

The Washington Post

Book reviews: 'You Say Tomato, I Say Shut Up' and 'More Perfect Unions'

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Sunday, July 11, 2010; E08

Two recent books delve past the numbers for a more personal assessment of marriage. In one, a couple reveal the joy, sorrows and heavy kvetching that test their bond from Day One. Another, offering a history of marriage counseling from the 1920s to the 21st century, studies our quintessentially American focus on keeping our unions together.

Annabelle Gurwitch and Jeff Kahn's "You Say Tomato, I Say Shut Up: A Love Story" (Crown, \$24) shows how hectic, hard and hilarious married life can be. Spanning friendship, courtship, marriage and parenthood, their "he said/she said" memoir at times reads like a mix of couples therapy and "Real World" confessionals for grown-ups. Only funnier and heavier.

One day into the couple's honeymoon, Gurwitch's grandmother dies, and a few weeks later Gurwitch herself is in the hospital, having a grapefruit-size tumor removed. "I hadn't actually married into the Gurwitch family but Death itself," Kahn deadpans. "We were married, what every self-centered, party-going, club-hopping, dating, dancing, drinking, sex-obsessed single person in the world was striving so hard to achieve."

The couple's hospital encounters multiply after their son, Ezra, is born with a birth defect that requires numerous surgeries and around-the-clock care. But even serious matters are handled with a smile and a laugh: After all, Kahn is a television writer and Gurwitch is an actress, backgrounds mirrored in their caffeine-addled, pop-culture-laced prose.

Gurwitch and Kahn sound off on each other's idiosyncrasies, annoyances and endearing qualities, and even openly posit what life might be like with someone else. Of course, as a project authored by television professionals, all gets wrapped up in the end. The 21st-century challenges of trying to make a living, raise a family and find alone time are universal, and with the right person, they suggest, are universally worth it.

Though they renounce it as a waste of money, Gurwitch and Kahn, like generations of American couples, have had professional help with their marriage. And in "More Perfect Unions" (Harvard Univ., \$29.95), Rebecca L. Davis delves into decades of marriage counselors' case notes and client correspondence to trace the evolution of what she calls a "uniquely American obsession."

Marriage counseling wasn't always about bringing couples together and encouraging emotional growth, Davis finds. Rather, it began in the 1930s as an institution to help hem women into expected gender roles, and in the 1940s and '50s leaned heavily on eugenics to help encourage marriages among white, middle-class Americans. And it wasn't until the 1970s that counseling sessions typically involved both husband and wife.

As women's social roles changed, marital counseling was forced to adapt from a discipline aimed at reconciliation regardless of the conflict -- abuse, neglect, adultery, homosexual tendencies -- to one that could help couples divorce on good terms.

Davis presents marriage counseling as an institution with larger aims than connubial bliss, but also as a tool of the state, clergy and social scientists to help strengthen families, communities and economies.

These books may not bring readers closer to finding The One or navigating marriage and its inherent conflicts. But can't any union (real or imagined) benefit from counterarguments, historical perspective and some comic relief?

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