Torn Asunder: Children, the Myth of the Good Divorce, and the Recovery of Origins

Margaret Harper McCarthy, ed. | Reviewed by Kimberly Patch

_Torn Asunder: Children, the Myth of the Good Divorce, and the Recovery of Origins_, edited by Margaret Harper McCarthy, is a compilation of articles, essays, and philosophical thoughts by various authors who were the children of divorce. This book follows a heavy Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of marriage and has several themes. First, the children of divorce are negatively impacted by divorce. Secondly, there is no such thing as “a good divorce” as marriage is a sacrament and should never be broken. Finally, the downfall of marriage and rise of divorce is in direct relation to the abandonment of the patriarchal marriage and the adoption of liberal, progressive, and egalitarian practices.

I do agree that children of divorce suffer and have lifelong negative repercussions following the divorce of their parents. There is no argument there. Children are negatively impacted by divorce. The problem is the book was very ambiguous when quoting research, refusing to give accurate data and utilizing phrases such as, “some children may experience,” or “could likely result in,” or “some participants.” How many participants? Two out of a million or fifteen out of twenty? When quoting research, empirical data is necessary and ambiguity leaves me suspicious.

I am a champion of marriage and believe divorce should be a last option. One issue I have with the book is that in 316 pages, there is one reference to a person leaving a violent or unsafe marriage as the ultimate sacrifice implying that divorce is still not an option. The book is very clear from the beginning: in no circumstances is divorce ever an option. This leads me to believe, upon reading the book, someone who is in an unsafe marriage with children, could be swayed or shamed into staying in an unsafe and damaging environment.

Regardless of how one feels about the two issues above, I can say with confidence that this disagrees with CBE’s core values and mission in that it shames mutuality in marriage by claiming “the relation between the sexes, dominated as it is by its egalitarianism, among other things, has had a hand in bringing us where we are now,” as well as placing blame on women in that “…even if the man has the power to choose, his ability to mature as a man is to an important degree in the lady’s hands. In this way, considerable blame has also to be put on the girl of our day. She has degraded herself from an archetypical princess, …she often ends up in an exploitation no ‘patriarch’ of the traditional family would ever impose on his wife.”

This book follows traditional Catholic beliefs on the sacrament of marriage and quotes _Catechism of the Catholic Church_ many more times than it mentions biblical quotes. There are many concerning quotes from this book but the most disturbing are the quotes disagreeing with CBE’s core values and mission. I have included them below to allow you to determine for yourself the book’s view on egalitarianism. No words of mine can give more clarity to the inappropriateness of its placement in any CBE promotion.

“For boys, the ‘absence of an appropriate male model for … identification’ leaves him without ‘the primary vehicle for the internalization of an appropriate sense of masculine identity.’ Girls on the other
hand, tend to ‘experience the emotional loss of father egocentrically as a rejection of them.’ . . . also observed that ‘the loss of a father through divorce has a significant effect on a young girl’s developing sense of femininity.’”

P. 31

“…the child not only needs to be brought into life, he also needs to be accompanied on the path of life toward his own destiny. In this sense father and mother not only point toward the origin but also indicate the te los of existence. The father does this by leading ahead to the Father from whom comes all that is; the mother by helping the child see that his destiny is love’s overabundant gratuitousness.”

P. 128

The child’s relation to God and to others is informed by the way he synthesizes his parents’ unfolding of their specific tasks in being – his mother’s gratuitousness and his father’s indication of origin, path, and telos.”

P. 128

“There are reasons in the very conception of the relation between the young people in question that help explain why things are as they are. Young men, ‘in possession of fortunes’ both large and small, do not all of a sudden stop being ‘in want of a wife’; and women do not all of a sudden start flocking to them in hopes of being chosen for the one-night-no-questions-asked-no-names-exchanged hook-up. As we will see momentarily, the way we have become accustomed to thinking about the relation between the sexes, dominated as it is by its egalitarianism, among other things, has had a hand in bringing us where we are now.”

P. 221-222

“One of the hallmarks of the ‘relationship system’ for which we today have been educated, is, perhaps most notably, the lack of relation of the kind implied by sexual difference. No one is brought up to be for anyone. This is particularly the case with girls who in the past had been raised for marriage and motherhood, and who accordingly were taught to behave is such a way as to harness male energies for them and for their eventual children. For the last several decades girls have been put through what Whitehead calls the ‘Girl Project,’ that ‘self-conscious and highly successful social project whose chief purpose was to prepare young women for adult lives of economic self-sufficiency, social independence, and sexual liberation. … Marriage, that is, will not define them.”

P. 223-224

“Courtship implied sexual discipline (especially for young men) and modesty (for girls) not because sex was bad, but because it (sex) was being directed to serve the longing that had awakened it in the first place. Modesty did this in two ways. On one hand, it protected the young woman from reductive objectification (lust) – asking the young men to take a respectful distance, and it increased the longing for her, on the other.”

P.229

“An independent, self-generating, androgynous individual going nowhere in particular, except by choice, is not likely to thrive in marriage, much less be faithful to it in the long run.”

P. 231

“…even if the man has the power to choose, his ability to mature as a man is to an important degree in the lady’s hands. In this way, considerable blame has also to be put on the girl of our day. She has
degraded herself from an archetypical princess, whose beauty was both a challenge and a prize for a young man, to a beggar that hopes the man she is living with and to whom she is trying to prove she can be a good wife will eventually marry her. …she often ends up in an exploitation no ‘patriarch’ of the traditional family would ever impose on his wife. She gave herself to him for no price, and her classical power to challenge the young man to ‘man up’ is consumed and lost.”

P. 244

“It is time for the girls of the Western hemisphere to launch a campaign: ‘I—and even my body, if you can believe it—am worth a commitment! Be a man—marry me!’”

P. 245

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