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Book Review: Cut Loose: (Mostly) Older Women Talk About the End of (Mostly) Long-Term Relationships

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Cut Loose: (Mostly) Older Women Talk About the End of (Mostly) Long-Term Relationships. Nan Bauer-Maglin (ed.). 2006. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press. 310 pp. US \$21.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Barbara R. Bergmann, Ph.D.¹

This book is mostly about the pain of being “dumped” -- the prolonged anguish, the anger, the humiliation, the enveloping loneliness. Several dozen women, mostly in their fifties and sixties, tell of the ending of their relationships and of the aftermath. A few of the women who tell their stories in this volume had had lesbian relationships, but most of the narratives are by women who had been married to a man. In all but one case, the breakup was initiated by the narrator’s partner.

Nan Bauer-Maglin, the editor of this collection, is a CUNY English professor and high-ranking administrator. The women she has recruited to write its chapters are almost all college professors. A couple of them express their painful feelings in poetry, but even the poets have jobs as professors. Almost all the contributors are eloquent writers, and so their narratives convey vividly their outrage and despair. Yet these authors have some big and highly atypical advantages over the general run of women who find themselves alone when no longer young. They continue to hold interesting jobs that provide stimulating duties, generous vacations, continual contact with intelligent and vibrant people, and freedom from petty supervision. Their secure jobs pay enough to keep them safe from deprivation, and their old age will be comforted by private pensions. So naturally, they tend not to mention money troubles. These are not the “displaced homemakers” we used to hear so much about.

This is not to imply that the authors of the book’s chapters have no right to feel sorry for themselves. Being rejected by one’s long-term partner is not for sissies. Their vocational success and high status may even make the comedown that accompanies their partners’ desertion harder to bear. But only a tiny fraction of the women in our society who suffer marital breakups in late middle age are in such a fortunate situation vocationally as they are.

A high proportion of the women who are “dumped” late in life have taken time out of the labor market, and sex discrimination has diminished their job opportunities. As a result they have access only to low-paying low-status jobs that are boring, and carry no possibilities of promotion. Many of these women must bear the tyranny of a petty boss and the disrespect of coworkers. Such women are far more likely than the professors represented in this volume to travel in circles where the prevailing attitude is, “You’re nothing without a man.” Alimony is pretty much a thing of the past, so many women whose marriage ends, and who can no longer share the household of a higher-paid male worker, experience a big comedown in standard of living. To the emotional pain they suffer is added the cruel pinch of penury.

Constance Ahrons, author of *The Good Divorce*, in her blurb for this book, takes its theme to be “the resiliency of women, showing how they gain the strength necessary to cope with life’s most difficult emotions.” But in truth the emphasis is on cruel and unremitting pain.

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There is a terrible jolt when walking into an empty house after years of having a husband, children and their friends, and dogs and cats littering the rooms. Dreams worked toward so hard evaporated like the morning fog over the rivers outside my kitchen window. One day, and it happens in one day, one hour, one minute, one heart-stopping second . . . it all goes away, just like life itself. (Marita Lopez-Mena, 62)

Most of the volume's authors report that the aftermath of their breakup was prolonged, and in most cases the pain had never let up.

Men of the age of these contributors' husbands are generally at the height of their careers, and are highly attractive to women subordinates and younger collaborators. In the case of almost all the contributors, at the time of the breakup the departing partner had already started a new relationship with a person younger than the narrator. That produced in these women an acute awareness that their physical attraction had diminished, and that their chance of a new relationship with a man was poor. One woman's husband told her he was leaving her for someone who reminded him of her younger self.

Some of these women "made the pilgrimage to the plastic surgeon." Many had prolonged psychotherapy. A few found a new good partner, but most did not. Some were indeed able to face a life alone with a fairly good spirit – as one woman says,

I feel a kind of contentment -- if you can leave aside my over-determined negativity about my body. I have regained energy and enthusiasm. I experience pleasure, laughter, occasional bursts of wild abandon. I've joined a workshop for creative and improvisational dance, which is something I hadn't done for decades. I feel connected to life and love on many levels. I've still got my fears and times of loneliness, but mostly I feel affection for the old bird I am becoming. (Sue O'Sullivan, 104)

What might one get out of reading this book? It is maximally gloomy and certainly far from entertaining. As noted, the authors are far from a representative sample of women whose long-term marriage breaks up, so the full range of experience is by no means presented. But the book has its uses. If you are young, you can read it as a warning. If you are one of those to whom this experience has already come, you can compare your pain with that of some eloquent others.