

REVIEW written by Walter L. Williams, of

Living Happily Ever After: Couples Talk about Lasting Love

by Laurie Wagner, Stephanie Rausser, David Collier

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This coffeetable type book is an effective tool against heterosexism simply because it is not focused on GLBT subjects. Based on a documentary film "For Better or for Worse," the book is marketed to mainstream readers as "a perfect gift for weddings, anniversaries, or any loving occasion" (from the back cover). The book consists of interviews of thirty couples who have been together for at least thirty years. Each chapter is devoted to one couple, complete with photographs of the couple when they were young, and up to the 1990s. The questions the interviewers asked them revolved around the issue of how they stayed together in a successful relationship for decades, and remain in love with each other to the present time.

Each chapter is a joy to read, with readers gaining different insights from each couple. As might be expected from authors from San Francisco, diverse couples are presented. Husbands and wives from every racial group are included, as are disabled people. As the reader is drawn into their personal family story, each chapter becomes a subtle challenge against racism and stereotyping. Nestled in with the heterosexual couples, and scattered throughout the book, are three same-sex couples (a PC 10% representation). The three couples are on pp.37-41 Harry Hay and John Burnside, pioneer gay activists active in Los Angeles' ONE Institute from the 1950s and 1960s, on pp.72-76 Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, founders of the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco, and on pp.110-114 Bruhs Mero and Gean Harwood of New York. It is a shame that none of the represented same-sex couples include a person of color, leading some readers perhaps to infer that only white people are homosexual, but the stories of these three couples are heartwarming.

While Harry Hay is the more famous, for his role as a founder of the original Mattachine Society, it is John Burnside who really sparkles in this essay. When he spoke of entering the gay world he talked of leaving his gender-conformist masculine role-playing behind and "exploring life with a freedom that we have as gay men.... The man has a certain restrictive pattern. To be gay means to be exempt from that and to do what you like." The attraction between him and Harry, John says, "was a physical thing and a metaphor for the deep spiritual connection that to this very day we enjoy in each other's presence. It seems to be very

healing" (p.39). John realizes that Harry's explosive personality type sometimes leads to friction and quarrels, but John's evenminded response is "Nothing in life is all that damned important. And that's assisted me in letting go of the little trifles that become magnified" (p.40).

These portraits of happily aged couples violate the grim stereotypes of miserable homosexuals past their prime, yearning for young flesh. John recognizes that their sexual drive is not as it was during their youth, but as they got older "We found that there was a tremendous life that opened up for us.... We saw it as a wonderful opportunity for understanding and supporting each other. So we stayed together, and back came the powers of capacity in a new form. We still engage in regular sex, but there's no pressing need; instead, the sexual vitality connects us in a day-to-day way. We can be sitting across the breakfast table and just look at one another and say, 'Isn't this wonderful?'" (p.41). Harry concludes that the main theme of their successful relationship is "constant dialogue the entire time" (p.41).

Having this unashamed sexual liberationist viewpoint presented in a forthright but not overly emphasized manner shows heterosexuals that they might be able to learn something from homosexual people, as well as violating the ageist stereotypes held by many young gays and lesbians.

As with Harry and John, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon admit to arguing sometimes. They saw it as simply one aspect of living together and interacting closely. Del said, "We question couples who never fight; we think something's wrong with the relationship." "It's not natural," adds Phyllis, turning the natural/unnatural metaphor on its head. But they don't take their arguments too seriously. Sometimes, they add, when they find themselves in the middle of a yelling fest, "we both burst out laughing." In explaining the success of their longterm relationship Phyllis concludes, "We don't have any secret that everybody seems to think exists, some magic ingredient that's kept us together for so long." The important thing, she says, is that "Del and I have had a really good life together" (p.76).

Bruhs Mero and Gean Harwood had been together for sixty-four years before Bruhs died in 1995. Gean said what kept them together was that "We both had the same ideal, which was that we didn't want to ever leave each other.... We built a life together which supported who we were and what we cared about. I think our most fulfilling times were the dance and music work we did together" (p.110). They created a small theater where Bruhs did dance performances to Gean's musical compositions. Gean remembered that "creating together strengthened our relationship. Ours might have gone the way of so many others without that creative cement to tie it together" (p.112). In the 1980s they became spokespersons for New York's

Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), and were interviewed on television as a model for longterm same-sex couples. SAGE honored them with a banquet on their fiftieth anniversary, assembling three hundred people "who welcomed us with open arms." In 1985 they were the grand marshals of New York's Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade. Gean recalled, "As our car rode through [the crowd], with one voice they let out the biggest roar of approval you have ever heard in your life. I can't describe how much love we felt coming" (p.113). Images like this show the supportive nature of the gay and lesbian community, countering stereotypes and creating an impression of an admirable community.

On losing Bruhs, Gean said, "I'm fighting back tears, because of the memories or the associations that I make with what we did in our lives together. I feel angry in some respects, but it's the anger of deprivation. I feel deprived." Still, he hoped that he and his partner "will be reunited at a future time in another setting" (p.114). This loving dedication cannot fail to move readers, who see the deep feelings of love that two men can feel toward each other.

Having a book like this, obviously directed to a mainstream heterosexual audience, that is inclusive of gay and lesbian couples is a powerful mechanism for reducing prejudice. If readers feel that they may be learning something of value from these wise individuals, something that will benefit them in their own life, then it is hard for them to sustain a hatred based on faceless stereotypes. We need more studies like this, integrating same-sex couples and singles into representations of all kinds of subjects. While it is equally important to have books published on specifically lesbian and gay topics, it is also important to integrate mention of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people into books on every topic of society. It is not necessary to conform and "be normal," but to be "normalized" by society. The gradual change in attitudes made by such normalizing of diversity makes it no longer threatening, but simply a part of life.