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Uncoupling: Perspectives of American Families Through the Eyes of Contemporary Fiction Writers

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"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So Tolstoy begins Anna Karenina, and so has run the conventional wisdom about families, except perhaps among contemporary American fiction writers and sociologists who seem intent on showing Tolstoy wrong in their attempt to discover some universal principle of connubial misery. In our pursuit of familial happiness, we Americans have doubled the divorce rate, reformed divorce laws to assure a steady supply of impoverished women and neglected children, and provided the occasion for fiction writers to speak of woe that is in marriage.

I was struck by this misery reading Lenore Weitzman's "Women and Children Last: The Social and Economic Consequences of Divorce Law Reforms," a condensation of the high (or low) points in her book-length study The Divorce Revolution. No-fault divorce laws, starting in California and working their way east as a perverse manifest destiny, "were designed to create more equity [but] have had unintended and unfortunate consequences: They have created substantial inequalities between divorced men and women and have led to the impoverishment of many divorced women and their children." A well-intended reform allows husbands to depart court with their earning power and living standard intact or improved, minimal parental responsibilities, and an unenforceable support judgment. His ex-wife retains custody of the children, often in a new dwelling and neighborhood, the family home having been sold to accommodate an equal property settlement; she finds her standard of living dramatically reduced as a result of selling family assets; and, especially if she's an older woman, lacks adequate skills to secure employment in any but menial work. "You can't tell me there's justice if someone uses you for 25 years and then just dumps you and walks out scotfree... It's not fair. It's not justice. It's a scandal... and those judges should be ashamed of themselves sitting up there in their black robes like God and hurting poor people like me." Even a reform designed to curb one brand of misery manages to create an even more excruciating torment.

If Weitzman documents for us the misery that persists after divorce, Arlie Hochschild enumerates the troubles married couples experience when both hold jobs. Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home chronicles the domestic tensions, near battles even, that two worker couples experience as they try to reconcile and accommodate roles as parents, lovers, and wage-earners. Hochschild shows us a real revolution is occurring: in 1986 fifty-eight percent of all married couples with children were two earner families. Hochschild employs the interview and composite portrait method; her Bay Area families, mostly middle-class professional (but not all) conduct their marriages on the fly, husbands preoccupied with career, wives preoccupied with career, housekeeping and children, and children preoccupied with trying to slow their parents down sufficiently to attract their attention. Working wives and mothers must adjust to their husband's expectation of a traditional household; they end up working what Hochschild labels a "second shift," in effect a thirteenth month of employment. These economic necessities have compelled women to refashion their gender identities much more rapidly and to a much greater degree than men. "This strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me," Hochschild says, "to speak of a stalled revolution."

This strain is most pronounced when Hochschild's subjects confront divorce. Hochschild repeats many of Weitzman's statistics and observes that "formerly, many men dominated women within marriage. Now, despite a much wider acceptance of women as workers, men dominate women anonymously outside of marriage." Divorce's grim visage prevents many wives from insisting too strongly that their husbands assist with the childraising and housework. Instead the women...
adjust and comprise; to do otherwise risks too much. One woman “responded to her friend’s [divorce] with empathy, horror, and a certain fascination. As she told me,” Hochschild reports, “my friend is gorgeous. But she wasn’t feeling good about herself, so she went out and got a facelift. She’s younger than me! Her husband went out and got a younger woman, even more gorgeous.”” Another woman, tired of battling her husband over sharing housework, finally yields: “Why wreck a marriage over a dirty frying pan?”

Weitzman and Hochschild’s sociological portraits of couples in distress brought to mind three recent short fiction collections where Ann Beattie, Jane Smiley, and Bobbie Ann Mason examine the distresses and adjustments couples—married, separated, divorced—and find them fixed, stuck in time, caught in a freeze frame. Some of the fictional material might very well have been lifted from Weitzman’s and Hochschild’s interviews. A cocktail waitress in Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Memphis” says to a customer: “You know why I got my tubes tied? Because I hate it when people assume things like that—that I’m the one to make supper because I’ve got reproductive organs.”” These story collections accumulate betrayals, loveless marriages, missed opportunities, failed intimacies.

