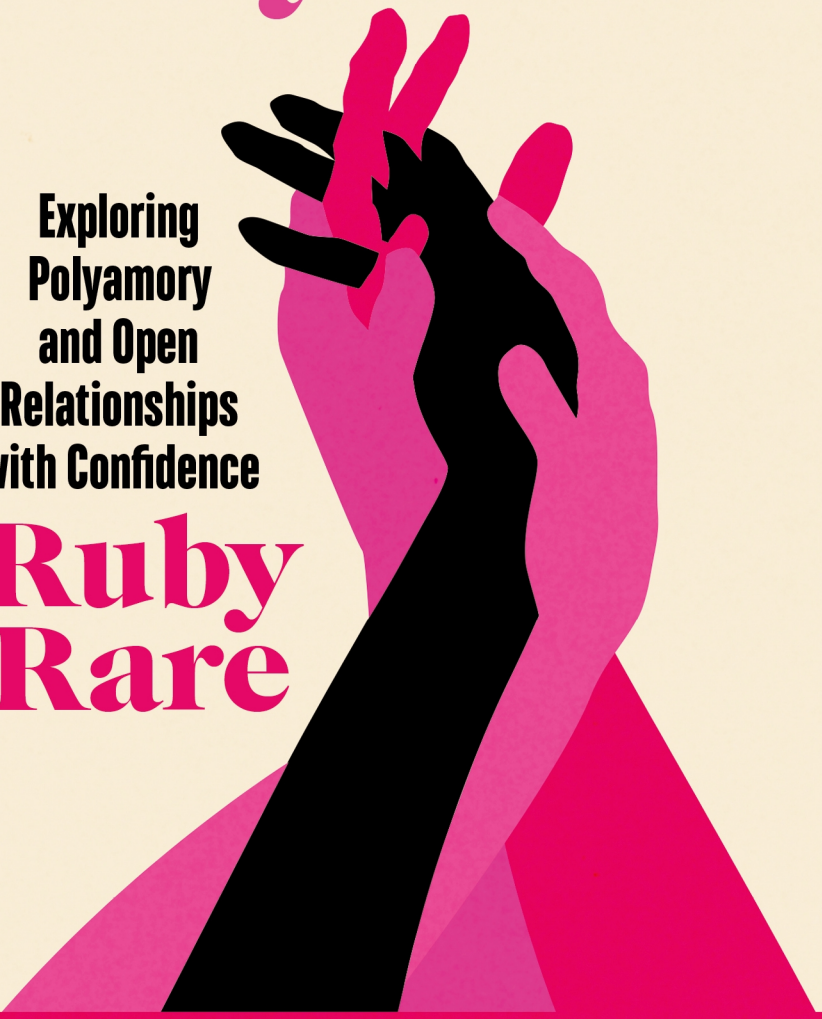
The Non-Monogamy Playbook



Exploring Polyamory and Open Relationships with Confidence

Ruby Rare

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'Fantastic. Full to the brim with well-researched guidance'
PAUL BRUNSON

Praise for *The Non-Monogamy Playbook*

'Ruby is a reassuring whisper in our ear. Her words encourage us to be bold, to explore, to live a life fantastic. To embrace a sexual psyche that yearns to be unleashed and demands to be seen. It's a different way of loving, and it's a rare gift indeed.'

Anna Richardson, presenter and journalist

'When I started out in non-monogamy over a decade ago, all I had to read were blogs from people who seemed like they had solved the non-monogamy puzzle, which left me feeling wrong for being nervous or scared. I wish I could go back in time and give myself *The Non-Monogamy Playbook*.'

Lola Phoenix, author of
An Anxious Person's Guide to Non-Monogamy

'As ever Ruby takes the big, hard stuff and removes the fear from it. Non-monogamy can be tricky terrain, but this book not only gives us a map with which to navigate it, Ruby's writing also reminds us that it's sexy, fun and enriching to get a little lost in the landscape along the way.'

Tom Rasmussen, musician and author of *First Comes Love*

'This book doesn't judge, it just takes your hand and walks you through something you maybe didn't understand. But now you do. Educational, funny, beautiful and freeing.'

