

'BUY THE WIFE'S BOOK OR I'LL NEVER
HEAR THE END OF IT' STEPHEN FRY

MRS

STEPHEN
FRY



HOW TO HAVE An
Almost PERFECT
MARRIAGE

How to Have
an
ALMOST
PERFECT
MARRIAGE

by
Mrs Stephen Fry

For my dear husband and children, without whom things
would have been so much simpler.

Forewarning

An almost perfect book, written in almost perfect English
by an almost perfect spouse.

– Stephen Fry

Dear Reader,

The book you are holding came about in a rather different way to most others. It was funded directly by readers through a new website: Unbound.

Unbound is the creation of three writers. We started the company because we believed there had to be a better deal for both writers and readers. On the Unbound website, authors share the ideas for the books they want to write directly with readers. If enough of you support the book by pledging for it in advance, we produce a beautifully bound special subscribers' edition and distribute a regular edition and e-book wherever books are sold, in shops and online.

This new way of publishing is actually a very old idea (Samuel Johnson funded his dictionary this way). We're just using the internet to build each writer a network of patrons. Here, at the back of this book, you'll find the names of all the people who made it happen.

Publishing in this way means readers are no longer just passive consumers of the books they buy, and authors are free to write the books they really want. They get a much fairer return too - half the profits their books generate, rather than a tiny percentage of the cover price.

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Thank you for your support,

Three handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. The first signature is cursive and appears to be 'Daniel'. The second signature is more stylized, possibly 'John'. The third signature is also cursive and appears to be 'John'.

Dan, Justin and John
Founders, Unbound

Introduction

Do you, Edna Constance Bathsheba, take Stephen John Elvis to be your lawfully wedded husband?

I did.

READER, I married him. Or e-reader, I married him, if you prefer. For after many, many years of marriage and many, many children, I've decided it's only fair to share my unparalleled expertise and deepest secrets with you in this invaluable guide.

Of course, the 'him' to whom I refer is my current husband, Stephen. You may be aware of his numerous books, his countless television shows and his enormous intellect. You probably know he spends his time travelling endlessly, attending operas, meeting famous stars of stage and screen and visiting tribespeople in the remotest corners of the globe. That's if you read all that rubbish he writes on Twitter, anyway - honestly, that man's imagination!

If you frequent the Dog & Duck, however, you'll know the truth. Or the Red Lion. Or Kevin's kebab van. Because that's where you'll almost certainly find him. Not dining at the Ritz or filming something about wizards in New Zealand and certainly not at home helping me take care of our children!

Of course, someone like you can't realistically expect to have a marriage as perfect as ours, which is why I've called this book *How To Have an Almost Perfect Marriage*, but whether you're a husband-, wife- or divorcee-to-be or just simply Fry-curious, you'll learn everything you need to know, and quite a lot you don't, about the most wonderful

years of your life as these nine chapters guide you through every aspect of marriage from proposal to divorce.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

According to Vaguelytruepedia.com, marriage as an institution has been around for centuries. The word itself harkens back to Medieval times, when any couple declaring eternal love for each other were ritually transported through the streets, exposed to ridicule and scorn in an open coach known popularly as the 'mad carriage'. Over the years, this became shortened to 'mad rage' and finally lengthened again to 'marriage'.

Marriage as we know it (i.e. with wedding dresses and confetti as opposed to straightjackets and rotting vegetables) was invented in 1963 by the writers of popular US situation comedy *Behitched* as a narrative device to create conflict. Up to that point, if a couple appeared in a television show they were almost certainly living in sin, gay or at the very least, mixed race (interestingly, the first inter-marriage kiss ever broadcast occurred in the long-running science-fiction series, *Star Trek*, when William Shatner married Mr Spock's rather hairy half-sister in the episode *The Stubble with Sybil*).

WHY GET MARRIED?

Statistically, 100 per cent of divorces start with marriage. And yet there are still hundreds of thousands of weddings each year – why?

Well, people get married for all sorts of reasons – security, social convention, pregnancy, boredom, fear of being alone, even love. Personally, I fancied a new hat and Stephen was nearby. Of course, we all hope to have a string of marriages to increasingly attractive and wealthy partners, but the reality for many couples is that their

marriage will endure for the rest of their lives – a chilling thought and one worth considering before entering into what is, after all, a legally-binding contract (see section on how to get out of legally-binding contracts). While this can seem daunting, it's equally important to remember that compared with being systematically abused in a nursing home or dying alone in a skip, spending your twilight years with your spouse can be relatively acceptable. Personally, I think it's always good to see an elderly couple walking down the street hand in hand – it stops them falling over.

