

Sarah Hampson's Generation Ex

## Why I needed to write about my divorce

The business of decoding, describing and documenting the painful process of divorce is a phenomenon, particularly among women



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Blame it on the Girlfriend Network. Well, maybe blame is a little harsh. It's not that writing about divorce or working in the divorce industry – because, come on, it is an industry – is bad. Clearly, it fulfills a need. But the business of decoding, describing and documenting the painful process is a phenomenon, particularly among women.

And some lament it. They see it as evidence that we're living in the apotheosis of the age of indiscretion.

“My friends and I remarked that it's a good thing none of us had been married to Hampson,” a male friend chuckled to me not long after this column, in which I often write about my own marriage and divorce, made its debut in the spring of 2007.

He and his buddies, most of whom had weathered at least one divorce, were having a beer at a pub. Not that they were obsessively combing through the ruins of their failed marriages for insight into how and why it had all crumbled. They're guys.

As another male friend once told me about men's divorce discussions: “It's handled in a few sentences, generally. ‘My marriage was broken. I couldn't fix it. What did you think of that Blue Jays game yesterday?’ ”

Women, on the other hand, tend to talk it over endlessly. Not all women, of course. I have known many who sweep the issue under the carpet and go about arranging new furniture on it, if you follow my metaphor.

And of course there are men, especially divorced fathers, who become activists in the aftermath of divorce. (Steve Peck, host of Divorce Source Radio, a weekly podcast out of Detroit, turned to the subject of marital breakdown after his own divorce last year. “I couldn't believe how high-conflict my divorce became, and I wanted to help others,” he explains.)

But generally speaking, I think women process changes in their lives differently than men do, and for the most part that means with their girlfriends.

It's what we did through every stage of our lives. When we were single in our 20s, we discussed our boyfriends the way oenophiles pore over wine choices. And then came weddings: Hello, obsession. During the pregnancies with each of my three boys, I talked to friends who were also expecting. And when the babies were born, we compared notes on their birth, the contents of their diapers, what they ate, how long they slept, the level of our sleep-deprived exhaustion.

If our marriages were disassembling, and once we got over the feeling of disloyalty for complaining about our spouses to others, we talked about that too. Divorce, the death of our marital dream, was just one more life passage that we picked apart, examined and shared.

Since I started writing this column three years ago, I have come across numerous women who felt compelled to

write about divorce, or somehow get involved in the industry as coaches, consultants or lawyers, after having experienced a marital split of their own.

“I was inspired initially because, just after my separation, my best friend was talking about a child who came from a divorced family, and she was saying that the child was behaving in a certain way because she’s from a broken family,” says Nancy Johnston, a divorced mother of two girls who began her blog ([myfamilyisnotbroken.wordpress.com](http://myfamilyisnotbroken.wordpress.com)) in January, a year after her 16-year marriage ended. “I wanted to create a little understanding, some compassion and a community.”

She set out not just to describe the recalibration of family as a single parent – removing labels such as “broken” versus “intact” – but also to look at how she would move forward as a divorced midlife woman. The impetus to write about divorce is often as much for the author as for the people she hopes to help.

“I had an extremely high-conflict divorce,” says Deborah Moskovitch, a divorce consultant and educator whose book, *The Smart Divorce: Proven Strategies and Valuable Advice From 100 Top Divorce Lawyers, Financial Advisers, Counsellors and Other Experts*, was published in 2007. After an 11-year marriage and three children, Ms. Moskovitch needed to rebuild her life. She had been working in marketing before staying home to raise her children.

“I met a lot of single men and women, and they were all bitter and angry people. I didn’t want to be like that.”

Lack of education about what to expect in the divorce process contributed to people’s anger, she discovered. “I wrote the book for no other reason but that I felt people needed it.”

Soon, she had a business as a divorce consultant. “Who would have thought I’d be doing this? But it took on a life of its own.”

Her motivation is simple: “I don’t want others to make a lot of the mistakes I did in my divorce. Learn from me.”

Often, I am asked about whether writing about divorce has been cathartic. And my answer is no. Having to go through it was. It made me think and examine myself in a way I would never have had to if I’d remained married.

There was rich, human material in that examination, and ultimately in the compassion I had to find for myself, that younger woman who entered marriage so innocently, and for my ex.

It seemed to me that the culture leans toward happy tales, the ones that follow the script we like to think we will all follow: marriage, the creation of a home, children. But what of the narratives that aren’t so perfectly packaged?

“I wanted to show how complicated and ambiguous the love was, and the letting go,” says Stacy Morrison, author of *Falling Apart in One Piece, One Optimist’s Journey Through the Hell of Divorce*, and editor of Redbook magazine in New York. “And the only way I knew how to do that was to be very naked. It was like I wanted to show others how little I know. I wanted to say, ‘This is what it looks like.’ ”

Kudos to that, I say. Is writing about divorce an act of indiscretion? Only if people think divorce is shameful. Which it isn’t. There’s value in honesty, in transparency, when it’s employed to untangle the complex beauty of love. Most importantly, it’s the only way to invite love back into your life after you’ve been disappointed by its limitations.

Sarah Hampson’s memoir about midlife post-divorce, *Happily Ever After Marriage: There’s Nothing Like Divorce to Clear the Mind*, is in bookstores now.

