

Marriage Vows by Gail Schimmel (Kwela) R169

11 January 2009

Fairy tales and romantic novels tend to end with the marriage of the central characters, on the assumption that this guarantees happiness ever after. In Jane Austen's novels, for instance, all the novel's energies are directed at getting the heroine married; thereafter she's on her own, and if she has marital problems they're not part of the novel's concern. The modern novel, though, typically treats marriage not as an end but as a beginning, not as a guarantee of happiness but as a test of strength and endurance.

Marriage Vows is firmly in this modern tradition. Its heroine and narrator, Jordan Gordon is, at age 55, self-employed in an interesting occupation, ostensibly happily married to a man she still finds sexually attractive, with two satisfactory grown-up children, at least one bosom friend and a home in one of the better suburbs of Johannesburg. In short, she would seem to want for nothing.

But of course there is a flaw in the perfect marriage. On the morning of her 55th birthday, as on every birthday for the last fifteen years, she receives a message from one Nico, an Irishman who has been pursuing her relentlessly since their first meeting. Although she is in a sense in love with him, she also loves her husband, Hal, and she has never succumbed to Nico's urgings. "My soul aches for him," she bumbles as she receives his latest message, before returning to her role as loving spouse.

The novel takes place on Jordan's birthday, with flashbacks filling in the back history. The central question and main interest of the novel is fairly simple: will she or won't she? But Schimmel has filled out this single question with many secondary plots, all of them relating in some way to the question of marital fidelity.

Chief amongst these is the story of Langbert, Jordan's brother-in-law, who inexplicably left the brilliant Vivienne for the stolid, stupid, unattractive Moira. Vivienne subsequently committed suicide, leaving Jordan with an implacable resentment of Moira, although she does consent to host business dinners for Langbert, Moira being too socially inept to perform this duty.

Schimmel skilfully steers her narrative between past and present, slowly unfolding more of the story and of Jordan's ambivalence regarding Nico's advances. She manages to sustain the reader's interest in the ostensible centre of the novel, Jordan's temptation and her resistance to it; but more interesting altogether is the gradual self-revelation of Jordan as the spoilt and selfish creature that she is.

Brandishing her fidelity to Hal like a badge of virtue, she is prissily disapproving of Moira, while doing little to discourage Nico's attentions. When on a whim he flies out to South Africa, she meets him at the airport unasked and accompanies him to his hotel, but at the last moment gets cold feet and nobly rededicates herself to Hal, taking careful note of "the sound of Nico's heart breaking as I walked away." Teenage boys have a name for this kind of behaviour, and it's not complimentary.

When, in a commendable effort to rid himself of his fruitless infatuation, Nico gets married, Jordan is mightily aggrieved: "I thought when Nico got married that he'd hurt me as much as he could" she says, not asking herself what on earth she'd expected the poor man to do – although it is pretty clear that she'd have preferred him to pine away for her forever. She wants both the virtuous sense of remaining faithful to her husband and the thrill of knowing somebody else is lusting after her. When Nico tells her his new wife

is expecting a baby, she puts the phone down in his ear, smashes a tea pot and has a nervous breakdown.

Jordan is at her most unattractive when she is indulging her sense of superiority to people falling short of her notions of style. When her mother acquires a new boy friend who works in the post office, she and her husband and sister “sat around the remains of the dinner, happily dissecting Edmund, and doing imitations of him for one another.”

Sneering at the hapless Moira, Jordan plays little games with her, intended to elicit Moira’s follies, which can then be shared over drinks with her best friend– “She’s wearing nude pantyhose that are already gathering above her too-tight pink pumps. But the best part, the part that I store up with relish, is that she has chosen to wear an ordinary grubby white bra with her halterneck, the straps glaring against her pale skin.”

It’s never quite clear whether Moira’s cardinal sin is her adultery or her lack of style: like all snobs, Jordan can’t distinguish between a moral lapse and a bad choice of clothing.

Marriage Vows is an enjoyable and readable account of a wonky marriage, seen through the eyes of a selfish woman. Too self-centred to notice what’s happening around her, she’s set up for the nasty shock she’s dealt in the course of the novel, about two hundred pages after the reader has seen it coming.

It’s possible that the author intended us to feel some sympathy with her heroine, but I suspect that most readers will take more pleasure in Schimmel’s skilful portrayal of a thoroughly self-deluded heroine getting her come-uppance. As for sympathy, that belongs to poor Nico.

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