Sofie Hagen, comedian and author of
Will I Ever Have Sex Again?

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'Reading this is like sitting in a bar with a kind, intelligent friend and letting her gently explode the limits of your romantic universe.'

Sophie Duker, comedian

'A friendly, approachable and deeply personal guide to non-monogamous relationships.'

Leanne Yau (@polyphilia), polyamory educator

'Ruby balances a hugely enjoyable and exuberant writing style with a serious richness of research and depth of questioning. Kind and thoughtful throughout, this is just the book you need wherever you're at on your own non-monogamy journey.'

Meg-John Barker, author of *Rewriting the Rules*

'Ruby's fresh perspective sheds a light on modern relationships, making different ways of thinking both accessible and inspiring.'

Ana Kirova, CEO of Feeld

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To my sexy friends. Long may we frolic.

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Introduction

I'm sitting on the bus and I open up the group chat with my two best friends from school. We've known each other for 27 years, and with all we've seen each other through, these two women are more sisters than friends. Soraya has just entered her second trimester. She's sending pics of her newly popped-out belly and I cannot fathom that in there is the tiny baby she's growing. And Adrita just got engaged in New York, surrounded by adoring family. Me? I'm on my way to a queer sex party, where I'm about to get absolutely railed in the corner of a sweaty basement filled with thumping techno. Being in your thirties is weird.

In recent years, the conversations about engagements, babies and mortgages have really ramped up. I have been assured by my older and wiser friends that this is an early-thirties thing, and the pressure to achieve all this will chill out in a couple years, but currently it's a lot. None of these are inherently bad, but the prescriptive nature of it all feels stifling. There's a clear script of what my life could, maybe even should, look like across the next few decades. I am genuinely celebrating my friends' choices and big life moments, but I'm struggling to separate this from the pressure

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I feel to join them. Because the underlying thing that is presumed within all of these moments is monogamy. And that's not part of my life anymore.

Are you feeling a similar sort of pressure and uncertainty? Like the roadmap your life is 'supposed' to be on just isn't feeling quite right? If you've picked up this book, chances are you're curious to see if there are other ways of doing things that might suit you better. If that's the case, welcome! It's really good to have you here.

We all exist in relation to the people who surround us: relationships are what define us. But we're taught to put the romantic one above all others: emphasis on the *one*. And I think that's weird. In my queer circles there's been lots of chat about growing up in environments that from birth assumed our straightness, known as compulsory heterosexuality. But what's less addressed is the compulsory monogamy that's also assumed. Think M&S meals for two, couples' discounts on Trainline, and every rom-com ever (even in the ones where you *think* things might end up in a hot throuple, the lead still has to pick one true love by the end). It's still seen as a bold move to intentionally turn away from this prescribed script.

For many of us, non-monogamy is an alternative we were never given the opportunity to consider. Until now.

Non-monogamy is just that: not monogamy. And it isn't new. Of the roughly 5,000 species of mammals, just 3–5 per cent are known to form lifelong pair bonds. If you're wondering, these include wolves and beavers, and shout-out to the diplozoon paradoxum, a parasitic flatworm that literally fuses with its mate in order to reach adulthood, taking codependency to a whole new level.

Fascinated as I am, I'm not here to talk about the lives of loved-upworms – this is a book about human connection. While we've

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all grown up with monogamy as the norm, throughout history it is far from the only way humankind has done relationships.

Just to clarify, this book will not be me exclusively talking shit about monogamy. I'm not anti-monogamy. It's worked for me in the past and it's a beautiful, valid relationship style. But it's just one of many ways of doing things, and I wish we weren't raised to see it as the sole way we form romantic and sexual connections. I don't buy in to the argument that 'monogamy is failing [insert dodgy statistic about marriage rates falling and infidelity rates rising], therefore non-monogamy is the answer'. It feels too smug, and far too simplistic. All relationships require hard work and dedication, and that remains the same whether your relationships are open or closed. But I resent the limited choices we grew up with, and I want more autonomy to design relationships that truly work for us.

