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The wifely life

By ELIZABETH SIMPSON

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The Meaning of Wife

By Anne Kingston

HarperCollins, 336 pages, \$36.95

From ancient Greece to modern Edmonton, from Medea's murderous rage at her husband's betrayal to Lou Paget's rubber-penis lessons for middle-class wives mastering oral sex, Anne Kingston gives good read.

The Meaning of Wife offers a history of women's subjugation, as well as a series of fascinating narratives about contemporary women who strive to break from coverture, the legal "authority" a husband has over the wife under his "protection." The problem, according to Kingston, began with the biblical notion of help-meet, whereby the word "wife" came to define a woman's role in ways that "husband" does not define a man's. She suggests that even now, when a husband can be legally charged for raping his wife, this unspoken legal authority shadows the wife's recourse in law. Kingston entertains as she enlightens when she shares her considerable knowledge in this social history, one that includes the growing number of women who now choose to remain single. "Meaning" in the title refers as much to husband as wife, in the sense that men are gradually and with some resistance from both sexes, filling "the wife gap." This expression suggests the chores within the home that career wives now lack the time and energy to shoulder.

Familiar stories of unappreciated wives take on context in this contemporary look at relationships, and few women will escape the mirror Kingston holds up. Princess Diana, for example, lost her innocence as "the ultimate confection" in her marriage to a prince, but in her single life slid into the position of playboy trophy. On this side of the ocean, John Bobbitt lost his penis to Lorena Bobbitt's Ikea kitchen knife before his wife tossed his intrusive length of flesh into a neighbour's yard. Kingston points out that culture and time determine repercussions beyond the obvious when she reminds us that "Diana might have freed herself from the shackles of her marriage, but to the end she was always the passenger." Lorena Bobbitt, however, got off on the grounds of "temporary insanity."

In one of her many delicious tidbits, Kingston offers an eye-opener on the 19th-century cure for "the dissatisfied wife." A telling glimpse into the divide between the sexes is the revelation that a century ago doctors routinely dealt with female malaise by bringing women to orgasm. Since "penetration" was synonymous with "infidelity," they used vibrators to give women a therapeutic uplift. The image of an enormous pedal- or battery-driven vibrator is both amusing and uncomfortable. This "widow's delight" eventually became electrified, coming hot on the trail of the sewing machine, kettle and toaster. When hand-held vibrators became available from catalogues, the appliances were outlawed.

In her research, Kingston also rounded out those women in the sixties responsible for this decade's effect on future generations. *Wife* offers a refresher course on those who brought female desire and independence out of the closet, women like Helen Gurley Brown, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem. Jacqueline Kennedy, in contrast, became a woman divided - the widowed First Lady who morphed into Jackie O and replaced Maria Callas as yet another

acquisition of one of the richest men in the world. The book tells us that Margaret Trudeau, another photogenic first lady, believed her purpose was to "to procreate and be a pleasant sexual diversion for hard-working men."

Readers will find acutely focused women in Kingston's depiction of bridal frenzy. Here the author puts a magnifying glass to the power of the engagement ring, which causes women to throw themselves into the waiting arms of the bridal industry. The groom, almost invisible, becomes backdrop or financial backup. His bride's affection pales beside her enthusiasm for a lavish celebration and the fashion statement she is about to make. Gossamer replaces connectedness and abiding love.

With considerable intelligence and objectivity, Kingston provides a historic perspective that elicits anger, sorrow and belly laughs. Readers will mourn wives abandoned and robbed by their husbands after keeping home fires lighted and children nurtured, only to be cast aside in middle age for younger flesh. Laughter comes when we learn what these rejected women did to level the playing field and find renewal. A sobering moment follows, however, with the reminder that cultures still exist in which women have their hymen re-attached to make themselves palatable to non-virginal males wishing to ensnare virginal baby-makers.

Wife raises important questions with its revelation of wives who have brought about "seismic shifts" while being scorned by those who find satisfaction playing second fiddle to the self-consumed ambitions of husbands. "Wife," Kingston writes, "has become the axis around which the next social revolution is fermenting." She foreshadows significant change as women find their power in the work force and thereby alter "justice and jury" schooled in these shifts.

