



## Unfaithful: Love, Adultery, and Marriage Reform in Nineteenth-Century America

**Carol Faulkner**

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Defining marriage and adultery is tricky, and it was even trickier in the 1800s. In the heady but colorful *Unfaithful*, Carol Faulkner gives the history of American marriage reformers. These rebels and thinkers, along with some straight-up abusers and oddballs, challenged marital standards. This history shows that their own experimental relationships were often less idyllic than their philosophies.

Reformers said marriage should be based on love, desired by both parties, and that women should be equal and willing partners in physical relationships. It was a hot topic at the same time as feminism and the abolition movement, and Faulkner discusses fascinating intersections between marriage reform, women's rights, and the push to end slavery. A nineteenth-century trend of comparing wifehood to slavery runs throughout the book, highlighting how women's roles in unequal, unloving marriages were seen as a form of servitude, both during and after times of actual slavery in the US.

The book also reveals that marriage reformers were mostly heterosexual and white, but Faulkner takes care to introduce historical figures who broke that mold. Paschal Beverly Randolph, a spiritualist of mixed race, is a dynamic personality who cowrote the 1860 book *Human Love*, but then came to an about-face in his thinking. Mary Louise Booth is another fascinating figure; she escaped her marriage to a cheating husband to begin a new life with feminist Mathilde Anneke in Switzerland.

Academic in tone but still exciting, *Unfaithful* introduces the stories of marriage reformers in the 1800s and their rich overlap with feminism, abolitionism, and many other movements. They challenged gender roles and questioned how, why, and whether people should marry or divorce to begin with. The changes to popular definitions of marriage over the last two centuries, described so well in this book, shine a light on definitions of marriage and respectability today as well.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (September / October 2019)

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