



SOCIETY

The stigma of being single, the lack of role models, and how coupledness shrinks the world

MICHAEL COBB IN CONVERSATION WITH BRIAN BETHUNE

MICHAEL COBB, 39, an English professor at the University of Toronto, also teaches in the university's Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies. He's the author of *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* and now of *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*, a literary theorist's take on how popular culture has not caught up to social reality when it comes to singles. Despite the fact that singles now outnumber married people, they don't really exist as a recognized category, because our prevailing cultural narrative sees them as "real" people in waiting. *Single* is Cobb's opening volley in a culture war.

Q: *You've written quite a polemic over something scarcely noticed by the world. But singles' cultural invisibility is the starting point of your issue with coupledness.*

A: I had a lot of frustration with why singles weren't being represented. We were always pre- or post-coupled—widows or bachelors or divorcees, unfortunates of some kind. Just a really awful category. When I started the book, I'd been single for 10 years of my life,

and quite happily so, and not because I had endless freedom to pursue whatever person or fleeting irresponsible experience [I wanted]. It was more a joy of being by myself and being able to cultivate all sorts of relationships and not have one person completely be the centre and focus of the world.

Q: *Still, you were unhappy being the odd man out?*

A: It started to occur to me that single people really are a strange sexual minority category, and perhaps the least valued. There's no history, there's no language, just a lot of pity that's foisted on us. Carrie Bradshaw launches *Sex and the City*—you know, fabulous, glittering New Yorkers—to answer, she once wrote, "the burning question" about herself and her friends: "Why are we still single?"

Q: *So there's schadenfreude too?*

A: Oh, yeah. A lot of bad feeling. There's always an assumption that you need to be coupled off to complete yourself. Even though we all know that people are not all saved and made happy in their coupledness. There are lots of distressed couples, lots of divorces,

lots of frustrating, sad marriages. I tried to question all that. I'm not against couples—I'm against the fact that in our society it's the way people become legitimate. Think about this: any major politician in the U.S., have they been single? When you start thinking about it, it's just absolutely everywhere.

Q: *Even when you think it's not, as you found in Beyoncé's All the Single Ladies.*

A: It's supposed to be an anthem for single ladies, and when you hear it for the first time and don't think about the lyrics it's great: very exciting, uptempo, a great video that everyone absolutely adores—especially Kanye West. But the idea you think you're getting—all you single ladies bond together, you're going to be okay—no, it's all about single ladies who are single because the man has chickened out, hasn't "put a ring on it." Now he's faced with seeing Beyoncé or some other single lady in the club later on with another guy, and there's regret and sadness. She's basically announcing to him, "You had your chance, you should have given me a ring; now I have someone else." It then gets weirder



when she says, “But if you actually decided to treat me how I deserve, which means become a couple with me, there could still be a future for you.” That’s pop culture’s basic message on being single. So this anthem, this celebration of singleness is about how one day you’re going to be strong enough and grown up enough to get married. That’s distressing to me.

Q: *It’s more than enough to make you question yourself.*

A: There’s that great moment in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* when she’s being interrogated at a dinner party full of couples and she’s the one single person, and they ask her, “So why is it that women are not getting married?” Meaning, “Why are *you* not married yet?” and she replies, “Oh, it’s because we’re covered in scales.” They all look like they’re actually entertaining the thought that it could be true. And there are times, when you’re being really hard on yourself, when you get to thinking that “maybe there is something wrong with me.” That’s the thing I resent more than almost everything else—there are very few examples growing up when self-esteem is correlated to an experience of being by yourself. Family and school will tell you that you can be whatever you want to be, but they never say, “And if you want to live by yourself and have a cluster of friends around you, that’s wonderful, too.”

Q: *You also talk about all the classic indignities of the single life: the wedding invitations with “and guest,” the puzzlement when you go alone to a restaurant—all of it ongoing even*

while the world changes. The growth in people living by themselves is remarkable and yet there’s no language, no narrative to reflect this.