In Canada, a woman married to a university president has set a precedent by being put on salary to be hostess, travel mate and general facilitator of her husband's career. Husbands, on the other hand, often do not reciprocate when their wives become university presidents. Instead, they carry on with their own all-consuming passions, and one wonders if perhaps the wife prefers this pattern, given the social expectation of male dominance.

Unfortunately, this history of gender imbalance makes it clear that, except on rare occasions, women seek change for themselves only when it is forced upon them by men. But relief comes with stories of famous men who gave their wives abundant credit for their successes. Nabokov, for example, dedicated his writings to his wife, Vera, the woman who plucked his manuscript of *Lolita* from the fire when her husband "threw it there in frustration." More recently, John Bayley patiently tended Iris Murdoch when his brilliant life companion descended into "the twilight fog of Alzheimer's."

The cover illustration is a conversation piece in itself: A female hand stretches up against a glossy blue background, one buffed nail giving the finger to engagement ring and wedding band, even while wearing them.

Clearly a few brave, intelligent and disappointed wives brought female subjugation into the up-yours light on which reform depends. Readers will be reminded that knowledge brings power, even while the shadow between ideal and reality remains. The index and bibliography of Kingston's *Wife* will provide easy referencing for readers of this provocative book when their book clubs, coffee friends and sociology classes dig in.

Elizabeth Simpson, author of two non-fiction books, The Perfection of Hope and One Man at a Time, has just completed her first novel, Under the Joker's Wing.

'You go, girl'

With the abused wife firmly entrenched as a familiar icon, her battered form an indictment of the violent subtext seen to underlie modern marriage, wives who screw their husbands over but good have emerged as female role models. It is the perfect redemptive one-two punch: wife as victim, victim as victor. The most famous avenging wives, it must be noted, were not physically battered by their husbands. More grievously, more painfully, they were betrayed by that mythical promise of forever love that serves as the precarious foundation for modern marriage.

The jilted wife, particularly one replaced by a younger, beautiful woman, has become the ready object of sympathy, no questions asked. A "you go, girl" mentality reigns. For a glimpse into the mindset, we need only look to the phenomenal success of *The First Wives' Club*, by Olivia Goldsmith, published in 1992. The 42-year-old writer was seeking her own personal payback when she decided to write the fictional fantasy. She believed that she had received a raw deal when the assets were divided in her own divorce. Writing well, or well enough to appeal to the

mass market, would be her revenge.

As a former marketing consultant, she knew women, married or not, would lap up her tale of three middle-aged ex-wives meting out clever, nonviolent vengeance on their rich, powerful, conniving husbands. The role of wife might be ambiguous, but the fury of the wronged ex-wife is readily understood. Feminism may have divided women along ideological grounds, but the wrath of the spurned wife is a unifying rallying point.

Goldsmith's inspiration for the book was a much-discussed 1989 cover story in Fortune titled "The CEO's Second Wife." The wife was presented as a commodity that could be rendered "new and improved," like laundry detergent. The article focused on the second, younger, more beautiful replacement wives of rich, powerful men whose first wives no longer met their needs. The trophy wife was regarded as one of the more visible symbols of the greed decade. . . . Although these women were usually accomplished . . . the term became synonymous with bimbo because she was also a walking testament to her husband's virility.

According to Fortune, the trophy wife is not expected to have children -- although she'll often have to cope with resentful children from the first marriage. Her tasks include adding new friends, new clothes, a new home, and new interior decoration to her husband's world. She will introduce modern fashion and art to his life and host exotic parties. . . . She will fuss about his health and get him on a fitness regimen. . . . Because trophy wives are usually successful career women themselves, they offer a contrast to their husbands' first wives, who spent years bringing up families and making sacrifices for their husbands' businesses. The first wife didn't have time to work out or to become a high flyer -- she was too busy dutifully looking after children and home.

-- *From* The Meaning of Wife



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