Because without getting too evangelical, non-monogamy has changed my life.

- It's transformed the way I view myself in relation to others.
- It's helped me deconstruct the damaging messages I inherited about traditional relationships, and my gendered place within them.
- It's allowed me to stop feeling guilty for wanting more out of my romantic and sexual life. I never thought I'd feel this settled *and* exploratory simultaneously.
- It's introduced me to some truly special people, many of whom are platonic connections.
- And, not to brag, but I have had some banging sex as a result of all this. It's not the main reason I'm

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> non-monogamous, but there's no denying that it's opened the door to some glorious experiences – I'm never short of a titillating story to share at a party.

I'm not alone in doing this, though we're a small minority. The latest data from YouGov shows that 4 per cent of Brits have been in an open relationship before, and 2 per cent are currently in one (things are lower for polyamory, at 1 per cent). But I've noticed a rising interest over the last few years, and the data reflects this, with 8–10 per cent saying they'd be open to trying this. Are you a part of that percentage?

The curiosity is there, but there's still not much concrete information on how we actually go about doing this in a fun, caring way. We're bumbling along, figuring it out for ourselves. And there's still a whole host of misconceptions and assumptions that people make of the reality. Many still view the dedication to monogamy as the main way to legitimise relationships, and without a broader frame of reference, it's easy to see non-monogamy as being a less committed, and more immature, way of doing things. It's difficult to understand how trust can be built outside of faithfulness when it's not something you've experienced first-hand.

It's easy to have a high expectation of what we *should* look like in a non-monogamous situation. I spent years putting immense pressure on myself to date, because I assumed that unless I was actively shagging around I wasn't 'really' doing non-monogamy. This is a mindset we need to move away from. It reminds me of the bi panic I've experienced over the years, that unless I'm dating a woman or a femme non-binary person, my bisexuality is less valid because it's less visible to others. Which is such rubbish!

So while I'm happily non-monogamous, there are still quite

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a lot of people getting their knickers in a twist about what me and my mates are getting up to. At any point in history, social attitudes and behaviours operate on a sliding scale, from progressive to conservative to outright regressive. The Victorian era saw the rise of the Puritan movement (no sinning, no fun), alongside people producing some of the most gloriously graphic porn I have ever seen. This disparity still applies today, only we feel it on a massive scale because of the ways we now share information online. While there's lots more awareness and celebration of non-monogamy, there's also backlash and hate, with the issue being tied up in family-values politics. The idea that it's a 'slippery slope' from gay marriage to group marriage is used as a moral panic on the Right. In 2018, former Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe said on *Celebrity Big Brother*: 'If marriage suddenly is no longer between a man and a woman, and it's between a man and a man or a woman and a woman, then why not between one man and two women? Why not polygamy?' It's worth stressing that non-monogamy is not at the forefront of this discrimination, and there are many other areas of identity politics that are significantly more discriminated against. But all of these discriminations connect, and people who are doing relationships differently can get looped into identity politics. We have to be aware of how that sits for us personally, as well as what it means on a wider cultural level.

Who Am I?

This is my tenth year of being a non-monogamous babe, which feels pretty wild. It's by no means been smooth sailing, which is to be expected when you're treading a pretty new path, but I wouldn't

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change any of it, and I'm grateful to have this stretch of time to reflect on.

I've also spent a decade working in sexual health and sex and relationships education. From teaching in schools and training professionals, I became good at holding all the different perspectives, and insecurities, in any given room. I am constantly amazed at how varied our intimate experiences and values are.

Think of me opening my door and gently introducing you to less normative ways of being, giving you the opportunity to peep in, or fully step inside, depending on how you're feeling. I love making intimacy feel less intimidating, helping people feel less alone in the fears and shames we all carry. So far I've contributed to the sexual health, queer identity, pleasure-focussed education and body positivity worlds, and now it's time to do this with relationships. The main thing I love about my job is what we learn from each other when we open up and start talking about the vulnerable stuff.

