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We're just not that into it

By Sheree Cartwright and Anastasia Powell Posted Tuesday, 24 March 2009

Within 10 minutes of watching the newly released film *He's Just Not That Into You*, we had given out our names and telephone numbers to a hot looking man and been checked-out by several others. Of course, the telephone numbers were to secure a table in a busy Melbourne restaurant and the men checking us out were old enough to be our fathers. Reality? Check.

Of course women everywhere are not lining up in the cinemas or cramming into plush velvet seats for a dose of reality - they are lining up in the cinemas and cramming into plush velvet seats to escape from the reality of dating, millennium-style. What they get is an hour and a half of Hollywood gloss smeared over the all too real and highly gendered stereotypes and "unwritten rules" about love, sex and relationships that cause both men and women everywhere daily confusion - sometimes with tragic results.

He's Just Not That Into You is of course based on the best-selling dating self-help book by the same name (released in September 2004), and, like the book, is written by some of the same story writers behind the enormously successful Sex & the City television series. The film it seems will be as successful as the book itself - with more than 42,000 fans already signed-up to its Facebook page and glowing reviews posted on the wall: "This movie is so true!", "Totally thumbs up", "Such a great ... and so true story".

Yet why is it that so many 20- and 30-something young women, who have grown up in the aftermath of the sexual revolution and formal gender equality, remain at the whim of such outdated gender stereotypes and unwritten rules?

"If a guy hurts you, it's because he likes you" (dating rule #1): Unfortunately all too many women experience relationships where men do emotionally and physically abuse them and the unwritten rule still tells us that this is to be taken as a sign of his love.

This is followed closely by "If you're the right woman, he will change" (dating rule #2) a trick that places all the responsibility for his abusive behaviour back onto women themselves.

Or how about "You have to please him, to keep him" (dating rule #7), while research continues to find many young women feel enormous pressures to put themselves and their own desires aside to please him - even if it means having sex that they don't want.

These may seem like extreme examples, but they are nonetheless a part of the same old gendered rules which are, unfortunately, all too alive and well in our daily relationships.

Meanwhile, the heroine at the heart of this particular story Gigi - is a disturbing reminder that the past is not dead, but ever-present with regards to gendered norms, expectations and relations in the household. Our protagonist physically resembles and embodies the stereotypical 1950's gal, which is alarmingly emphasised toward the end of the film where she is in the kitchen, wooden spoon in hand, smiling with the pleasure of stirring the contents of her bowl - a dip for her man's party where she happily claims the long awaited role of "hostess".

Yep, despite the continual increase in women's (and mothers) paid work participation rates, the promotion of gender equity policies and the dominant discourses espousing supposed individual freedom of choice for both men and women to decide about their roles in unpaid household work - we are reminded that underpinning these changes ideas about gender norms and expectations remain the same. Equality? While Gigi eagerly embraces

and accepts the powerful sexual politics in the home, these outdated stereotypes and unwritten rules make unfair negative assumptions about men too - ungenerously positioning them as shallow, sex-seeking creatures.

While Gigi finds true love (accessorised by an apron) - many of the stories end unhappily, leaving every young woman in the cinema to hope that she may be the exception to the unwritten rule. The unwritten rule being that independent, intelligent and otherwise successful young women do not get a happy ending in love. This film confirms the fears of a generation of otherwise savvy young women - that gender equality means the end of love and romance.

If love and romance are about stirring dip for a man in order to make him realise just how much he loves us (dating rule #11: the way to a man's heart is through his stomach) - then let us "never ever give up hope" that gender equality does indeed end it - and fast. For every one young woman who thoroughly enjoyed this film, we're putting our bets for the future of dating and relationships on her three gal (and guy) pals who can spot the outdated gendered stereotypes, old school dating mythologies and unwritten "rules" for what they are - straightjackets for free thinking women and men - and completely outright reject them.

But, perhaps the biggest challenge still is to imagine and construct healthier and sustainable gender norms and relations for both men and women.

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