

## Splitsville:

### *On the Rise of Divorce Memoirs*

by Vivian Wagner

Divorce lends itself to storytelling. Almost always, there's a built-in arc of conflict; tension and drama; protagonists and antagonists; challenges and difficulties.

Maybe this inherent drama is one of the reasons why the last decade has seen a rise in divorce memoirs, even as the actual divorce rate has gradually been falling. Maybe writers are more likely to craft a story about a divorce than about a happy-enough marriage. Or maybe it's simply that divorce is now so common that it was destined to surface eventually in the world of memoir.

Whatever the reason, divorce memoirs have been flourishing. Most recently, the genre gained momentum with the publication of Elizabeth Gilbert's wildly best-selling *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (Riverhead, 2007). The story of Gilbert's grief over the loss of her marriage, her recognition that she no longer knew who she was outside of the marriage, and her subsequent search for pleasure, peace, spirituality, and, ultimately, happiness, *Eat, Pray, Love* is as much about what happens *after* the divorce as it is about the divorce itself. Gilbert's quest forms the basic structure of the book, as she learns that she's responsible for her own choices, her own happiness. She observes, "Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it, you must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into that happiness forever, to stay afloat on top of it."

In the wake of Gilbert's bestseller has come a raft of books, most of them by and about women, telling tales of self-exploration and discovery after divorce, including Theo Pauline Nestor's *How to Sleep Alone in a King-Size Bed: A Memoir of Starting Over* (Three Rivers Press, 2008), Suzanne Finnamore's *Split: A Memoir of Divorce* (Penguin, 2008), and Stacy Morrison's *Falling Apart in One Piece: One Optimist's Journey Through the Hell of Divorce* (Simon & Schuster, 2010). These books tell stories of vastly different circumstances, characters, and situations, but they share common threads of trauma, recovery, and rebuilding.

The narrative of marriage as a happy ending, as a culmination of desire, as everything to be dreamed and hoped for, is so prevalent in our culture that telling a story of a marriage falling apart still feels risqué and daring. There's something mysterious and unspoken about divorce and what happens after it, and until recently, this story has not been widely told.

The divorce memoirs of the last decade fill that void, telling stories that have not been heard, shaping alternative visions for those who emerge from this wrenching experience changed, confused, and emotionally bruised—yet willing to take the next step in their quest, and the next, and the next.

Finnamore's *Split* is one of my favorite divorce memoirs. I discovered it while going through my own divorce—and writing my own divorce memoir—and fell in love with Finnamore's humorous, humble, sometimes manic, always wise voice. Her story, which begins with her husband's decision to leave her—because, he says, they're "different people"—taught me not only how to find my way through the wreckage of an imploding marriage, but also how to write my way out of it. Finnamore helped me to re-envision endings, beginnings, and story structure itself, and I learned how to craft a hopeful (if not exactly happy) ending out of smoldering ruins.

Ultimately, Finnamore comes to understand that her married years weren't a waste, but were instead an early part of a journey that will continue long after the book ends. In the book's final scene, when her ex-husband stops by to pick up their son, she observes:

*What hits me is that I finally feel good about being unmarried. But maybe this is not a feeling that is based on being married or unmarried.*

*It could be that this is the feeling of happiness.*

Later that night, in a heartbreakingly beautiful moment, she and her ex-husband climb a nearby mountain to see the Hale-Bopp comet:

*The comet only appears every seventy-eight years. So you have to get up that hill. Because you have to see the comet, and because it is rare and precious, even if it ends.*

It's a perfectly crafted resolution, a denouement containing elements of both grief and recovery, lamentation and celebration.

The divorce memoirs in the current crop narrate experiences of putting one's life back together after a marriage falls apart, feeling at once guilty and giddy, discovering freedom, and searching for new ways of being in the world. Perhaps, they suggest, divorce is a calamity only when viewed from within a failed marriage. Yes, divorce *is* traumatic in the moment, but memoir provides the opportunity for reflection, and the farther along a new path the divorced memoirist travels, the less tragic the divorce seems.

Perhaps divorce doesn't matter as much, in the end, as the life that comes after it. And that's a story worth telling.

## FOR FURTHER READING

**Cynthia Copeland, *Good Riddance: An Illustrated Memoir of Divorce* (Abrams ComicArts, 2013)**

This graphic memoir about divorce, dating, and single parenthood is at once humorous and heartbreaking. In an early scene, for instance, the narrator says that "it was an ordinary day" when she discovered her husband was cheating on her. The accompanying illustration shows the narrator standing by an electronic control board: "[N]othing on the radar screen." Copeland's endearing sense of humor pulls the reader through what could otherwise simply be a harrowing tale of grief and loss.

**Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012)**

This memoir focuses on the period of separation preceding Cusk's divorce, and intersperses the personal narrative with stories from Greek tragedies.

**Alexandra Fuller, *Leaving Before the Rains Come* (Penguin, 2015)**

This powerful and unique story about divorce, family history, and self-discovery is as much about Fuller's parents and childhood roots in Africa as it is about the breakup of her marriage to an American man. The memoir traces a late-in-life coming-of-age, which just happens to be sparked by marital disintegration.

**Isabel Gillies, *Happens Every Day: An All-Too-True Story* (Scribner, 2009)**

The title of this candid and intimate story of divorce and renewal comes from a friend of the author, who says of her husband's leaving that it "happens every day." That kind of blithe acceptance of divorce in the culture is one of the underlying themes of this conversational and redemptive memoir. Ultimately, it's about how Gillies rebuilds her life so that it's stronger and more authentic than it was before.

**Mardi Jo Link, *Bootstrapper: From Broke to Badass on a Northern Michigan Farm* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013)**

This is a witty, engaging story about Link rebuilding her life, her farm, and her self-confidence after a divorce. To survive, Link has to dig deep into Michigan's soil and culture, finding that she has more substance and grit than she knew.

**Jill Talbot, *The Way We Weren't: A Memoir* (Soft Skull Press, 2015)**

This is not technically a divorce memoir since Talbot and the father of her daughter were never married. It's more a book about single parenthood, the longing for a marriage that never was, and the strength of spirit that Talbot and her daughter discover in themselves.