And while professionally I have the ability to inform and help guide people through these big moments, in a personal capacity I am by no means an expert in non-monogamy, because I don't believe that anyone can be. This book is absolutely not me modelling perfect behaviour to you. I have no interest in writing a definitive guide about 'perfecting' any form of relationship. I won't shy away from the messy moments, or over-simplify things when there's no straightforward conclusion. Nor will I hold back on sharing my criticisms of the non-monogamous world, which is dear to my heart, but not without its faults.

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Who Are You?

Obviously you're a babe with excellent taste in books, but where are you at in your life? What emotions, hopes and fears are you bringing as you begin reading these pages? This topic may be brand new to you, and perhaps quite scary. It may be something you have some awareness of, through friends, social media or broader media, and you're curious to learn more. You may be opening this book knowing you are ready to give this a go. Or perhaps you're opening it knowing your loved one wants to give this a go, but you're not so sure if it's for you. You may have been exploring non-monogamy for a while, and you're here to gain some new perspectives and experiences which you can compare to your own.

Let's make a pact. I promise to provide you with information, support and general enthusiastic cheerleading vibes, if you promise to come into this with the intention to keep an open mind, stay curious, and be kind to yourself as you read and reflect. However you are arriving, I hope this book provides a space where you can develop the skill of listening to what *you* actually want, rather than following what you've been told you *should* want.

Housekeeping

We'll get to language in Chapter 4, but for now it's useful for you to know that while some people use the phrases consensual non-monogamy or ethicalnon-monogamy (CNM or ENM), I tend not to. For starters, non-monogamy is already such a mouthful, we don't need to be adding any more syllables to the mix. And

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while consent and ethics remain important ways of how I frame relationships, it's a tall order to announce that is how you do relationships 100 per cent of the time. We don't feel the need to prefix monogamy as ethical, so why do that for more open dynamics?

I've aimed to be as inclusive of all gender identities, sexualities and relationship styles as possible. Unless specified, when I use the terms woman and man I am referring to gender identity, and am including everyone who identifies with these terms, not just cisgender people. When it's relevant, I use the acronyms AFAB and AMAB (assigned female, or male, at birth) to refer to biological sex. But where possible, I've kept my language gender-neutral, to include all identities including non-binary, genderqueer and intersex people.

Some other important terms to clarify are asexual and aromantic: where someone experiences little to no sexual or romantic desire respectively. The opposites of these are allosexual or alloromantic: people who do experience sexual or romantic desire. We've got much better at embracing all the identities under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, but so many of us continue to assume this kind of desire, which limits our understanding within relationships. You can be in multiple loving relationships that don't have a focus on sex. You can also have multiple relationships that may be sexual, but where there's not a romantic emphasis. Looking at non-monogamy through an asexual and aromantic lens has been formative for me, in making me aware of just how much we focus on sex and/or romance in order to categorise, quantify and validate our relationships.

I want to challenge you, but I've written this book with kindness at its core, and I hope that's something you can feel. This can be emotional, difficult stuff, particularly in the early days, and I hope

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I can help you feel seen, and encouraged to figure out what it is you are wanting and needing right now. But if what you need is gentle nudge to shift from theory to practice, then my hope is that this book gives you the confidence to give things a go.

There's also someone else I need to introduce you to: the wonderful Genevieve Collister Brown. They are a psychosexual relationship therapist, and have helped me make sure that the advice in this book is therapist-approved. We'll hear from them a few times throughout the book when we're tackling some of the more complex issues that come up when exploring non-monogamy. I'm so grateful for their insight and enthusiasm in helping shape this book.

I've interviewed some wonderful people for this book – I'm also very grateful for their time and insights. I've used real names for the experts I spoke to and some of my friends, but for the more personal stories I've kept my loved ones, past and present, anonymous.

How to Use This Book

Welcome to this playbook. A 'playbook' has two definitions: a book containing all the rules for a team sport, which as a non-sporty girlie, I am not a huge fan of; or a book that houses a collection of plays. I hope this book feels like a mix between the two, where there are suggested guidelines, a bit of a roadmap which you can follow, but nothing concrete. Where there's still space and active encouragement for you to question the rules. This book doesn't just cover the how-tos, it also covers the whys, and the what-ifs. Think of it less as an instructional manual, and more as an invitation to create.