A: When I’m with my busiest friends, I’m thinking how we actually are more in relationships with our technology than each other, people staring at iPhones or BlackBerrys, to the point that I think, “Okay, something else is happening here, we are removed, we have other ways of associating.” Somehow we are often actually more comfortable associating with people far away than beside us. I’m not lamenting that, I’m just saying that it’s a dynamic that is happening, but the old grand narratives about how you belong to a culture and a world, a society, haven’t changed. There has been an extraordinary amount of singles studies that have appeared in the last year or so. The cover story for the *Atlantic* in November, written by a friend of mine, Kate Bolick, called “All the single ladies,” pointed out that sometimes successful women don’t want to get married, even in their late 30s. You start a conversation on this and you find a swell of support from people saying, “Yes, this is exactly what I experience myself.” Many single people are craving some kind of language, some kind of analysis that says you do not have to do this thing: married, children, retirement.

Q: *Does the gay community bring a particular insight or emphasis to this?*

A: It’s been very interesting to watch what has happened to gay politics in the last decade or so. Marriage equality—especially in the States—became the major focus. In Canada, we got it relatively quickly, and it wasn’t traumatic—the sky didn’t fall. But it shows the power of the couple idea. Sexual minorities felt like, “Okay, one way that we are constantly officially delegitimized is because we are not able to marry,” and it’s true.

I’m appreciative of that desire to correct that civil wrong, but on the other hand it still proclaims the most legitimizing thing you can be is married, which will enable the rest of the world to say, okay, now you can inherit each other’s property, you can have visitation [rights], you can make stable custodial arrangements for the children. I don’t know if a lot of people have done enough thinking about this. Why is the couple and very official couple-making the goal we’re all driving toward?

Q: *Your argument goes further, though—it is a polemic, after all: coupledness doesn’t just overwhelm singleness or isn’t always as perfect as claimed, it’s actually often toxic.*

A: Coupledness shrinks the world. I use that language deliberately because being part of a couple is the thing that’s supposed to save you, as it does at the end of almost every single romantic comedy. I’m not saying people don’t have wonderful, large, fantastic relationships, but they are also anxiety-producing. They do shrink the world. You have fewer friends, you have fewer opportunities to go out in the world and explore and have all sorts of intimacies and associations and friendships and activities. Some people really like that, but I don’t think it’s much better than any other kind of situation. I’m trying to knock it off its hierarchy a little bit.

Q: *Your point is that there are far fewer pairs who complete each other than there are couples?*

A: Exactly. In couples there’s a lot of angst, a lot of anxiety once you get involved with anyone. Think of the torturous years when you first start dating, or during moments of indiscretions or betrayals. There’s just a lot of anxiety about managing this thing that’s supposed to make you solid. Things are incredibly fragile all the time, and there’s a lot of loneliness in those moments. I’ve often felt the most lonely when up against another person, because the boundaries between both of you are highlighted in that moment. It can be disquieting, especially if the other person gets sick, or if they go away, or when they seem distant and removed. So there’s a lot of negative energy there that I think is actually displaced on singles, the idea that they must

have it worse. That’s a cheap trick, a mean trick, but it acts to keep people pursuing relationships that may or may not be everything. Actually, they will never be everything because a couple can’t be a world.

Q: *Is that the lesson you draw from Love Story?*

A: When it starts you know

‘Single people are a strange sexual minority category, and the least valued. There’s no history, no language, just pity.’

that Ali MacGraw’s character is going to die; it’s the first thing you learn. Then that sadness fills the movie and the relationship with so much pathos, so much anxious feeling that is frequently in any kind of love story. The story not only admits that death will end the couple, it prompts you to long for that kind of devastation. Years ago I went to a wedding where the minister decided to ad lib. As he was talking about the circle of the rings as symbols of eternity, he started predicting all these horrible things that were going to happen. “You’re going to have fights, you’re going to be upset, there’s going to be illness, for better or for worse is really, really true. I want

you, when you're there, to think, when you're about to get mad and you're about to leave, I want you to think about how you felt right at this particular moment, come right back to this moment, and you will feel connected and secure." The sense I got was, okay, there is likely failure, there's definitely a death in your future with this person, so how do you deal with it? By pretending that time doesn't matter, that events don't matter, that history doesn't transform us indelibly, that you can go back to this moment and feeling.

