

Seriously single

Kate Bolick challenges the spinster stereotype as well as the boundaries of first-person narratives.

By Sue Hertz

The assignment from *The Atlantic* was vague: what do men's worsening economic prospects mean for the future of dating, family, and marriage? The editor encouraged the writer, Kate Bolick, to draw on her personal observations and relationships to supplement the research, which struck Bolick as a grand idea. For years, she'd used her own experiences to explore larger issues, such as what it means to be an aunt and the impact of Facebook voyeurism. But this was much bigger, and the more she researched, the more she reflected, and the more complex the story became. In her late 30s, she'd had more boyfriends than she could count, and no burning desire to marry. But why? She talked to sociologists and psychologists and anthropologists. She flew to Amsterdam to an all-woman collective. She drove to Boston to talk to college-aged women about romance and commitment. "All the Single Ladies," her resulting 13,000-word essay, dominated the November 2011 issue, which featured Bolick on the cover, arms crossed, eyes outlined in thick black liner, staring defiantly at the camera. "What, Me

Marry?" it said. Inside, she was featured again, this time in profile, elegantly coiffed and bejeweled, a champagne glass in her hand and a bridal bouquet flying over her head. Her expression is thoughtful.

The text, too, was ruminative rather than rebellious, a thoroughly reported exploration of why more women are choosing to stay single, using her own experiences to form the narrative's framework. Immediately, the media was calling, and Bolick was featured on morning talk shows, in panel discussions, on multiple NPR interviews. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to know more about her conclusions that women no longer needed a man to feel complete, that they could work, own homes, bear children, form partnerships – all without a marriage license. They wanted her thoughts on the "hook-up culture," about successful men and women avoiding commitment, and the contrasting trajectories of earning power: How is that as women ascend to more lucrative and responsible roles in the workforce, employment prospects, educational attainment, and income for many men are on the decline? Is it possible to have autonomy and intimacy?

New York publishers called. How about a book? But Bolick wasn't interested in stretching out the magazine piece for 250 pages. Instead, she used her overnight celebrity to propose a project she had mulled for eons. Rather than rehash why contemporary women opt to live solo, she would analyze the unconventional choices of five women, long dead, who in no small way served as Bolick's lifestyle models. Bolick had discovered columnist Neith Boyce, essayist Maeve Brennan, poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, novelist Edith Wharton, and social visionary Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the rocky years after her mother died of breast cancer, when she sought the guidance about men and career that she no longer received from her mom.

Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own was a smash. Living up to

the Goodreads prediction that it would "inspire fanatical devotion and ignite debate," *Spinster* has been called "bold," "moving," and, by *Kirkus*, "a sexy, eloquent, well-written and researched study/memoir." It was one of *Publishers Weekly's* Top Ten Social Science Titles of 2015, one of *Newsday's* 10 Books Not to Miss, and one of Flavorwire's 10 Books That Will Define the Conversation in 2015. Recently published in paperback, *Spinster* is making its second round on the U.S. book tour circuit as well as abroad. An off-Broadway play of the same name has been based on the book.

Bolick had done more than craft a memoir about how her choices led her to living single in her 40s. She'd done more than analyze a culture that coined the term "spinster" for unmarried women. And she'd done more than write a love letter to her literary mentors. The resulting combination was a new hybrid: part memoir, part cultural criticism, part literary valentine.

Blending the personal with the global is Bolick's signature style. You will find it in her *New York Times* book reviews and in her essays in *Slate*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *The New Yorker*. At New York University, she teaches a graduate course on merging memoir and social issues. In a rambling conversation over salad and seltzer, Bolick talked about the challenges and rewards of balancing the "eye" of research with the "I" of personal narrative, of finding a fresh approach to writing about an age-old topic, and how to reconcile conflicting reviews.

Let's start by talking about how you arrived at the idea behind *Spinster*.