Alongside this, it's become increasingly important for me to talk

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about the culture we find ourselves in, both broader mainstream stuff, as well as what it feels like to exist within non-monogamy culture. I'll go into the ways non-monogamy challenges our understanding of community, family and the legal structures that underpin our lives. And how it has the potential to encourage more radical thinking and dismantling of systems that encourage and uphold inequality and injustice. We'll be sitting with some truly juicy questions:

- How do we stop feeling ownership over other people's bodies and desires?
- What does it mean to exist in good relation with ourselves, our environment and the people around us?
- How can we build intimate lives that are less dependent on capitalist frameworks?

These are complex questions, and I'm not promising to provide the answers in these pages. But what I *can* do is share my thoughts, and encourage you to think deeper and come to your own conclusions.

Many of the ideas in this book confront the norms we were raised on, but difficult as it may be, I believe it's essential to address these inherited messages as we enter non-monogamy.

In Part 1, we'll start by contextualising monogamy today, and how we got here, as well as the culture of infidelity that sits within it. We'll then begin to question our basic understandings of love, and how they could be reimagined, before diving into the world of non-monogamy. Part 2 is about becoming familiar with this world, getting to grips with terminology, and considering why non-monogamy is trending right now, along with exploring it through the context of queerness and queering relationships. We'll also navigate judgement and when that slides into full-on

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prejudice, as well as considering the cultier side of polyamory, and the responsibility we all have to ensure non-monogamy spaces are safer and more accessible for all. Part 3 is where we get into the practical how-tos, with deep dives into the topics I get asked about most: how to open up a relationship, navigate dating, build more conscious relationships with friends, partners and even your partners' partners, improve your communication skills – and, of course, there's a chunky chapter on navigating jealousy through all this. And we end on, well, the end: how we might frame breakups differently through a non-monogamous lens.

What this book will *not* provide you with is a load of relationship cheat codes – because they simply do not exist. We're so keen to streamline our experiences and relationships, and the truth is there's no easy way to do this. You've just got to jump in, knowing it's gonna get messy.

This book is also not a recruitment strategy: I promise I'm not trying to lure anyone away from monogamy against their will. It's about creating more space for people who are curious to give non-monogamy a try.

This book is intended as a conversation starter: there are prompt questions dotted throughout for you to delve into what *you* think and feel. These are jumping-off points to discover your own perspective and reflect on your experiences. Go gently if there's tricky stuff that's brought up by these questions – you can go as deep with investigating them as you want to. Answer these solo, or with your loved ones. We learn a lot from sitting with our own thoughts – but then again, multiple perspectives always make for the juiciest conversations.

It's useful approaching this with the mindset of an experiment, as a whole collective and also as an individual. Not in a dismissive

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'Oh, you're just experimenting' kind of way – we're official. We've got lab coats and protective eyewear on and everything (we look hot). We're keen, we're curious, we're ready to try things out, see what happens, and learn from our mistakes with the hope of building something beautiful. It's OK to just give this a go! And if you try this and find it's not for you, that's great, because all it means is you've had the confidence to experiment, and learnt more about yourself in the process.

I really don't want you to lose sight of the fun and playfulness of this. Yes, exploring non-monogamy can be a big and scary shift – you're holding a lot of emotional weight – but it's important to remember the intentions behind it, which for me are rooted in connection. This is about creating sustainable structures where abundantly caring, pleasurable relationships can thrive. It's taken a decade of trial and error getting here, but my life is made up of long-term loving relationships, sexy friends, platonic loves and hot babes who rail me in sweaty basements. It's a combination that works well for me, and I hold all the facets of it very close to my heart. What does your version of this look like? Let's find out.

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PART 1

How We Got Here

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1.

Unpacking Monogamy

Monogamy is a colossal cultural phenomenon that shapes so much of our understanding of the world. It's so ingrained that you may never have questioned how you define it. For me, monogamy is two people, in a relationship, where romance and sex only happens between those two. You may have a slightly different approach, but I hope this simple definition isn't a million miles away from your thinking.

