

Sex & the single girl in the 21st century

by Chandra Niles Folsom



Dalma Heyn, author of *Drama Kings: The Men Who Drive Strong Women Crazy*.

When best-selling author Dalma Heyn kissed Manhattan goodbye and returned to Westport's gold coast, it was a homecoming that sparked the birth of a groundbreaking book that is changing the way many women view intimate relationships.

Drama Kings: The Men Who Drive Strong Women Crazy, published by Rodale Books, examines the current trend of strong, successful women attracted to weak men who sabotage their strength.

"*Drama Kings* is about the odd coupling of 21st-century women dating 20th-century men — men who love strong women but can't handle real relationships with them," says the author of *The Erotic Silence of the American Wife* and *Marriage Shock: The Transformation of Women into Wives*. "It's a dating book, but people are dating all through their lives, not just in their teens and 20s."

While her earlier books focused on marriage, Dalma's latest offering has taken a step backward, or forward as the case may be, looking at single women and their personal choices. Happily married herself, the writer is still critical of the outdated insti-

tution and felt the need to understand its dark side.

"My first books were about this question of what happens to women's pleasure, and women's selves, in marriage," says Dalma. "I'm interested in the self and why it can become weaker or stronger."

She began by asking why many young newlywed women were having affairs when they had intended to be faithful.

"I became fascinated by the experience of marriage for women — how different it is from what we think it is; how the institution itself has such a specific, atavistic impact on women quite distinct from the impact it has on men," explains Dalma. "What happens to women's pleasure in relationships and in marriage? Where does it go?"

And was it ever there to begin with? It was during her tenure as a columnist for *Mademoiselle* that Dalma first became aware of the discrepancy between what people think women feel and do, and what is actually true.

"Young women would confide in me about their love affairs; young wives would confide in me about their marriages, and they'd all admit to feelings and behaviors that experts on women called wrong or bad," Dalma says. "The top analysts, psychologists, psychiatrists in the country would say, 'No, women don't really feel that, not real women!' Or only bad women, or narcissistic women, or badly adjusted do that! Real women feel blah, blah..."

Basically, the so-called experts, mostly male, would simply decide whether or not they approved of what they heard. So, Dalma decided to dig for the truth. She even went back to school for a master's degree in social work to refine her ability to listen and report the facts.

For Dalma, both talent and inquisitiveness are family traits. Her dad was editor and

publisher of *Popular Science*, among other magazines, and her mom was both an actress and a writer in Hollywood. Dalma published her first piece while still in school.

"I got started in magazines right after college, when I began writing for a travel magazine, and was soon hired by Redbook to be an articles editor," recalls Dalma. "Soon after I moved to New York, I had a chance to become editor-in-chief of *Health* magazine. Then, as executive editor of *McCall's*, I was able both to be a staff writer and to focus on the direction of the magazine."

Before long she was writing essays, articles, and columns for a wide variety of publications and focusing more and more on women's issues, experiences and feelings.

"My first major task as a writer was to decide: Will I be on the experts' side and continue to report their ideas about women, or will I report what women themselves tell me and ditch the experts' knowledge?" Dalma says.

She chose the latter and never looked back.

"Now, years later, even though I'm among the ranks of those experts by virtue of having an academic degree, I'm scrupulous about listening to and telling the truth about what women tell me, no matter how much it differs from what the culture knows or wants to hear," says Dalma.

The art of listening has proven to be a breakthrough in the genre of self-help books for women, and it has helped Dalma discover her own role in society.

"I like being the whistle-blower, because the truth is so much more validating for women," Dalma reflects. "I love it when women call and say, 'You changed my life. You validated me. I read what those women said in your book and it could have been me speaking.'"

Although the author finds inspiration in women's lives, she is troubled by the lies that have become conventional wisdom: That men leave women, when nearly three-quarters of all divorces are initiated by wives; that women are miserable outside of marriage, when men thrive in marriage far more than wives; and single women are in better psychological shape than wives.

"Women have been told so many wrong things about who they are and what they feel, that I like the job of saying, 'Hey, conventional wisdom — when it comes to women — is usually off the wall!'"

The process of discovery wasn't always easy to unravel because, raised in a society of conventions, Dalma had to unlearn much of what she was taught.

"It takes forever to make sense of what you're hearing, because so much of it goes against what you think you're going to hear," Dalma explains. "It's exciting when you start to hear a story you weren't expecting, but it can take months, years, to untangle it and face your own, and the culture's, prejudices and form your own thesis. The idea you started with is rarely what you end up with, if you're doing the work."

Even with all she's learned about the true nature of a diversity of women in and out of intimate relationships, conventional or otherwise, the work is far from over for Dalma Heyn, who may soon ascend to the next plateau of her career.

"We hear a lot about how girls develop strength and resilience, and I've learned a lot about how women keep both," says Dalma. "I'd love to have a radio show about relationships — to host a smart show with all the people who are making headway in the world of relationships. It would be a safe haven for women and their real feelings. And you know what? It's all good news for men, too!"