"All the Single Ladies" had come out and gone viral. There's so much interest in this new demographic of unmarried women. Publishers wanted me to change that article into a book. But I didn't want to do that. It felt boring and redundant. I'd approached it in a specific way for the purpose of the article and didn't want to continue that for two years. If I'm going to do a book, I want



to do something literary and historical, something that challenges me in a new way. I pitched a book proposal that said, "Here are these women I have talked to in my head for 10 to 15 years. I want to tell their stories. I will be their linking glue. They form a random group of women, and the only thing they have in common is that I became interested in them." I thought that this would be an unusual way to approach this conversation of singlehood and marriage. I thought it would be more personal for readers. I thought if I'm telling stories and going into the historical context of these questions, and put my own experience into the story, the reader will engage with the material in the book, not unlike the way I engaged with the women while I was reading and writing about them. That process, I thought, would create alchemy inside the reader that would recreate on the page the internal conversation that I'd carried on with these dead women for many years.

The reader would engage with you and not the characters?

The reader would engage with all of us. I put myself on the page to compare and contrast with the lives of these women to show how things have and haven't changed. By making myself present in the narrative, I would be giv-

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ing more for the reader to hold on to. I didn't want the women to be mistaken for heroines. I used the Edith Wharton term "awakeners" because I wanted to make a distinction. These are not heroines. They are not my favorite writers. These are women whose lives captivated me, their work captivated me, and through this, my engagement with them, they influenced how I thought of this specific question of should I get married or not.

Aside from Edith Wharton and Edna St. Vincent Millay, the women are not well known.

That was strategic. I didn't want it to make it all obscure women or all famous women. Readers are more inclined to read about someone they know but I also wanted to introduce them to women they may not know.

How did you know when to stop researching these women and the history of women in America, both subjects that could go to the moon and back?

It's a matter of time and space. It could have gone on forever. I stopped when I had enough to tell each woman's story. I had Neith Boyce speaking to the question of work in women's lives. Edna St. Vincent Millay spoke about sex and romance. Maeve Brennan was

a little more vague but she represented autonomy. The 1950s were the worst to be a single woman. Edith Wharton was about living alone – to do it well you have to do it with intention. Charlotte Perkins Gilman drew all of those themes together.

How much research ended up on the cutting room floor?

Tons and tons. I was also keeping up with contemporary conversation about marriage, but I didn't put any of that on the page. Most of the research is on the floor.

How did you arrive at the book's structure that wove together the multiple threads of you, your mother, these five women, and feminist history?

I always knew that the structure would be chronological. I thought it would be a book about my 30s. I spent the first nine months researching and rereading. When I started writing I realized that if I was going to write about my adult life I had to start with my mom's death because that is when I think of my adult life beginning. I had not intended for her to be part of the book. I was a little annoyed. "Move on already, Kate," I told myself. "Stop making everything about your mom." But it was.

I decided to place the five women's stories in the order in which I found them and not their chronological birth order. I knew that might make it confusing, but the only way to make their narratives hang together as a book was to show why I was drawn to them.

I made a big chart on an adhesive chalkboard with the women's names on left. On top were their biographical moments on which I would focus. And then I plotted what part of my life intersected, what themes they addressed, what historical moment they spoke to.

Many writers – and readers – would argue that personal essays are just that: personal, dependent on the writer's experience and reflections. But you break that mold by inserting context into the most intimate of your ruminations. What would you say is the role of research in personal narrative?

I don't have the desire to write a straight-up personal story. It doesn't interest me. I was working at the *Atlantic*, first as a personal assistant and then as an editor, during the height of the memoir boom. All these memoirs were coming into the office all the time. I didn't like them. They were too self-involved. I didn't feel that I was learning anything. I wanted to write out about my own experiences, but didn't like the way contemporary people were doing it. Instead, writers at mid-century, such as Maeve Brennan and M.E.K. Fisher, were my guiding lights. They wrote about themselves at the intersection of something else. M.E.K. Fisher was doing herself and food, and Maeve Brennan was doing herself as a woman in New York City. I was drawn to the history. The best personal writing [occurs] when you have your eye on the larger story and finding the intersections, and doing the research to find them. The research always enriches the narrative.

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If it happens to an individual it happens to others?

Totally. I always think of myself as a stand-in for other people. You can call it solipsistic but I'd rather not. I'm very aware of my subjective experience, and so I trust it. Writers are like everyone else; they are just better at articulating the things that happen to everybody. If I write a story that is highly subjective but I'm getting the details down and linking to something larger, then I'm delivering a larger story.