Monogamy has gone through a great deal of change over the last few centuries, and it's worth examining, because it reminds us that none of the beliefs and behaviours that come from monogamy are static. In this chapter, we'll be exploring historic and modern iterations of monogamy, questioning the messaging that's been handed down by them, and considering what a restrictive definition of relationships does to our ability to love.

Monogamy's Origin Story

There's a fair amount of debate over when monogamy entered human existence, with some suggesting it's been around from very early human history, and others making the case for it being more

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recent, between 10,000 to 20,000 years ago. But it's widely considered that the shift from hunter-gatherer existence to agricultural society marks the beginning of monogamy as we know it today. Once humans began to settle in specific areas, the emphasis on ownership increased, and pair bonding was a way of ensuring land and other resources were kept within the family. Monogamy turned out to be a useful way of regulating that, but polygyny, where a man has more than one wife, was also used as a popular framework.

For centuries, marriage was the dominant way we formalised relationships. The first recorded marriage happened in 2350 BCE, in Mesopotamia, well before the Torah, the Bible or the Quran were written and marriage and monogamy became an integral part of many religions.

Over time, relationship norms have shifted considerably. Nowadays, the default monogamy in the Western world is what's known as serial monogamy. This varies depending on cultural backgrounds and religious practices, but it's now generally more expected to experience multiple relationships throughout our lives, trying them on for size until we find the one that's 'just right', promise to stop any intimacy with others, and lock it down with marriage. You are sexually and romantically monogamous for as long as each relationship lasts, and when you break up there is a transitional period of being single, then dating, and then being monogamous with a new person again. There is a degree of sexual promiscuity permitted within this structure. Shagging around and making mistakes is seen as a youthful rite of passage for many, but one that we are expected to mature out of, eventually settling down into a 'real' relationship.*

* And I know I'm jumping ahead a bit, but consider how this model might shape the way many people see non-monogamy as inherently juvenile and immature.

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If I time-travelled a serial monogamist back to ye olde times, their behaviour would be *scandalous*. Sex with multiple people? Before marriage?! What we see now as the cultural norm would have been a shameful, sinful way of behaving. There were rare cases of annulment, and divorce was brought into the UK by the king of serial monogamy himself, Henry VIII, in the sixteenth century, but for the vast majority of the population, once you said 'I do', there was no opting out. Which, if you ended up with someone nice, might not be too bad, but given that for most of human history anyone who fell outside of the 'rich white straight bloke' category had little to no choice in who they married, the whole 'one person forever' thing was a massive gamble.

So serial monogamy is our modern-day norm, but that doesn't mean it's always been *the* norm. Knowing that helps me hold my understanding of monogamy a little looser, because history is a pretty good indicator that it may well change again.

Imperial Monogamy

As Britain and other colonising countries began to steal indigenous land across the world and claim it for themselves, monogamy, linked to religion, was used as a form of control. Imperialists enforced their culture in the name of 'civility', positioning themselves in contrast to the 'savage native'. This constructed hierarchical distinction gave colonisers permission to view their actions as either an attempt to save the souls of 'uncivilised' indigenous people, or a justified punishment for their supposed 'wrongdoings'. Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, author of *The Sex Lives of African Women*, explains the impact of British colonialism in Ghana: 'A diversity of

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relationship types was lost, and a form of relationships that wasn't native to us became what was regarded as the norm.' In many ways the mission of colonialism was a mission of homogenising people, stripping away indigenous and community tradition by placing shame and punishment on them, and replacing that with an enforced set of Eurocentric rules through social behaviour and law. And the implications of this are still prominent today. It's essential to look at this, especially in the UK, where our colonial past and present is one of the largest and most destructive in the world.

Scientific Debate

This is something that comes up all the bloody time, so let's nip it in the bud. There's an obsession with proving whether it's monogamy or non-monogamy that's biologically innate in humans. And the evidence we use to prop up either argument holds many biases, which in turn impact our own unconscious biases. Science is often presented as fact, but when the values underpinning it are often more subjective, it's worth considering whose fact this is.

