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Innovative Ways of Exploring Love: A Book Review of Modern Romance by Aziz Ansari (with Eric Klinenberg).

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Modern Romance.

By Aziz Ansari (with Eric Klinenberg).

New York: Penguin Books,

2016, 288 pages. Paper, \$13.55.

Searching for love has undeniably undergone immense changes in the last decade or so. Modern dating is often referred to as labor-intensive, tiresome, never-ending, and disillusioning. Sociologists and other scholars have been exploring these phenomena, and in *Modern Romance*, Aziz Ansari (2016) amplifies this discussion by sharply captivating what finding (or ending) modern romance is really about.

By far the most unparalleled feature of the book is its authorship. Aziz Ansari is the main author of *Modern Romance*, but while it is mentioned that the project, especially its research component, was completed in collaboration with Eric Klinenberg, he is not listed as an author on the cover. This is also an unlikely pair: Ansari is an actor, comedian, writer, and director, whereas Klinenberg is a notable sociologist with critically acclaimed books. Nevertheless, this out of the ordinary collaboration actually works – Ansari and Klinenberg deliver a powerful, thoroughly researched, and witty account of dating in the contemporary era. In fact, Ansari and Klinenberg might have created a novel genre. It might possibly be labeled as popular science, but it is even more distinct than that. Ansari goes as far as acknowledging that Klinenberg has made a risky career move by paring up with him (p. 253), but judging by the end product, the gamble has paid off.

The research methods and scope of *Modern Romance* are truly impressive. First, the research is based on hundreds of individual and focus-group interviews across the globe, as well as information from a massive online forum the authors created. Second, Ansari and Klinenberg interviewed eminent sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and journalists about their own research on modern romance. Their list of prominent interviewees included, for instance, Andrew Cherlin, Stephanie Coontz, Barry Schwartz, and Sherry Turkle, just to name a few. Third, the research methods also involved a content analysis of participants' text messages, e-mails, online dating profiles, and phone dating apps. Fourth, secondary data analysis of quantitative surveys (e.g. by Match.com) was completed as well. I presume that Klinenberg's contribution to the book was most pronounced and needed in the research stage of the project, and frankly, if Ansari conducted the research on his own without an established and experienced sociologist guiding the research design, the results of the project could be seen as dubious by the academic community. This way, they seem to be comprehensive and highly remarkable, and Ansari's amusing delivery of the findings elevates the entertainment factor of the text.

The scope of topics in *Modern Romance* is also commendable. Ansari starts out by discussing interviews with residents in a retirement community to illustrate how finding mates has changed in the last half century or so. In the past people often married young, to individuals who lived very close to them, sometimes as close as the same building, and they usually decided to get married after a relatively short courtship, most of which occurred in predictable ways, largely following conventional and highly similar steps (Ansari 2016:14-15). The increasing length of emerging adulthood, focus on independence and individualism, the ideological shift from companionate to soul mate marriage, a proliferation of options, the "wanting the best" consumer-type mentality spreading to love, as well as modern communication technology have transformed how romantic relationships come about, develop, and how they typically end.

While technology is by far not the only factor in the love revolution (see the list above), it is still a predominant one because due to new technologies romances are conducted in novel ways and in new spaces. As Ansari puts it, “if you own a smartphone, you’re carrying a 24-7 singles bar in your pocket” (p. 31). Right behind face-to-face delivery, asking someone out by text message is the second most common method practiced by individuals under 30 (Ansari 2016:34), and breaking up also often occurs by text or social media (p. 192). Cell phones have given way to sexting, new ways of cheating, and mobile dating apps, such as Tinder.

Ansari devotes an entire chapter to online dating, which is not surprising, considering how prevalent it is. Between 2005-2012 one-third of couples who got married in the United States met on an online dating site (Ansari 2016:79). While it can be an effective way of meeting someone, Ansari emphasizes the drawbacks as well, such as exhaustion by going through all the profiles, too many options, too high expectations, conditioning to dismiss potential mates too easily and too soon, and too much focus on looks. There is a chapter on choice and options as well, stressing how an abundance of choices and the “finding the best” mentality have resulted in sizable difficulties in settling down with a potential romantic partner.

Another riveting feature of *Modern Romance* is its international scope. Besides various places in the United States, such as New York City, Los Angeles, Monroe, NY, and Wichita, Ansari and Klinenberg also conducted interviews and field research in Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Paris, and Doha to explore cross-cultural comparisons in love and dating. These places seem to have been strategically selected to examine some of the distinct characteristics of contemporary love. Some of the described contrasts were fascinating, such as the ones between “herbivore men” in Japan (those who are shy and uninterested in sex and romance) and frequently sexually aggressive Argentine men (p. 157, 170).

One slight weakness of the book is that its main focus is on heterosexual, middle-class subjects (as less affluent individuals cannot even afford the technologies covered in the text). Ansari recognizes this issue himself and points out that addressing all different aspects of romance would have required another volume, which is a valid argument. The book had another small negative for me: while Ansari’s style is undeniably humorous, I thought that he went a little too far at a few places and included some crude jokes and four-letter words, which I found unnecessary. In fact, for me, a couple of times they have weakened the logically sound and meticulously researched argument he had made right before those jokes.

To sum it up, *Modern Romance* is undoubtedly one of the most timely, comprehensive, well-researched, and compelling texts on love, dating, cheating, breaking up, and settling down in contemporary times. It is an intriguing mix of markedly sound research, entertainment, humor, and dating advice. It is beneficial both as a self-help book and a valuable scientific contribution to the sociology of gender, marriage and families, social media, and technology. Due to its highly accessible language, engaging style, and very timely topic, it is appropriate for undergraduate courses in these fields, as well as for social problems and courses in communication and psychology. It can also be a worthwhile text for anyone who has ever dated, is planning on finding romance in the future, or is simply interested in how love progresses these days. This means that *Modern Romance* potentially has something to offer for virtually *everyone*.