In the author's note you say, "In writing about my life and the lives of others, I sought to be personal without being confessional." Where is the line between personal and engaging, and confessional and self-absorbed?

Every story about myself I put into that book was there because I thought it would illustrate a larger point. It was clear to me that I could write a confessional memoir, but I had no interest in doing that. A) I didn't feel like it. B) The world didn't need another confessional memoir about being a single woman. I set myself a challenge of a different way of having this conversation that put it in a context that showed women's long history. I'm the messenger, a foil in a way for these women I'm writing about. I revealed what I felt comfortable revealing.

If I were writing a confessional memoir, I would be airing other people's laundry, telling stories. I didn't want to do that. Once I finished the manuscript, I contacted everyone who appeared in it in a significant degree and asked if they wanted to read their part. I didn't want to drag people into the story if they didn't want to be in it.

Your essays and book are filled with background and numbers. Do you have any tricks to share about how to weave stats and facts into a narrative so that the reader doesn't choke on them?

I tell my students to live with information long enough to incorporate those stats and facts with authority and originality, and to do it as conversationally

as possible. Don't let statistics stand for only themselves. Every number, every anecdote, every piece of history should relate to something else.

Throughout the book you offer insights into not only your experiences, the experiences of the five women, but also feminist history. How did you arrive at some of your conclusions?

I've been teaching, at New York University, a graduate class on how to write like this. The students write one 5,000-word essay in first person about an issue they are invested in using contemporary reporting and historical research. The first half of the semester, they develop the idea, research, and write a research memo. The second half, they write a series of three drafts. One of the things I tell them is that they should take notes while reading and researching. What do they think and how they feel? It is these offhand thoughts, what you write in the margins, where ideas become insights.

Many of your reviews were mixed. Some said they loved the memoir but not the feminist history while others said they wanted more feminist theory and history and less personal anecdote. How does a writer balance conflicting reactions?

I was trying to create a new book about a popular conversation. I didn't want it to be a book of feminist theory that only feminists would read. I didn't want it to be a book of memoir; there are way too many memoirs on this topic. As a writer I was doing what I wanted to do and what the subject needed to bring it to life, even if it meant that some readers would be annoyed. They could skim the parts they didn't like. I had a bunch of friends read it before it came out. I paid special attention to my sister-in-law, who is not a writer but a voracious reader. She preferred the memoir parts, which, she said, pulled her through the history, the parts she wouldn't necessarily read.

You have said that you had a hard time with the end. Could you please explain

how you arrived at the conclusion that spinster is a frame of mind, that a woman can live independently in a marriage as well as solo?

All five awakeners were married at some point in their lives. I structured the book so that I'm intersecting with each of them when they are single. I look like I'm contradicting myself by being pure to the idea of singleness. But saying "I'm single and I want to be single forever" is just as boring as saying "I must find a husband." These are just claims and wishes we make for ourselves, but we don't know how we'll change. We turn the corner and fall in love. We turn the corner and fall out of love.

I didn't know how it would end. I got the book deal when I was single and not dating anyone. While working on the book, I met Seth. I wondered: If he sticks around, how would I deal with it in this book? If I were going to be pure about presenting a single woman's narrative, I wouldn't mention him. But I then realized he doesn't contradict what I'm saying. I'm not saying that I will never marry. He's a person in my life, and he deserves to be mentioned and the reader needs to know that I'm in love again. But the romance and white wedding is not the book's end. Instead, I end with an imaginary trip scene in which Seth and a friend and I go to Edna St. Vincent Millay's Maine island. I wanted to end on the *social*, that in this day and age it is about the constellation of people in our lives. ❧

Sue Hertz, an associate professor of nonfiction writing at the University of New Hampshire, is the author of *Write Choices: Elements of Nonfiction Storytelling* and *Caught in the Crossfire: A Year on Abortion's Front Line*. Her essays and stories have appeared in numerous national and regional publications, including *Redbook*, *House Beautiful*, *Walking*, *New England Monthly Magazine*, *Boston Magazine*, the *Boston Globe Magazine*, and *Parenting*. Before she began the double life of teacher-writer, she was a feature writer for the *Hartford Courant*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and the *Herald* in Everett, Washington.