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Books

Redefining Intimacy

Jenny Block--and Other Spouses in Open Relationships--Refuse to Let Monogamy Ruin Their Marriages

by Heather Harris

Whom and how would you love if no one ever told you how it was "supposed" to be done?

It's a question that's impossible to answer, but think about it for a moment. Would you love men or women? Would you love for life? Would you love in series or in parallel? If you loved in parallel, would you tell each partner about the others? What would you do if you had to create the rules from scratch?

The circumstances of author Jenny Block's life led her to wrestle with these questions as few of us do. In her new book, *Open: Love, Sex, and Life in an Open Marriage* (Seal Press), Block traces her path from monogamy to infidelity to polyamory, being in an intimate relationship with more than one person. Today, she is happily married to a man named Christopher, and also in a committed relationship with a woman named Jemma.

Polyamory may have an established presence in urban "alternative" communities, but Block is telling her story from the suburbs. The thirtysomething girl next door, the one with the handsome WASP-y husband and the adorable young daughter, the one who got married in Vera Wang and sits next to you at the book club, has her husband's blessing to engage in sexual relationships outside of their marriage. And what she has learned by flouting relationship convention so thoroughly is surprisingly, universally relevant.

When Block and her husband married, they promised sexual fidelity. But after a pregnancy and postpartum period that highlighted their incompatible sex drives (hers was higher) and her subsequent affair with another woman, Block started to doubt her ability to live in a normal, i.e. monogamous, marriage. In *Open*, she writes: "I vacillated between three ways of thinking about my marriage: 1) this was `just the way it was,' and I should deal with it; 2) I had married the wrong person; and 3) I had married the right person, but I could stay with him only if I could also have the freedom to be with other people."

Block convinced her husband to try a threesome with her and her friend, a much-younger firecracker named Lisbeth. Christopher agreed, not without some reservation, and one night the girls tag-teamed him. "I was watching them," Block says on the phone from her home outside Dallas. "And I had this moment of, `Are you completely insane? She's 16 years his junior. She's hot. She's much more fun and entertaining than *you* are. How long do you think it's going to be before he leaves you for her?'"

But Lisbeth didn't want to be a wife and mother right then, and Christopher didn't want to be married to anyone but Block. So while their first foray into polyamory hit a few snags, it didn't threaten the integrity of the marriage



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or cause either spouse to question his or her desire to be there. It was a watershed experience for both of them.

The idea behind the polyamory that Block and her husband practice is that primary, lifelong partnerships can be defined by sexual fidelity, but they don't have to be, and trying to own one's partner out of fear or insecurity most often results in more fear and insecurity. In her book Block references George and Nena O'Neill's 1972 book *Open Marriage*: "The entire idea of being sexually exclusive and wholly possessing our spouses, the O'Neills point out, "breeds deep-rooted dependencies, infantile and childish emotions, and insecurities."

Ouch. It's no fun to read that as part of the monogamous masses and wonder whether your marriage is a glorified and ineffective security blanket and sex with your spouse some grown-up version of thumb sucking. It's no wonder that Block's book is hitting a nerve and Block herself is drawing some venomous criticism.

But Block isn't trying to sell polyamory as some sort of utopia. "My husband can leave me just as easily as anyone else's," she says. "It's just that if he wants to see if the grass is greener, he can jump over the fence, that's all. In some ways I think being allowed that freedom keeps him from running off into the next pasture. There's no fantasy about what else is out there. Go ahead, look, have at it." She stops to think for a minute. "In the end, I think marriage and relationships all bear striking similarity to one another in that we all face the same issues once we settle down with one person. Yeah, you can leave your wife for your secretary, but it won't be long before your secretary turns into your wife."

Block believes that most people's discomfort with open marriage isn't having sex with other people--she cites Stephany Alexander, relationship expert and founder of WomanSavers.com, who estimates that half of married people in America are already doing that--but saying we want to and then saying that we did. "The straightforwardness of open marriage makes a lot of people uncomfortable," Block writes. We're not afraid of being immoral, in other words, we're afraid of being forthright and dealing with the consequences.

Perhaps. But when we cut through all the discussion of maturity and security, when we peel back all the arguments about human nature and ethics, aren't we really just talking about people who want to have sex with a lot of people? Block writes that "open marriage is not about leading a life focused on sex; it's about leading a life free from fretting about it." But isn't the only difference between monogamy and polyamory that polyamorists sleep with their primary partner and their friends, and monogamists don't get to/want to sleep with their friends?

