

The Dutch Don't Care About Marriage



Being single in the Netherlands is pretty great.

Photo by Ferdy Damman/AFP/Getty Images

I was in Amsterdam for probably three hours when I began to see that having children and not being married was not a big deal there. In fact, marriage itself is not a big deal there. I was there to talk about my book *[In Praise of Messy Lives](#)*, which was coming out in Dutch, but what passes in America for a messy life is in Amsterdam just, well, how things go.

The Dutch attitude, which I like, is that marriage is not for everyone; it is a personal choice, an option, a pleasant possibility, but *not* marrying is not a failure, a great blot on your achievements in life, a critical rite of passage you have missed. Sometimes people get around to getting married, and sometimes they don't. Several Dutch women in their 40s, with children and rich romantic histories, tell me about marriage, "It just wasn't something that mattered to me."

As a popular view, this *laissez faire* approach accommodates the vicissitudes of the heart, the changing nature of love, the great variety of forms attachments take in real life. It acknowledges that things change, and to exit a relationship with kids is less violent somehow, less publically

absolute, than to exit a marriage. A bit of tolerance, of bemusement, of compassion or imagination is built into the system.

I try to describe to a couple of audiences in Amsterdam the against-the-grainness of someone, especially a woman, who has not married in America. I try to explain how having children outside of marriage is still considered an alternative, and essentially inferior life choice. I mention that an American writer wrote [a cover story in the *Atlantic*](#) on the remarkable and exotic fact that she was in her late 30s and had never married. This sort of blew their minds. Who could possibly care? It seemed like a crazy American thing for marriage to matter so much. To them this obsession, this nagging necessity for weddings, the lack of general acceptance toward other pretty common ways of living, is so foreign, so uniquely American, such a quaint narrowness, that it's incomprehensible as an actual mode of modern life.

At first I started fantasizing about whether I could move to a steep little Dutch house, and if I could balance a child on a bicycle. But it also seems to me it would be a great thing if we could absorb some of the Dutch attitude toward conjugal life. I am not here arguing against marriage, but against marriage as a rite of passage, against the assumption of all little girls that they will one day be married in a white dress on a green lawn, against the socially engraved absolute of it, the impossible-to-evade shining ideal.

What would it mean to end the centuries-long American fixation on traditional family structures? Would we be able to look at families living outside of convention without as much judgment, as much toxic condescension? Would the “smug marrieds” Helen Fielding wrote about in [Bridget Jones' Diary](#) be less smug and just married?

If we woke up one morning and discovered that in America marriage was suddenly regarded as a choice, a way, a possibility, but not a definite and essential phase of life, think how many people would suddenly be living above board, think of the stress removed, the pressures lifted, the stigmas dissolving. Think how many people living unhappily would see their way to living less unhappily. In Edwardian England, the cultural critic Rebecca West wrote about the “dinginess that come between us and the reality of love” and the “gross, destructive mutual raids on personality that often form marriages.”

Whatever one thinks about the institution, the truth is that marriage is increasingly not the way Americans are living. If one goes strictly by the facts—that the majority of babies born to women under 30 are born to single mothers, or that about 51 percent of American adults are married—one has to admit that marriage can't be taken for granted, assumed as a rite of passage, a

towering symbol of our way of life. But somehow this hasn't dimmed our solid sense of marriage as the American normal.

If we suddenly stopped being in thrall to the rigid, old-fashioned ideal of marriage, we could stop worrying about [low marriage rates](#) and high divorce rates. We could stop worrying about [single mothers](#) and the [decline of marriage](#) as an institution, especially in the lower middle class, and the [wasteful industry of wedding planning](#). We could instead focus on actual relationships, on intimacies, on substance over form; we could focus on love in its myriad, unpredictable varieties. We could see life here in the amber waves of grain not for what it should be, but for what it is.