Q: *That's why people are dropping "till death do us part" from their marriage rites? I thought it was more pragmatic: until we divorce.*

A: I see people using instead "forever and ever and ever" language. By doing that they give themselves an optimistic sense that even though there is a tragedy waiting, you're going to be able to be together forever. It's very seductive language, and this is why I focused so much on the language that swirls around singles and couples rather than sociological case studies and statistics. A lot of any relationship is ritual and a lot of words: texts, phone calls, emails, as much a linguistic relationship as an actual lived experience. And the kind of rhetoric people use to talk about how things should be to themselves and to each other are often these flights of fancy. They're very literary, they're very strange, but they make sense. Saying, "I will love you forever" is so much better than, "I will love you for nine months," or however long.

Q: *You say that you "lapse into coupledom" on occasion. Do you get grief from fellow militant singles for being a backslider?*

A: No [laughs]. Partly because I don't pub-

licize it that often. In the last long-term relationship I had, what seemed to drive everyone crazy was that we spent all this time with our separate friends and never were out together. And I liked that, not because I didn't enjoy his friends, but it was just a sense of being separate individuals. It certainly made the breakup much easier.

Q: *You didn't have to divide up your friends? Or your dog—I saw on a professor rating site...*

A: Oh God, you read that? I refuse to read that website! I think they're actually good to me, but it is a scary, scary thing.

Q: *Well, there was mention you talk often about your dog, but I don't see one.*

A: I do have a dog, but he's with my ex. You know, that shared custody struggle.

Q: *Many earlier works on singles stressed the sex-life aspect of singleness, but you strive to keep that out of your book. Why?*

A: Because of the old assumptions. When people are single they're either lonely or they can't be committed, they're too interested in their libido, etc. I got tired of people saying, "Single? Oh, single!" that is, swinging singles, relieved of the hard work of relating, off being selfish and enjoying your own physical pleasures. I wanted readers to think that singles are not just out to have pleasure, they're often just being themselves, you know? I don't want the assumption to be they're just finding tons of possible people they could couple with, but won't. That could be the experience of people—and often it

is—and I don't want to honour or disparage that kind of experience, but instead I just want the focus to be on, rather than sex, all the other kinds of emotional and political and theoretical impact.

Q: *People do know that being alone does not necessarily equal being lonely, but you think the two often blur in our emotions?*

A: You can be completely lonely at times when you're by yourself, but you can feel the same thing when you're with someone.

I'm trying to take away that kind of pathetic condition from singleness: "No, there are experiences of being by yourself that are incredibly interesting and rewarding, with all sorts of fantastical moments of imagination and insights." Some will make you feel more connected than anything else.

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I often find that when I'm away from the immediacy of some terrible emotion I'm having with someone that I'm deeply invested in, that's when I can start figuring something out. Then I feel fonder and closer in some ways. Even people with happy marriages have moments when they've never felt lonelier, when they realize that the other sees something differently. That's because you're building such a narrative of "we're sharing everything, we know each other so well." But you never, ever can know the totality of what someone's thinking. You can know their emotional processes, you can sit there and spend days, months, years trying to figure it out, but you're never going to figure it all out. Think of your own self, the unconscious stuff going on in your head when you're reacting and acting out in certain ways. It's never going to be full disclosure.

Q: *Do you think the iron grip of coupledom will ever slacken?*

A: It will be interesting to see what will happen now that there are all sorts of creative associations with new technologies. Certain kinds of lonelinesses will not be experienced like they traditionally were. People go away and you can Skype, you can have face time, you can text, you will feel connected to them in all sorts of ways. I wonder whether this is going to intensify the anxious relating and clinging onto another person or allow for all sorts of other associations to crop up, because you'll never feel you're that removed. But you may also feel that you can never escape. It's always a moving balance, at all times. ♣

For more on the stigma of being single, turn to 'A table for one' on page 68



Singled out: *Bridget Jones is asked, 'So why is it that women are not getting married?'*