"It started out being about sex," Block says. "I said I wanted to have sex with other people, and did. And then it evolved into being about more than sex. Sex was the original motivation--I guess I have to concede that point, that's what being open is. But swinging isn't for me, and I guess that's just where I get stuck."

Rebecca, another thirtysomething wife and mother living in the suburbs, also balks at the idea that polyamory is essentially about sex. She has been in an open marriage for seven and a half years, but right now she isn't seeing anyone other than her husband. She has plenty of friends; she just doesn't have any sexual chemistry with them. "I've had good friends that I thought if I just had sex with them it would turn into a relationship," she says on the phone from her office in Northern Virginia. "But it doesn't always turn out that way." Rebecca argues that polyamory is about being open to exploring chemistry with a new person and letting that new energy infuse all her other relationships.

Rebecca also points out that many polyamorists do have rules about sex that the collective or primary partners work out and agree upon. "Some people feel that poly people cannot cheat on their partners," she writes in an e-mail. "That is completely false. Cheating means breaking a promise. A poly person who dates (or possibly has a one-night stand with) someone secretly is cheating just as much as any mono person. To me, they are committing a BIGGER offense than a cheating mono person." (Emphasis Rebecca's.)

Rebecca's current dry spell highlights one of the biggest differences between polyamorists who live in cities, where alternative communities tend to thrive, and those who live in the suburbs, where they are isolated in part by appearing to be monogamous. "I may have 20 poly people in my neighborhood and not know it because they don't know about me," she says. "It's harder to find someone to date [in the suburbs]. You end up using the internet more. You hide certain pieces of yourself and you try to find as much fulfillment as you can."

Rebecca hasn't dated someone in almost two years. She met someone promising a year ago, but he moved to Indiana. She found her last boyfriend on the Adult Friend Finder online dating site, and he was willing to give her situation a try. But he has since settled into a monogamous relationship. "A lot of people who are willing to try it but don't self-identify as poly try it and don't like it and just fall back into what they're used to," she says.

Rebecca has attended events at the Chesapeake Polyamory Network, a nonprofit organization serving the Mid-Atlantic region, but hasn't found her home there. "The CPN group is largely older people, Maryland/D.C. centric, and Poly 101. I'm looking for a social support group. People you could call to help you move. But being poly in a room together doesn't mean you have things in common."

Anita Wagner, co-founder of the Chesapeake Polyamory Network, is concerned that there are persistent, basic misunderstandings about people who choose to open up their relationships, and much of the work she does is educational. "[An] erroneous assumption we often hear is that anyone who would let their spouse or partner have sex with another must be a loser lacking in self-esteem," she writes in an e-mail. "Hurtful comments along these lines . . . have been directed at Jenny Block's husband, Christopher. In reality, most of the time the level of love and trust necessary to permit this kind of sharing and freedom is an indicator of a secure and solid person and relationship."

Still, Block is human, and the constant reminders that her lifestyle is not "normal" wear on her sometimes. She admits that, once or twice a year, she still asks Christopher if he's sick of their arrangement and wants her to leave. She says that he "gets incredibly sad or incredibly angry or both and says, 'You're doing that thing where you let other people define who we are and how things are supposed to be. You and I are happy, and this works.'"

And they do seem happy. Even during Block's affair, it was the deception, not the presence of another, that was

the problem. Of the affair, Block writes, "It turned out I was more fulfilled with Christopher when I was with Grace, because I no longer wanted something from him that he simply couldn't give me."

Block and her husband had to learn these lessons the long, hard way, and one of her goals in writing this book is to fly in the face of the status quo so that, someday, couples in situations like hers will have real alternatives. "As long as those authorities get to define my lifestyle choices as `slutty,' and get to insist that I'm doomed," she writes, "they're ensuring that other people worry more about avoiding these supposed `consequences' and protecting their `reputations,' and less about their happiness or the state of our society at large."

But it's still hard. "I totally see why people follow convention," she says candidly. "People don't want other people to be different and they don't want them to be happy when they're different because then the implication is that they could live differently, too. A lot of people just can't face that."

Block's larger goal for her book is to make it easier for people to live differently in all sorts of ways. *Open* doesn't just explore polyamory; it explores what it is to be a woman, a wife, a mother, a bisexual, a breaker of convention, and a married person in America. And with each exploration, Block suggests that people should have more latitude and responsibility to do what feels right and works for them.

"I don't want people to think I'm advocating open relationships," she says. "I think there are plenty of people who are fabulous monogamists and open relationships would be a terrible idea for them. I just want people to have choices. That's the bigger story."

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