

# HITCH OR DITCH?

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IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPLICATED WORLD, WHERE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE IN A RELATIONSHIP IS CONSTANTLY EVOLVING, WE ASK: DOES MARRIAGE STILL MATTER? A WRITER WEIGHS IN

The classic white picket fence, while simple in its intended purpose, also represents the lasting vestiges of 1950s Americana: it is an allegory for life “happily ever after,” a symbol for peaceful living, and a token of success for the suburban middle-class. It is the end goal of every fairy tale, every romance novel, and every movie where the narrative trajectory accelerates towards the ultimate climax: a wedding. This is what we’ve been told is the turning point of our existence, where the princess gets her prince, rings are exchanged, and real life begins.

But how relevant is the cliché in 2019?

There has been a significant cultural shift in the relationship habits of millennials compared to those of their baby-boomer counterparts. Growing up, boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—were heavily influenced by their parents’ belief that marriage was, essentially,

a duty and that, for women, options outside of this social institution were extremely limited.

Millennials, on the other hand, have adopted more complex views due to the crippling uncertainty of their generation. According to a 2016 Gallup study, only 27 percent of millennials in the United States are married, compared with 48 percent of baby boomers at the same age.

That doesn’t necessarily mean millennials don’t want to get married. They do eventually; they’re just taking their time. “They are facing a much more unsure world, especially when it comes to the economy, artificial intelligence, jobs, and housing,” says Vicki Larson, journalist and co-author of *The New I Do: Reshaping Marriage for Skeptics, Realists and Rebels*. “Millennials are wise to be intentional.” Many people from this generation have witnessed first-hand the adverse impact of divorce, infidelity and

unhappy spouses staying together “for the kids,” so they are also more realistic when it comes to the hopeful tradition of wedding vows.

Of course, no one can ignore that there are still to this day a number of enticing perks that come with obtaining a marriage licence. In the landmark decision that legalized same-sex marriage in the U.S., Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote: “Marriage responds to the universal fear that a lonely person might call out only to find no one there.” In addition to the promise of eternal companionship and mutual support, there are more than 1,000 federal American laws that exclusively benefit and protect married couples, including reduced tax burdens. Plus, more generally speaking, let’s not forget there’s the added bonus of a double income if both members of the couple are employed.

Despite these considerable advantages, according to a 2017 census, more than 45 percent of Americans aged 18 and older are unmarried—and many by choice, not chance. As the stigma surrounding this kind of lifestyle fades, millennials have refreshingly positive attitudes towards life without tying the knot. “They see this as benefiting other parts of their lives, such as their friendships and their careers,” says Bella DePaulo, author of *Singled Out: How*

*Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*.

People are also more open to simply living differently today. “They don’t want to be put in boxes or told that there’s just one good and respected path through adulthood,” DePaulo adds. “Young adults are at the forefront of [this change].” This means turning to alternative methods of companionship, such as polyamory, co-housing—which offers community, alone time and split living costs—and the concept of Living Apart Together, or LAT, where romantic partners remain committed to each other under separate roofs. Some unmarried individuals are even entering platonic parenting arrangements to alleviate the stress of raising a child alone.

Yet, even though the way we form unions continues to evolve, marriage still matters. Many consider it to be the strongest foundation for a family and a uniquely powerful declaration of love. Public proposals will still be made in front of gleeful strangers, and films will diffuse a timeworn rhetoric in celebration of matrimony. After all, we are social beings driven by the universal desire to discover meaning through sharing parts of ourselves with someone else. “Don’t fear,” Larson insists. “People always find ways to have love, sex, commitment, children and companionship.”

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