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Self-Help Books: Why Women Can't Stop Reading Them...

Kiri Blakeley, 06.10.09, 3:50 PM ET

In 2007, as her 16-year marriage began to dissolve, Brooklyn, N.Y.-based writer Christina Frank turned to self-help books. At first, she devoured books on marriage savers, such as *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman and Nan Silver. But as it became clear that salvaging the relationship was not in the cards, she turned to coping books, such as *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron.

"When I realized that the separation was inevitable, these books really helped me navigate everything," she says. Frank was hardly an avid consumer of the genre: Previously, she'd only read the occasional parenting advice book.

In Pictures: Six Self-Help Books Women Love and (Most) Men Won't Read

However, as she writes in [her blog](#) chronicling the separation, just as there are no atheists in foxholes, there's no snarking on self-help books when one's life is in turmoil. "Some of the books were kind of ridiculous, but when everything falls apart, you turn to the things you might have laughed at before," she says.

It's easy to see why the self-help genre, especially the relationship category, might inspire some snickers--or cringes. The titles alone are enough to embarrass: *Women Who Love Too Much*; *Men Like Women Who Like Themselves*; *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*; *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*; *He's Just Not That Into You*. But 13.5 million of these types of self-help books were sold last year, a 22% increase from the year before, according to Nielsen BookScan. And in 2008, women purchased 74% of books sold in the relationship and family category, according to book consumer trends tracker R.R. Bowker.

What gives? Underneath the powerful confident career woman is there really just a desperate neurotic who hopelessly chases, is married to or is separating from a jerky guy?

Not quite, says BJ Gallagher, a Los Angeles author and genders studies expert. "Part of this phenomenon lies in self-esteem issues," she says. "When a woman has a problem, she immediately blames herself."

Publishers (as well as advertisers) know this. Hence titles that subtly (or not so subtly) cast blame while offering a solution. Men, however--if they can even admit they *have* a personal problem--don't tend to look to others for solutions: "A man thinks he should be able to solve problems on his own," says Gallagher. "Unless it's how to fix the car, repair the house, use a computer or make more money."

That's not a secret in publishing circles. When Gallagher was researching her latest self-help book, *Why Don't I Do The Things I Know Are Good For Me?*, men told her that they too didn't eat healthy enough, save enough money or pursue the right relationships, so she wanted her book to be for women *and* men. But literary agents and editors didn't want to hear it. "This is a business," says Gallagher. "They knew that men weren't going to lay down money for a book like that."

Men, usually one-half of a relationship, just aren't that into them. Or, at least, are just not that into reading about them. "Men would be more into a book about how to score a chick than how to emotionally bond," says Kimberly Dawn Neumann, author of two relationship books, including *The Real Reasons Men Commit*. "They do want relationships, but they don't go at it in an emotional way. They're more likely to think, I'll get the chick first, then leave it up to the fates."

Some of this can be blamed on evolution. While prehistoric men were out hunting, the women were being engineered to focus on social ties for survival. Therefore, a book that can give women a competitive social edge, such as bagging the right guy, understanding her teen, sharpening her gossiping skills or learning to differentiate between friend and frenemy, would be eagerly sought out by them, says executive coach Olivia Fox Cabane, whose focus is applying behavioral science to business.

Of course, there's an entire subset of the relationship genre dedicated to the ultimate social tie: Marriage. Women may be delaying tying the knot more than ever before, but books like *Why Hasn't He Proposed?* continue to clog the book aisles. "Society is set up for women to be passive," says Jonathan Alpert, a Manhattan psychotherapist who pens a relationship column for Metro newspapers. "It's the men that traditionally propose marriage. Imagine if it was the woman who proposed, you'd see a whole slew of books like *How to Get Your Lady to Pop the Question.*" (We won't hold our breath on that one.)

However, the times are a-changing, says relationship expert Scott Kudia, author of *If This Is Love, Why Am I Unhappy?* Kudia admits that men make up only about 5% of the audiences at his relationship seminars (and most of *those* guys were dragged there by women), but it is getting better. "Dr. Phil has been on TV for a decade now," he says. "Once self improvement becomes mainstream, men feel better being a part of it."

But what about the 95% of guys who would rather, oh, have a root canal than sit down and read a relationship book? Kudia suggests offering an incentive: "Tell him if he reads the book and discusses it with you, you'll buy him a trip to Vegas or dress up like Little Bo Peep." Brooklyn blogger Frank writes that she occasionally left save-your-marriage books on her husband's bedside table, but to no avail. "He said he'd get to it just as soon as he was done with *Remembrance of Things Past.*"

Then there's always the exception to the rule. John Gray, probably the best-selling relationship author of all time, says at least as many men as women read his 1992 relationship classic, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, which sold 30 million copies. "I've taken a lot of heat for writing a book that says good things about men," he says. "Men also want to understand women, and I explain women and men to each other in a positive way, without coming across as dismissive or critical of men."

Still, Gray admits his self-help empire, which includes 16 Mars and Venus books, CDs, seminars, an online dating site and magazine, as well as a line of nutrition supplements, wouldn't exist without women: "They are the biggest supporters I have."

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