

Reader, I Divorced Her

By Richard A. Shweder

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The disintegration of a marriage, from the husband's point of view.

FALLING

The Story of One Marriage.

By John Taylor.

225 pp. New York:

Random House. \$22.95.

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IT may be hazardous to take sides when a marriage breaks apart, but it's irresistible. John Taylor is a former senior writer for *Esquire* magazine and the author of "Storming the Magic Kingdom," and "Falling" is his ironic account, written from a "male perspective," of just how distressing it can be to get divorced. The book, a specimen of an emerging genre — caricature of the illogic of misalliance or satire about the painful experience of marital demise — is discordant and unsettling, and the results are mixed.

The author opines, philosophically and ambivalently, about the fragility, even pointlessness, of old-fashioned Victorian ideals like duty, sacrifice and commitment. He tells his story and hers too. And he derides or burlesques almost everything in sight: liberated women, marriage counselors, trial separations, mediated settlements, even the various women with whom he had extramarital affairs. Consider Jill, for example, the impulsive artist from Oregon who was always being overtaken by some terribly important "new enthusiasm," like building a meditation pyramid for the homeless, and who treated him as one of her "new projects." There is probably nothing Taylor could have done about the failure of his marriage. But let us at least hold him responsible for the failure

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of his irony, which all too often evolves into sarcasm, leaving the reader with the impression that a bitter lamponer might be far more difficult to live with than a resentful wife.

The resentful wife is Maureen, an older woman (she was 34 when they married; he was 28), an Englishwoman (he is American), a Jewish woman (he is Unitarian). Before the marriage she was liberated, cosmopolitan, self-confident and employed. By the time their union dissolved, 11 years later, she had become a lapsed writer, a frustrated, unemployed parent trapped by her own opinion that work is unfulfilling and motherhood unchic. Taylor, always the ironist at heart, represents Maureen as a byproduct of our times. There he is, ready to bail out. There she is, metamorphosed into a dependent spouse whose only remaining ideal of liberation is her sense of entitlement to lifetime maintenance.

Taylor can be effective with his quips and retorts: "Failure can be gratifying, even liberating; it relieves you of the need to aspire"; "I'd had an affair to escape the burden of marriage, and the affair had become as burdensome as the marriage." There are times when his one-liners make you smile: "Ed and Meg had four children, a family so unusually large by the standards of the neighborhood that it was as if they practiced some archaic religion." Some of his descriptions ring all too true. Here is his Darwinian stockbroker's advice on the survival of the fittest: "You know what's the object in a divorce? . . . Pre-emptive retaliation. Here's what I want you to do. Clean out your bank account before she does it for you. Hide your assets." If you ever wondered whether Plato was right that a society designed by the wise would prohibit divorce, you may find yourself pondering the question again.

Perhaps Taylor will even succeed in getting you not to like him. He is an

author who describes himself as "constitutionally ambivalent," as someone who "never developed the habit of honesty," as violent, as oppositional, as a man in search of a moral compass. And he employs a method of provocation that is not only aggressively ironic but also disorienting, almost by design, or perhaps by nature. The more he intermingles mordacious taunts with apparently earnest reflections on the feelings and choices of a man suffocated by a less than satisfying matrimony, the harder it is to take him seriously or to distinguish what's satirical from what's sincere. He composes a tribute to the glories of returning home to the atmosphere of a Victorian household. "I . . . kissed first my wife," he tells us, "and then my daughter, and as they returned to their tasks and I fixed myself a Scotch I was overtaken with a feeling of pure, exultant harmony." Feigned? Who's to know? His daughter, he's just noted, is sitting at "the old upright piano we bought for \$100 and spent \$500 to have moved and to whose yellowed ivory keys she had affixed animal stickers." Or he writes, seemingly straightforward, "My wife had wanted to have a child, and now I thought she was doing what she wanted to do, staying home and looking after the baby while I worked to pay the bills, which was what I wanted to do." One begins to wonder, who is this masked man who seems so intent on forcing the reader to have doubts about even his sober voice?

A prominent Manhattan family lawyer, a friend of mine, once told me "Men are weak, men are wrong. But if they stay in a failed marriage, it is usually for the kids, the money or out of a sense of duty." Taylor has many things to say about the kids, the money and the sense of duty — for example, that if you invoke duty, perhaps "you hadn't thought the matter through." As for who's right and who's wrong