There is also the question of money. The tabloids are full of warring celebrity couples for whom the rather unseemly battle for financial remuneration has muddied the marital waters and allowed them to lose sight of the reason they were getting divorced in the first place.

And it can be easy to get carried away with the romance of a wedding – the church, the dress, the horse-drawn carriage, the free bar. People even use the phrase 'fairy tale wedding' although very few use the phrase 'fairy tale marriage' – unless they're referring to the original, traditional fairy tale which was generally a pretty gruesome adventure without a happy ending.

This book is intended as a guide not only for those couples about to enter into a state of holy matrimony but also those couples already in a state. If you and your spouse are sitting there, cosily imagining that you have nothing to learn from the following pages, I recommend you attempt the following short quiz and I'm quite confident that you will feel differently by the time you've finished.

HOW PERFECT IS YOUR MARRIAGE?

HIS QUESTIONS

1. When was the last time you forgot your wife's birthday?
 - a) I never forget her birthday – the date is etched eternally on my heart, together with our wedding anniversary, the day we first met and her shoe size.
 - b) I only once forgot her birthday but I never will again. Luckily, the surgery was a success.
 - c) I know when Elvis was born – does that count?
2. Your wife has bought a new dress but looks terrible in it. What do you say to her when she asks how she looks?
 - a) Gorgeous, darling, as always.
 - b) I'm not sure it shows off your amazing figure to its very best, my sweet.
 - c) Hahahahahahahahahaahahahahahahaha
3. At a party, you notice a good-looking man eyeing up your wife. What do you do?
 - a) Nothing. Just feel proud that he's noticed how attractive she is.
 - b) Give him a dirty look and steer her towards the vol-au-vents.
 - c) Ask if he's ever considered laser eye surgery.
4. Your wife wants you to go with her to the cinema this evening to see the latest Hollywood romantic comedy. What do you do?
 - a) You go along with her to watch it. The most important thing to you is that she's happy, even if it is inane, shallow drivel.
 - b) You agree to go but pop out in the afternoon and set fire to the cinema.
 - c) You agree to go but pop out in the afternoon, set fire to the cinema and frame your wife for it.

HER QUESTIONS

1. How on earth do you manage to put up with him?

Right, now that's all sorted, let's proceed, shall we? Pop the kettle on, put your feet up, turn the page and let's begin your seemingly unlikely journey to an Almost Perfect Marriage...

Finding Mr (or Miss) Right

*Please note, this chapter is aimed at unmarried readers -
I'm afraid it's too late for the rest of you, dears.*

BEFORE YOU get married, there is one very important thing you must do - locate your future spouse. Without him or her, the event is likely to be a bit of a damp squib.

So, how should you go about this onerous task? I'm glad you asked...

WHERE TO LOOK

According to research, one of the best places to meet your future husband or wife is the supermarket (this is especially true if you're seeking a life partner with a career in the check-out or shelf-stacking sectors). Sadly, this is becoming less true as more and more people are choosing to have their weekly shop delivered for a small extra cost, leaving only the poor, the disorganised and the computer illiterate to patrol the aisles. Fortunately, that still leaves plenty of candidates to choose from, provided you're not too fussy.

So how should you go about this 'partner-shopping' as I like to call it? Simply wandering aimlessly around your local supermarket for hours on end will provoke suspicion among customers and store detectives so it's important that you have a clear strategy. First, you need to identify your almost ideal partner and choose your hunting ground accordingly. Is she a Waitrose kind of girl? Is he a Tesco or

a Sainsbury's guy? Does everything about her scream Asda? Once you've selected the right establishment, take a deep breath, put some clothes on and pop along. Evenings are generally the best time unless you have a preference for the unemployed or elderly but do try to avoid Saturday evenings if possible - we don't want to appear too desperate, do we?

When you enter the store, do so confidently with a light, breezy air. You're saying 'I'm here merely to do my shopping, not to find the man or woman of my dreams, although should that opportunity present itself I wouldn't necessarily run away screaming.' To this end, it's important to appear open and friendly - a bright smile will help attract a possible partner although too big a smile could result in him or her running away screaming. On a scale of 1 to 10, with one being a slight curling of the lip and 10 being Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, I would recommend about a three.

Take a basket (a trolley suggests that you have a family, particularly if you have a small child in the seat) and casually parade up and down the aisles. If you are looking for a wife you could try the chocolate department, if it's a husband you seek, the beer section, but there's one area more likely than any other to bear fruit (other than the fruit aisle) - the ready meals freezer. So many of the great romances of our age have been sparked by hands meeting accidentally over a roast chicken dinner for one. I wonder where Prince William and dear Princess Kate would be now without Findus Crispy Pancakes?

