status of women ("Why look for a husband, or have children, when I can have a personally more satisfying career?" "Why should I take on the burden of supporting her when she can support herself?"); the destigmatization of bastardy, divorce, infidelity, and abortion ("Do I really need a husband in order to have children?" "Why should she practice chastity or I be sexually responsible when abortion exists to deal with any accidents?"); the general erosion of shame and awe regarding sexual matters, promoted by the commercialization of sex and the sexualization of commerce, and exemplified most vividly in the ubiquitous and voyeuristic presentation of sexual activity in movies and on television ("Why should I dress or act modestly?" "Why should we have any scruples or feel reverence about giving our bodies?"); widespread morally neutral sex education in schools ("Why think about romance and devotion, if the whole story is pleasure and safety?" "Why see sex as positively related to having children, if the whole story is preventing or getting rid of the consequences?"); the explosive increase in the numbers of young people whose parents have been divorced ("Why trust anyone but myself?" "Who can honestly promise lasting love?") or who are born out of wedlock ("Who needs marriage?" "What's wrong with single parenthood?"); great increases in geographic mobility, with a resulting loosening of ties to place and extended family of origin ("Why think of settling down?" "What do I care about what my family thinks about my 'relationships'?"); and, harder to describe precisely, a popular culture that celebrates youth and independence not as a transient stage en route to adulthood but as "the time of our lives," imitable at all ages ("Why take on the burdens of adulthood, when we can continue to enjoy ourselves without responsibilities?"), and an ethos that lacks transcendent aspirations and asks of us no devotion to family, God, or country, encouraging us simply to soak up the pleasures of the present ("If it feels good, why not 'Just do it'?").

A treacherous obstacle course by any standard.

To be sure, the Kasses' presentation of their students' perspective is not as balanced as it might be. In fact, a backlash of sorts can be discerned on campuses today, as college women observe and absorb the ambiguous experiences of women in their thirties and forties, who have discovered that the opening of opportunities in the workplace did not, as the fatuous slogan promised, enable women to have it all. Moreover, most mothers (and fathers, too) do not choose single parenthood but have it thrust upon them. Also, recent years have witnessed the much-ballyhooed publication of books by women in their twenties and thirties in praise of modesty in dress and conduct and in defense of the joys of motherhood and the dignity of stay-at-home wives. And so on. But more striking than this or that quibble with the Kasses'

characterization of contemporary circumstances is the sympathy they display for their students' plight. Doubts about loving, courtship, and marriage, their analysis pointedly indicates, are legitimate --- all too legitimate --- inferences from our lived experience.

Why did experience turn against courtship, incriminate love, and accuse marriage? The Kasses do not, as skeptical readers will be wont to suspect, blame the sixties, everybody's favorite turning point. They dig deeper and reach a more disconcerting conclusion: The fundamental source of our doubts about and dissatisfaction with courtship and marriage is both further away and much closer to home. It is moral and political but lies beyond partisan differences, consisting of truths that we barely think about because we hold them to be self-evident. We are estranged from love and the institutions that preserve it, the Kasses suggest, by the very principles on which our politics is based- by the gradual working out, more in our souls than in our laws, of the spirit of freedom and equality.

This spirit imparts distinctive lessons about the moral life and inclines us to adopt particular systems to govern our associations with others. Among these are lessons of impermanence and systems of separateness. The more we grow to love our freedom and embrace it as our defining feature, the more we learn to view ourselves as under no overarching or enduring authority, connected to no community that commands our permanent allegiance, bound by no promise, principle, or duty that is not retractable or revisable as the spirit moves --- after all, who is looking? Inasmuch as we suppose that the freedom we love is shared equally by all, we are inclined to see others as like us in the morally relevant ways, moved by the same desires, governed by the same impulses, similarly willful. We collaborate in the construction of systems, psychological and social, that reaffirm the separateness our essential independence dictates. It is not that we cease to associate but that we conceive of every association, even the most intimate and impassioned, as ultimately instrumental and effectively subject to renegotiation or cancellation at a moment's notice.

The lessons of impermanence and the systems of separateness intertwine, constantly complementing and reinforcing each other, quickening and emboldening familiar human proclivities. They encourage us to distrust others, because we attribute to others the same attachment to the freedom to do as one pleases that we discern in ourselves. They impel us to suppose that others are withholding themselves from us, because, to safeguard our independence, we routinely withhold a part of ourselves from them. They goad us to suspect that friends and lovers are secretly devising schemes for a fast getaway, because we are carefully and covertly formulating such contingency plans all along.

Moreover, the lessons of impermanence and the systems of separateness are fortified by the fruits of our freedom: economic progress and scientific advance. The siren song of supply and demand persistently murmurs, "Out with the old and in with the new," "All the world is a market," "Everything has a price." Revolutions in medicine and technology --- from the birth-control pill to in vitro fertilization to cloning --- enlarge our freedom by providing powerful tools for controlling our bodies and manipulating biological processes, and at the same time

menace it by inexorably insinuating that men and women are fit objects for control and manipulation, limited only by cost and know-how. Of course, individual freedom, along with the economic progress and scientific development it has unleashed, must be counted among the great glories of the modern world. This does not make it a sign of ingratitude (in fact, it may be an obligation arising from our freedom) to inquire, What price glory?

Despite being subtle guides to the anti-romantic tendencies generated by our love of freedom, the Kasses barely notice (though this is of the essence) that it feeds our pronounced romantic tendencies as well. Freedom drives us to prize our uniqueness, for how can we be really free if our feelings and actions conform to patterns followed by others? And if we are unique, is there more than one other who can understand and cherish us and whom we can understand and cherish in return? Perhaps we place extravagant hope in the redemptive power of romantic love because, after our urge toward freedom has overwhelmed the old sources of transcendence, only the union of two in one --- in which each lover, in embracing the beloved, becomes a sturdier, more bountiful individual --- remains to offer those intimations of eternity toward which the human heart seems ceaselessly drawn.

At the same time, the romantic in us exacerbates confusion about courtship and marriage. If our anti-romantic tendencies persuade us to expect too little from marriage, our romantic tendencies seduce us into expecting too much. Simultaneously romantics and anti-romantics, we yearn for the perfect union but conduct our love lives in a manner that renders us increasingly ill prepared to attain it. For us, serial monogamy has displaced courting. This is regarded as progress, on the grounds that you can't know what you haven't tried, and practice makes perfect. But the routine justifications miss the meaning for the heart. By the time we contemplate marriage, we bring not only ourselves to the altar but also the ghosts of lovers past, lurking rivals and well-rehearsed reservations, secret places and forbidden chambers. We accumulate a world of intimate sorrows and joys, and the very attempt to share these can widen the chasms that divide us.

Yet when has marriage not been embattled? When have lovers not labored to preserve their love in the face of the world's temptations and travails? When has courtship not been a fraught and complex affair? Never --- at least not in recorded history or according to the testimony of our literature. Did not Abraham expose Sarah to danger and dishonor during their wanderings in the desert? Did not Aphrodite cuckold her lame husband, Hephaestus, by lying with Ares, the god of war? Did not Shakespeare and Jane Austen, master portrayers of the intricacies of romance and courtship, shy away from depicting the flourishing of love in a lasting marriage? Yes, yes, and yes. But let us not get carried away: although acquaintance with the shoals on which love and marriage have foundered in the past provides perspective and affords a certain comfort, it gives no grounds for complacency concerning the perils of today.

Times change. Old barriers crumble and new ones arise. But the mysteries of the human heart --- the raging passions and tender pathos, the waywardness and loyalty, the fragility and resilience --- endure.

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