Beattie’s Where You’ll Find Me collects stories about suburban middle-class families trying to deal with the loss of children, infertility, infidelity, incapacity. “What happened happened at random,” thinks one woman bereaved at the loss of her daughter; ‘and one horrible thing hardly precluded the possibilities of others happening next.’” For Beattie’s characters, the future holds potential disaster and terror. They feel themselves, not like sinners in the hands of Jonathan Edward’s angry God, but victims of the same biblical text: ‘Thy foot shall slide in due time.’ One divorced woman muses: “I am a thirty-eight year old woman, out of a job, on tenuous enough footing with her sometime lover that she can imagine crashing emotionally as easily as she did on the ice.” These characters struggle to hold back the crash but realize they exist at that moment in the skid when all seems momentarily frozen in time and space. A Beattie story often concludes with its characters suspended, afraid to make another adjustment. Mrs. Camp “was tired. It was as simple as that. The life she loved so much had been lived, all along, with the greatest effort. She closed the door again. To hold herself still, she held her breath.” Holding one’s breath and hoping for grace are what Beattie’s stories are all about.

Robert Miller, husband of Liz and father of Tommy in Jane Smiley’s latest novella Good Will, attempts to create for himself and his family a self-sufficient life lived apart from the frenzied existence of commercial America. Return- ing from Vietnam, he buys an abandoned farm in a valley outside Moreton, Pennsylvania, and transforms it into what he considers a near perfect, self-sustained farm. His only mistake, he believes, is the house he constructed from brick scavenged from demolitions in nearby State College. Beneath the placidity we soon perceive great tensions. Tommy, who Robert is educating to his ways of self-sufficiency and the discipline it demands, returns from kindergarten with a note saying that he has willfully destroyed another child’s doll. This child turns out to be a black girl, whose mother, Lydia Harris, teaches mathematics at nearby Penn State and has recently moved to Moreton. The Millers are dumbstruck at Tommy’s destructiveness, destructiveness which persists and which culminates in Tommy’s setting fire to the Harris’ house and destroying it. Robert’s idyll is ruined; the court orders the family to move into State College, to find regular work, and to enroll Tommy in public school. Robert reflects on what happened: “But it seems to me that what they want of me is to make another whole thing, the way I made a whole of my family, my farm, my time, a bubble, a work of art, a whole expression of my whole self... .Let us have fragments, I say. Let the racial hatred that has been expressed through us lie next to the longing I feel for Lydia Harris; let Tom’s innocence lie next to his envious fury; let Liz’s grief for the farm lie next to her blossoming in town; let my urge to govern and supply every element of my son’s being lie next to our tenuous custody; let the poverty the welfare department sees lie next to the wealth I know was mine.” Robert, a man of good will, nevertheless by imposing it on the world manages to crack and deform what he has made. His will impels him to fulfill his wishes, “but the moral of all wish tales is that, though wishes express power or desire, their purpose is to reveal ignorance more fulfilled wishes, the more realized ignorance.” Robert’s ignorance is realized in his attempt to fashion his son as a work of art and make him a continuation of himself. Ironically he succeeds; the care and resourcefulness Robert employs to build his farm is mirrored in the care and resourcefulness Tommy used to destroy the Harris’ home. It is easy for us to demand our children’s attention, not so easy for them to demand ours.