Two examples for you: way back in 1859, when Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* and popularised the theory of evolution, he put chimpanzees as our closest evolutionary bosom buddies. These primates are patriarchal and monogamous in nature, which confirms and further legitimises these practices in human society, and places monogamy as the superior mating structure in terms of evolutionary survival. How convenient for science to uphold the rigid hierarchical and patriarchal views of the time.

In 2010, Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá published *Sex*

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at Dawn, which offered a reinterpretation of this evolutionary argument, suggesting we're biologically just as close to bonobos, known to be matriarchal and non-monogamous primates who use sex as a way to socially bond (my kinda primate). Their argument makes a case for non-monogamy to be our evolutionary predisposition, with monogamy being the 'unnatural' tendency human civilisation developed. Much of the research in *Sex at Dawn* has been criticised in recent years, with the argument that Ryan and Jethá skewed their research to fit their case – in the same way others have been doing to uphold normative beliefs for centuries.

While I'm sure there's a lot we can learn from our biological cousins – and to stress, I am a very pro-science person (no flat-earth bullshit over here) – I find neither of these arguments particularly compelling. We're close to both chimpanzees and bonobos from an evolutionary standpoint, and I can see given their context and motives why both parties would claim each primate as their blueprint for human bonding. But does either provide us with proof about what's hardwired into our human brains?

Because lots of scientific research has historically held up normative beliefs, it's tempting to cling on to the newer bits of research that counter those narratives. But isn't that us basically doing the same thing as them? Waving a book, study or statistic around and going, 'See? I'm right. So there!' instead of actually engaging in conversations that leave room for differing perspectives. I'm far more interested in how the stories we tell about our past shape our present and futures. I'm up for there being scientific research on the factors that impact our relationships, but I really can't be bothered to delve deep into any of this to prove my own beliefs. It's useful to know about these different arguments,

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but our relationship norms are shaped by culture much more than they are by the way different primates bone.

First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage

Love is a pesky thing to define. For me, it's the quality of attention we pay to things, wrapped up in affection, care, joy, pleasure and intimacy. But it can also come with a sense of duty and hardship.

Ancient Greek philosophy breaks down love into more specific categories, to reflect the various flavours of affection we experience:

- Agape: universal, unconditional love
- Philia: the love between friends
- Eros: passionate love
- Philautia: love for oneself
- Storge: familial love between parent and child
- Ludus: playful love
- Mania: excessive love
- Pragma: long-standing love

Love is a collection of feelings, but it can also be a choice we make, to continue to nurture the connections we've built.

- What's your personal definition of love? And how do you experience it in your life?

Love and happiness are often presented as intertwining experiences. The brilliant Sara Ahmed, who'll be popping up

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throughout this book because she's my ultimate academic crush, writes about happiness as a cultural performance, where the promise of happiness is elusive, and ultimately limits us. She points to marriage, and the implied monogamy within it, as a moment we invest a lot of hope in to provide happiness, though it isn't always guaranteed.

For much of our history, partnerships have had very little to do with love. Marriage was a pragmatic, economic decision rooted in legacy and prosperity, to the extent that if a family wanted to keep their wealth to themselves and not merge with another family, they'd keep marriage in the family between cousins or even siblings –alarm bells sounding from today's standards!

Love entered the picture later than you might think. Within the European aristocracy, courtly love, which was essentially a load of unrequited horny teenage energy, began to appear in art and literature in the Middle Ages. And it was only in the eighteenth century that the notion of love and marriage merged. Romanticism redefined marriage, placing a new emphasis on romantic love at the core of relationships. While the economic aspect of marriage didn't go anywhere, it was met with the expectation that you should yearn for your beloved, that marriage was a meeting of souls, as well as bank accounts.

Over the last century, there have been many advances in legal and social attitudes that have impacted relationships: the right to vote, access to contraception and abortion, reform in divorce laws, the legalisation of interracial and queer marriage. But through these changes, marriage and monogamy have remained the assumed norm. The messaging we see about modern marriage places love at the centre of these unions, with less cultural emphasis on religion. Perhaps we've shifted a lot of our faith into the concept of love?

