

When Your Children Marry: How Marriage Changes Relationships with Sons and Daughters

Deborah M. Merrill
Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011.

Reviewed by Sally Dear-Healey

The purpose of Deborah M. Merrill's *When Children Marry: How Marriage Changes Relationships with Sons and Daughters* is to "investigate how the transition to marriage differs for sons versus daughters, and in particular how their relationship with their natal (i.e. birth) family changes after marriage and the process by which those relationships change." She begins with the age-old question, "Is a daughter a daughter all of her life, is a son a son 'til he takes him a wife?" Merrill effectively addresses this question, as well as numerous other salient points, throughout this well-written, thought-provoking, and useful book.

Merrill unabashedly addresses the inevitable and often difficult choices couples, specifically adult married sons and daughters and their respective parents, make about spending time—or not spending time—with "the relatives" and the manner in which those relationships are negotiated and carried out. These choices are further complicated by gender and marital status; differing beliefs, values, and expectations; as well as geographic location, time, and money. Providing case studies of five different families, Merrill tracks similarities and differences in their responses in order to analyze relationships within the context of the family and, more specifically, parent-adult child and extended family relationships. Although the sample size is limited, and is not meant to be broadly representative, the case studies provide useful examples of diversity in individual and collective human behaviour.

According to Merrill, the characteristics of generally positive parent-child relationships are relative proximity (living within a thirty-five mile drive of one another), frequent contact (at least weekly) often involving an exchange of resources, and emotional closeness (shared affection). Although conflict and ambivalence are also common, "ambivalence is greater the closer the family relationship," it is "collective" when there are multiple children in the family, and it is more common during "status transitions" such as marriage. A point often stressed is the sense of obligation parents and children feel toward one another, which Merrill reports is more common within a wife's family than a husband's family. This results in men having more contact, defined as

emotional support, companionship, affection, and caregiving, with their in-laws than do women.

Merrill found that “living at a distance is related to worse relationships with parents for daughters” and explains that, in some cases, geographical distance not only preserves the parent-child relationship, it influences how their individual and respective roles are viewed. For example, women in Merrill’s study referred, and often deferred, to the “primary grandmother,” the mother of the daughter or son who lived closest, when they considered their own living arrangements.

This book will prove useful to marriage and family counselors, as well as undergraduate and graduate classes focusing on family relationships.

Bite Your Tongue

Francesca Rendle-Short
North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex, 2011.

Reviewed by Julia Lisella

“Some stories are hard to tell, they bite back. To write this one, I’ve had to come at it obliquely, give myself over to the writing with my face half turned.” Despite her warning of an oblique narrative, *Bite Your Tongue* tells a difficult story with directness, honesty, and a great deal of love. The story captures the deep longing of an adolescent girl for the approval and love of a mother who was so focused on her moral crusade—to rid Queensland, Australia of “smutty” literature during the 1970s—that she sacrificed her daughter’s well-being and safety throughout the years of middle school and high school. Though the narrative trajectory recalls many other daughter-mother memoirs, Francesca Rendle-Short circumvents the pitfalls of blame and revenge to tell an intricate tale of attachment, disappointment, and finally acceptance, even admiration for her mother.

Rendle-Short interweaves public and private documents as much as she interweaves fiction and memoir. X-rays of her mother’s hands, family photographs from an old instamatic camera, and copies of documents from library archives reveal her mother’s vulnerability as well as her determination and drive. The blending of fiction and archival research also allows Rendle-Short to examine and eventually understand her own history. For example, Rendle-Short’s fictional character Glory discovers that MotherJoy (the fictional mother) read all of the books she recommended banning; Rendle-Short’s real