Bobbie Ann Mason’s latest collection of stories, Love Life, is again set in western Kentucky where shopping malls, fast food restaurants, and subdivisions encroach upon the farmland, laying...
Dismissing the French textbook as useless ("You can’t learn about France from this"), he abandons the teaching of irregular verbs, and instead regales the class with tales of his own amorous adventures in France. It’s not necessary to know much French to meet girls, he assures them; besides, the only way to learn French is to visit France, where everyone has remarkable adventures. (Inspired, one of his students impulsively flies to France and does indeed have a thrilling time, unimpeded by his lack of familiarity with the language.) As a seemingly logical consequence of this line of reasoning, Billy takes his students to the movies. Thus, even a likable and entertaining teacher fosters the pervasive idea that true enjoyment can be had only by experience school this way: the real “action” is outside the classroom, in the halls, the cafeteria, the locker rooms. But I have also known students who speak nostalgically of high

school and college classrooms, who remember intellectual excitement and imaginative, challenging teachers. Of this there is no clue on television. The excitement is physical, sexual, emotional — but never intellectual. In no television classroom I saw (admittedly my experience is limited) did a lively interchange of ideas or arguments occur. Television writers are no doubt afraid that any conversation on a serious subject lasting more than two minutes would bore viewers - and they may be right. The result, though, is that the public never sees for itself what can go on in a good classroom, which may explain why, although there is a great deal of discussion about improving the quality of education, budgets continue to be cut. The viewing public never sees the possibility that there might be stimulation - yes, even fun - in the exercise of the mind.

suburban America’s TV and music over the rural customs. Mason’s characters are dislocated in their very homes; their categories no longer separate and distinct. “Jenny kissed him in front of Opal and told him he was gorgeous. She said the placemats were gorgeous too.” This is Mason’s way, and more than with Beattie and Smiley, one has to listen to the voices, to reread, to let the stories resonate. In “Wish” an elderly sister tells her eighty-four year old brother how their father had ruined her life by forbidding marriage to the man she loved. “You know she says, ‘how you hear on the television nowadays about little children getting beat up or treated nasty and it makes such a mark on them? Nowadays they know about that, but they didn’t back then. They never knew how something when you’re young can hurt you so long.’” Her brother, “hard and plain” she calls him, eight years widowed from a domineering woman who forced him to move out of the family home to her dream house, recalls after his sister leaves, meeting the girl he loved in the woods behind the family home, the girl he didn’t marry. Suddenly we realize the painful influence of father on son. The hurt forces us to reread “Wish” and understand that unfulfilled wishes engender painful knowledge. The hurt and the knowledge of it passes from generation to generation.

“Memphis” shows us that indeed men continue to dominate their ex-wives outside of marriage. Joe tells his ex-wife, Beverly, that he is relocating to Columbia, South Carolina. “I’ll want to have the kids on vacations—and all summer,” he tells her. “Well tough!” she responds; “you expect me to send them on an airplane all that way?” “You’ll have to make some adjustments,” he said calmly. . . .” Beverly can’t accept the adjustments and can’t understand why. “It seemed no one knew why [divorce] was happenening,” she thinks. “Everybody blamed it on statistics; half of all marriages nowadays ended in divorce. It was a fact, like traffic jams—just one of those things you had to put up with in modern life.” Her friends and ex-husband accuse her of being too judgmental and of never knowing what she wants. “It ought to be so easy to work out what she really wanted,” she thinks. “Beverly’s parents had stayed married like two dogs locked together in passion, except it wasn’t passion. But she and Joe didn’t have to do that. Times had changed. Joe could move to South Carolina. Beverly and Jolene could hop down to Memphis just for a fun weekend. Who knew what might happen or what anybody would decide to do on any given weekend or at any stage of life?”

Who among us knows? Sociologists may document through interviews and statistics the messes we’ve made of our lives; story writers reveal that what’s been documented is emptiness. “Marriage,” says one of Smiley’s characters, “is a small container...barely large enough to hold some children. Two inner lives, two lifelong meditations of whatever complexity, burst out of it and out of it, cracking it, deforming it.” The container is inadequate to its task, perhaps because we do not know any longer what its proper task should be. For too many of the characters in these stories the future holds only more cracking and more deformity. There are no happy families any more.