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But ultimately, at the core of marital law lie many of the same old historical things: income, property and inheritance.

Marriage continues to be a celebrated tradition in many couples' lives, but the emphasis on it is waning. In 2022, 90 per cent of people getting married in the UK were already cohabiting, again a scandalous shift from ye olde monogamous values. And the proportion of people who are married or in a civil partnership has fallen below 50 per cent for the first time – we're becoming less focussed on marriage as the primary signifier of a union. And while we're talking stats, there's around a 50 per cent chance that first marriages will end in divorce, and birth rates are at their lowest since 2002. We're already seeing a decline in the traditional path of marriage and kids, there are more options than ever for how we go about these becoming a part of our lives, and despite the 'til death do us part' vows, realistically, marriage is often no longer a forever commitment. While there are still huge industries created around the 'soulmate', our attitude around weddings and marriage is shifting.

I want to acknowledge that I find being critical of the institution of marriage while not coming across as a total knob who's hyper-critical of lots of my mates' relationship choices a real challenge. There's no tidy way of framing this, but I don't want the answer to be to not look at it at all. There are so many areas of our lives that can be rooted back to patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy and colonialism (which, and I hope you agree with me, are terrible frameworks we're striving to dismantle). I get that these are uncomfortable things to engage with, and that we're not always in the mood to be critical of the culture that shapes our beliefs and aspirations. And yet within all of this, I still love the camp excitement of an engagement, and weep at every wedding I attend. I'm full to the brim with hypocrisy, as we all are.

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Normativity

Monogamy shapes our understanding of the morally 'right' way to do relationships. Its presence is so strong, it's actually difficult to notice it, because it's basically everywhere.

The 'relationship escalator' massively feeds into our inherited understanding of relationships. This concept was popularised by Amy Gahran, and named as such because once you get on it, it's quite hard to get off. Picture the classic love story: two people meet, they begin dating, kiss, shag and fall head over heels in love. Then there's meeting the family, moving in, the puppy, the proposal, the picture-perfect wedding, buying property, popping out 2.5 kids and raising them, until they begin relationship escalators of their own, which brings grandkids, retirement, and hopefully a serene death tucked up in bed, holding one another tenderly.

All of these can be wonderful, enriching, important parts of our lives. But I struggle with the expectation that if we want to do one of those things, we have to do all of them, in that certain order, and with just one person. It doesn't give us many opportunities to consider our own wants and needs, and how these may differ from others' and change over time.*

Also, it's hetero as fuck. When I asked you to imagine that perfect love story, I bet you pictured a man and a woman. While the escalator can be adapted for queer couples, it's based on a framework that centres the heterosexual family as the 'default' way of life. And if you fancy digging a little deeper, there's a good

* Many of these stages are also very expensive. It may be confronting, but consider the way these expectations enforce capitalism and largely unnecessary spending.

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chance your mind also pictured this man and woman as white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, affluent and educated: this is a structure that continues to uphold many normative beliefs, and limits our ability to see marginalised identities as worthy and able to experience love and affection.

Cis-heteronormativity is a mouthful, but it's important to look at. It positions being cisgender and heterosexual as the cultural default, which is evident through societal attitudes, law, economics and politics. And mononormativity is its sneakier partner in crime, which positions monogamy as the default. Academic Mimi Schippers defines it as 'a foundational discourse of relationship morality and health [. . .] As such, mononormativity is a central pillar of contemporary gender, race, class, and sexual relations.'

As someone who's both queer and non-monogamous, these normative beliefs feel very intertwined. My experience of it taking me a long time to come out as queer due to a lack of visibility echoes my experience of not knowing non-monogamy was an option I was allowed to explore for the first decade of my dating life. Without visibility, how are we supposed to broaden our horizons, if the default isn't sitting right with us?

Gendered Messages

As well as these extensive histories, we all have a personal history with monogamy. My messaging about monogamy, and my place within it, was entirely shaped by being raised as a girl. From an early age I learnt a key role in my life was to be a girlfriend, then a wife, then a mother. Yes, it was the nineties, so there were also 'girl

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