

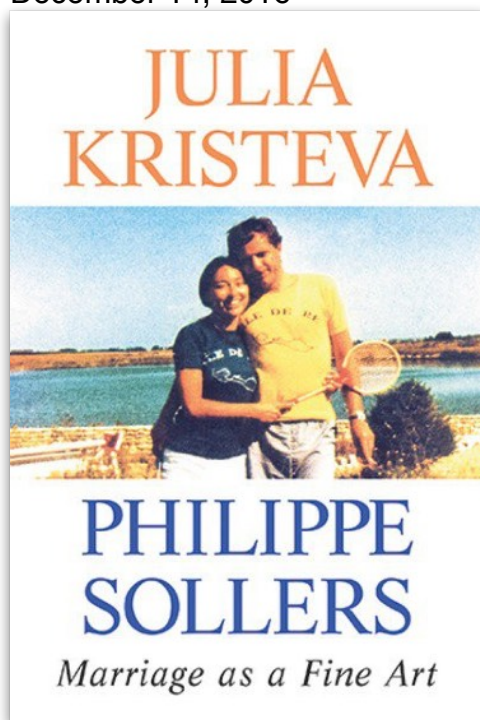


Tied in Knots

The modern marriage is an elaborate feat of performance.

BY VIVIAN GORNICK

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MARRIAGE AS A FINE ART by Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers Columbia University Press, 128 pp., \$26.00

Marriage as a Fine Art is a book of conversations between the celebrated French power couple Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers, in which they open themselves to a barrage of questions about their own marriage. This subject matched with these participants must seem highly suspect to many: Kristeva is a world-famous psychoanalyst and feminist theorist and Philippe Sollers a novelist, critic, and magazine editor well known in France.

The couple has been married for 50 years, and has for just as long been part of an elite circle of intellectual theorists—including such figures as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan—where defending marriage as such is the last thing on anyone’s agenda. So what were these two now up to?

In her preface to the book, Kristeva promises “to tell all about a given passion, with precision, without shame or shirking, without altering the past or embellishing the present, and steering very clear of the flaunting of sentimental fixations and erotic fantasies so prevalent in the current ‘selfie’ memoir.” Sollers adds that when “people get married out of calculation or delusion, time wears down this fragile normality contract, they get unmarried, they remarry, or else they stagnate in mutual disappointment. Nothing of the sort with us: Both partners equally preserve their creative personality, each stimulating the other all the time.” It’s a “new art of love,” he proposes, one that he believes society may not, however, be ready to accept. Thus, from the very start, both respondents took pains to establish their attachment as an example of the intelligence and courage that it takes to rescue the words “husband” and “wife” from their ever-increasing lack of prestige.

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Kristeva and Sollers met in Paris in 1966 when she was 25 years old and had just arrived on a fellowship from Bulgaria, and he was 30, already a published writer, and a disaffected son of the French middle class. No sooner had they begun talking than each recognized in the other an exciting kindred spirit. Two years later they were married and, from that day on, the conversation between them has not ceased to flow. This intellectual companionateness, both aver, has established the kind of equality that is vital to a successful marriage. It also doesn’t hurt that Kristeva and Sollers are equals insofar as material independence goes. Sollers, sounding for all the world like an American feminist as well as a French bourgeois, confides that without equal earning power, “there’s not much use in talking about the sophistication of love or the ins and outs of fidelity.” Kristeva laughs and assures the reader that Philippe is only speaking the simple truth. The problem is both Kristeva and Sollers are incorrigible intellectuals, constitutionally incapable of a simple anything, much less a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. For each, theory is mother’s milk, abstraction the staff of life. To be sure, bits of concrete information—including the fact, mentioned on the book jacket, that Kristeva and Sollers do not actually live together—appear alongside abstract disquisitions on literature, social history, analysis, you name it. But while their book is characterized by intellectual elegance, not much of what they say has the feel of flesh-and-blood reality. Kristeva, especially, sins on this score. When asked how she herself would respond to a clear instance of infidelity, Kristeva observes, “In male-female relations, you can engage in ‘outside’ friendships that are sexual and sensual while still respecting the body and sensitivities of your main partner”—and adds that she herself has never known jealousy and thus could never feel betrayed. “To feel betrayed,” she clarifies, “implies zero self-confidence, a narcissism so battered that the slightest affirmation of the other person’s individuality is felt as a crippling blow.” Huh?

Thinking back to the Darling and Ginzburg essays, I could not help admiring anew the fearlessness with which those writers evoked the pleasures and pains of that extraordinary contractual relationship into which two human beings, no matter how many times they’ve performed the ceremony, enter as innocents and emerge initiates. In contrast, Kristeva and Sollers’s presentation of their marriage seemed the work of two people who think openness equates with exposure, and thus were more involved with self-protection than with truth-speaking.

Towards the end of one conversation, however, they each answer a question that breaks their uniform imperturbability and, inadvertently, delivers a flash of emotional rupture. When the hapless interviewer insists that whether to confess or to deny an infidelity is still the great question in marriage, Kristeva instantly announces, “I don’t believe there can be secrecy.” But Sollers declares, “I don’t believe in transparency . . . I’m all for secrets.” Secrets, he persists, are the real foundation of liberty. I could not help recalling that the couple does not live together, and began mischievously to wonder exactly how open this marriage is; and at what emotional cost; and if the cost is being paid equally. It is my fervent belief that no reader could come away from this book with anything like a usable insight into the actualities of the Kristeva-Sollers marriage—or, for that matter, into the institution of marriage itself. At the same time, I’d also bet that nearly everyone will come away exhilarated. The performance, so smart, so practiced, is genuinely entertaining, enacted, as it is, by two people who are openly energized by showing off to and for one another. Their mutual enjoyment, as they go through their paces, is palpable. Clearly, intellectual busking is the glue that binds Kristeva and Sollers to one another.

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