

**Constance Ahrons, *The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Comes Apart* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1994)**

**Reviewed by Catherine Sienkiewicz**

Divorce isn't good *per se*, but it is better than a bad marriage. This is the premise of the book by Constance Ahrons which seeks to put divorce in a new and pleasanter light.

Ahrons wages a war on words. Much of the damage inflicted upon children of divorce, says Ahrons, is due to the language and attitudes surrounding it. Therefore we should not talk of broken homes, but of "binuclear" homes. Divorce language should embrace the new reality, not be rooted in the old. Continuing to cling to an ideal of a nuclear family with one mother and father, says Ahrons, only serves to deny reality and causes immeasurable harm to children of divorce; it is antiwomen, antimen, and antifamily (p. 10). A binuclear family simply spreads the original family between two homes, each managed by one "uncoupled exspouse."

Ahrons aims to shatter all of the standard conceptions about divorce and its fallout. Primary among them is the belief that divorce damages children in a variety of ways. It's not the divorce that causes the problems, argues the author, but the bad marriage which the divorce is ending. If the exspouses progress through the stages of divorce in a healthy and mature way, the children will emerge intact and will, in fact, be better off. It is deeply ingrained in our society that only in a nuclear family can we raise healthy children. Ahrons seeks to discredit that claim, with new and positive language for divorce, with new rituals to approach divorce and all its stages, and with an acceptance of divorce as a normal, healthy way to end a marriage that has failed.

And so, for much of the book, Ahrons supplies the reader with an analysis of the stages of divorce, from the initial decision to the legal endpoint. Through the anecdotal evidence of her case studies, one cannot help but question the conclusions she has neatly derived from them. They invite the reader to ask the deeper questions which the book does not raise. Central to any discussion of marriage, and therefore of divorce, is an understanding of married love and the marriage vows which ground it. Ahrons's clients talk of falling in and out of love, of love failing. One gathers that married love is a feeling, outside of our control. (Yet if it is so ephemeral, why is there consistently shock and anger when it is revealed that the feeling has "gone?") Once it has gone, the marriage has failed. Though feelings seem to be paramount, apparently one mustn't be concerned with the feelings of the spouse who did not initiate the divorce – in no-fault divorce, only the feelings of the divorce-seeking spouse carry any weight.

If changing feelings are sufficient grounds to end a marriage, what worth can a marriage vow possibly have? The reality that – in spite of high divorce rates – many people still do marry (and remarry) signifies that there is a strength and a form to the vow, in which the spouses promise not to feel but to behave in a certain way towards each other. There is profound irony in the action, which Ahrons describes, of the vow-reversal ceremony which some divorced spouses perform, where the vow to honor and cherish is replaced by the vow to forgive and release. Somehow the persons are to take comfort in a vow originating from the same person who rendered a lifelong vow temporary and meaningless.

One of the strengths of Ahrons's book is the continual and emphatic priority she places on the children of the divorce as deserving of utmost consideration, *even above the temporary feelings and concerns of the spouses*. She consistently emphasizes, using examples from her client histories, that

the spouses should not allow their understandable anger, pain, and loss to determine the terms of their post-divorce relationship. She seems optimistic about the amicability and personal growth that result from sacrificing one's own feelings to a higher purpose. The reader might be led, inadvertently, to wonder how such a selfless concern, both for the children and the other spouse, might have saved the marriage itself. But unfortunately one theme of the book is that the decision to divorce should be virtually free from critique or retrospection. We have no way of knowing how things might have been if the divorced couples she studied had stayed together. But there *are* studies on couples who were on the brink of divorce, yet remained committed to the marriage – these overwhelmingly show that the marriages improved, often drastically, through conflict and perseverance. The children of those marriages also tell a very different story from even the best divorces.

Ahrons makes the case that divorce in itself does not cause emotional and psychological wounds; that a good divorce can be a very healthy experience for the children involved. When addressing the myriad blended family arrangements in which children of divorce find themselves, she seems confident of the adaptability of children, and does not mention the documented risks such children are often in, physically, emotionally, and sexually.

In what she seems to view as an exoneration of her own divorce, Ahrons ends the book with an essay written by her grown daughter, describing her life after her parents separated. Her daughter considers it a benefit that she had to become independent at a young age, and was exposed to many situations and experiences, as well as to the different lifestyles of her divorced parents. Even if we could agree that these are desirable experiences for children, it is amazing that Ahrons does not take account of her daughter's emphatic statement that she would "never wish it on anyone" and hopes "never to experience it personally." Could it perhaps be true that divorce creates a loss, the magnitude of which cannot be measured or quantified? Perhaps it is also true that one can add up every laudable effort to make the best of a bad situation, and the sum total will still never be "good."

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