Having successfully engineered your 'chance' meeting, all that's left is for you to engage in fascinating conversation, discover numerous common interests, fall madly in love and book the church - easy!

INTERNET DATING

A modern alternative to the supermarket is the internet (also for shopping, should the urge take you). Whether you prefer social networking or dating sites, looking for a prospective partner on the world wide web can be a minefield. I have an acquaintance, let's call her Edwina, who spent months chatting on the website SuperspouseMe.com to someone who claimed to be a door-to-door double-glazing salesman called Neville only to finally discover he was, in actual fact, a door-to-door double-glazing salesman called Neville. Naturally, she assumed he'd been lying as so many do from the safety and anonymity of their computer keyboards. You can imagine her disappointment. Another acquaintance, let's call him Stefan, was surprised to find that the leggy 22 year old blonde part-time lap-dancer from Lytham St Annes was in fact the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Even if the person in whom you have any interest has given their real identity and occupation they may still not be being completely honest about their relationship status - they may already have a partner or even a spouse, but how can you tell? Examine their online photograph closely. The following should raise your suspicions - a white mark around their ring finger, a wedding ring around their ring finger, his and hers towels hanging in the background or a marriage certificate hanging in the background.

If you find dating sites a little 'full-on' and you prefer a more casual approach, there are several social networking sites that allow you to make contact with like-minded (i.e. socially inept) people such as yourself. The popular friendship site Facebook, for example, allows you to exchange pleasantries, banalities and farm animals in your pursuit of eternal love.

If your social and literary skills are even more basic, however, don't worry - Twitter could be for you. With its

140 character limit and proliferation of acronyms and poor grammar, it's the social networking site of choice for everyone from reality TV stars to professional footballers to nobodies like you. However, the language of texts and social network sites can be confusing to a normally-minded person, so here is a guide to the most frequently used acronyms.

LOL - Leaning On Lamp-post - meaning that the writer may be either Marlene Dietrich or George Formby. Probably best to find out which before embarking on a conversation about ukuleles.

OMG - The lesser-known '80s synth-pop band, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Garage.

PMSL - Pleasuring Myself Lightly - meaning that the writer finds your message particularly interesting.

LMAO - Let My Auntie Out - a very specific and urgent message.

ROFLMAO - Room's On Fire, Let My Auntie Out - an even more specific and urgent message.

SPEED DATING

Speed dating is a relatively new phenomenon, originating in the United States of America like so many other ridiculous ideas. Men and women take part in what appears to be musical chairs for single people, chatting briefly to one prospective partner before moving swiftly on to another, hence the name. Originally there were three speeds - 45, 78 and $33\frac{1}{3}$. Now however, the attention span of the modern young person means that at many events, you have an average of less than 30 seconds to introduce yourself, bond and forge a meaningful relationship. It is therefore vital that you limit your conversation to short, pithy statements containing single syllable words only. If you have a particularly long name you may want to

consider having it shortened by deed poll to save vital seconds.

THE FIRST DATE

Once you've finally found your potential Mr or Miss Right, the next step is to arrange a date. But before you do I recommend you take into account the following factors.

WHERE TO GO

Choosing an appropriate venue for your first date can be tricky. Ideally, you want somewhere conducive to relaxed, flowing conversation with just a hint of romance. Generally, it's best to avoid the following: launderettes, post offices, pet shops, underground car parks, landfill sites and ex-partner's homes.

Here are some of my personal recommendations with pros and cons to assist you with your decision:

Bars/Pubs

Pros – A convivial, informal environment which allows you to get to know your date. A little alcohol can help reduce inhibitions to the point where conversation can flow freely.

Cons – A lot of alcohol can reduce inhibitions to the point where your lunch can flow freely.

Restaurants

Pros – A meal in a candlelit French restaurant can be very romantic. It also gives you a focus for the evening in case you and your date struggle to find topics to discuss.

Cons – A meal in a Burger King may not be quite so romantic.

Cinemas

Pros – Going to see a film together takes the pressure off the evening – you don't need to fill the time with idle chit-chat. Sitting in the back row can make you feel like a teenager in love. It also allows for the time-honoured 'arm-round-the-shoulder' routine.

Cons – Your date running up and down the aisles shooting the other cinema-goers with an imaginary space pistol can make you feel like a teenager babysitting your little brother (just one of the many reasons I haven't been to the cinema with Stephen since 1983).

Art Galleries

Pros – They can provide an opportunity to connect on a higher cultural plane.

Cons – Your date running up and down the corridors shooting the other visitors with an imaginary space pistol (we haven't visited an art gallery since 1983 either).

DRESSING FOR A FIRST DATE

First impressions are terribly important so it's vital you strive to make the best one possible by choosing appropriate attire. While I obviously have no idea of the contents of your wardrobe (although if it's anything like mine it can be anything from the latest haute couture to Primark, depending on who Stephen's hidden in there) and am therefore not in a position to advise each and every one of you personally, here are his and hers blanket lists of what not to wear.

Him:

A blanket.

A t-shirt with a slogan – at best they can appear juvenile, such as I'm With Stupid, provocative e.g. Ban the Bomb or downright offensive e.g. any of Stephen's.

A medallion.

Flippers.
An eye patch.
A false beard.
Roller skates.
A tin foil hat.

Her:

Anything that might give him the wrong idea. Which could be anything, really – you know what men are like.

BODY LANGUAGE

Other than your sartorial appearance, how you behave physically is awfully important. Apart from the basics such as sitting up straight and not picking your nose (or your date's), there are countless ways you can affect the outcome of your meeting by the correct use of what body language experts call body language.

Mirroring – this is where someone unconsciously mimics another's physical movements. It occurs when one person is attracted to another and has the subliminal effect of heightening interest in the mirroree – assuming there is such a word, and if there wasn't, there is now. It is easy to replicate this natural reaction by simply copying your date's movements – raising your hand to your face when they raise theirs, crossing your legs when they cross theirs, jumping on the table and removing all your clothes when they remove theirs, etc (although I personally would steer clear of the last one).

Eye contact – when you make prolonged eye contact with your date, you are showing them that you are attracted to them and interested in what they are saying. This can, of course, be difficult if you're naturally shy or you're dating someone like Stephen. I recommend practising at home –

stand in front of your bathroom mirror for as long as you can, staring deeply into the reflection of your own eyes until either your vision becomes blurred or the Candyman appears. If either of these occurs, it's probably best to stop for a little while.

Using your date's name – frequent use of your date's name is a strong verbal signal, reinforcing their importance to you. It also helps if you have a poor memory or you're a bit of a slut like my dear friend Mrs Norton. When adopting this strategy, it's vital that you use the correct name and also that you don't giggle if it's a particularly silly name.

Licking your lips provocatively – this can be a very flirtatious act if performed properly. i not, however, it can look like you're fond of Labrador impressions or you've recently been released from a secure psychiatric unit. Either way, I would recommend a fairly robust lipstick (see earlier section – What Not to Wear On a First Date – Him).

Make 'em laugh – if you really want to impress your date, make her laugh (note, this only applies to men as most men are intimidated by funny women. And sharks). You can do this in all sorts of ways – making witty observations about fellow diners, relating amusing anecdotes about your boss – but it's important not to go too far. A spinning bow tie or a one-man rendition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be inappropriate in the wrong company.

'Accidental' touching – this refers to the brief, seemingly accidental touching of your date, such as grazing their arm with yours or your fingers meeting when reaching for the salt cellar, as opposed to touching your date – or indeed yourself – in a more prolonged and vigorous fashion, which instead of awakening their interest can provoke anything from a slap in the face to a taser.

Eating – if you're in a restaurant, your choice of meal is terribly important. Be sure to avoid anything too messy or difficult to eat. It can be very off-putting for your date to have to carry on a conversation whilst ignoring the spinach in your teeth or gravy in your hair. Remember the old adage – a moment on the lips, what seems like a lifetime down your cleavage.

CONVERSATION

The real key to a successful first date is conversation. This is how you make that initial emotional contact with someone and turn a virtual stranger into a virtual life partner. Suitable topics of conversation are music, art, films and the weather. Topics of conversation best avoided include phlegm, keyhole surgery, necrophilia and Daniel O'Donnell.

A good way to show that you are interested in your date is to ask them plenty of questions, although judging the right tone of questioning can be difficult if you're unused to dating – too light a tone can come across as superficial and dull, too heavy can be off-putting to someone you have only just met. Here are a few examples to give you an idea.

Too light – What is your favourite colour?

Just right – What is your favourite film?

Too heavy – What is your favourite sexual position?

Too light – Do you have a family?

Just right – Are you close to your family?

Too heavy – Have you ever had inappropriate feelings about a member of your immediate family?

Too light – Do you know where there's a good greengrocer?