

## Where love knows no bounds

By Ruth Ostrow

RADIO National began one of its recent programs thus: "Nineteenth-century author Alexandre Dumas sagely opined that 'the chains of marriage are so heavy that it takes two to bear them ... and sometimes three'."

Dumas was no radical, said the announcer: "It seems that monogamy has never been the norm for human societies. Or at least that's the view of David Barash and Judith Lipton, authors of a new book entitled *The Myth of Monogamy* (W.H. Freeman & Co). They argue that our evolutionary biology leans heavily in favour of multiple sexual partnerships and that there's something distinctly unnatural about our moral predilection for one lifelong mate."

The radio segment was a huge success and another indication that the topic of monogamy is back in the limelight, with several new books out and talk-back debate reignited on this taboo subject.

According to Relationships Australia (NSW) chief executive Anne Hollonds, people today are more inclined to multiple partners or serial monogamy.

But Lipton, a psychiatrist and author, and Barash, zoologist and professor of psychology at the University of Washington, argue that it has been ever thus. Even animals and birds that allegedly mate for life have offspring with genes that suggest a little extramarital love on the side. They say females and males have multiple sexual partners as a way of guaranteeing the genetic pool.

Not that monogamy isn't a good system, they argue, particularly for the rearing of children. But with one in two marriages ending in divorce and a similar percentage of people admitting to having cheated, Lipton and Barash suggest that it's fair and intelligent to revive a debate about whether the pair-bond structure forged 2000 years ago from a biblical notion of fidelity is achievable and what the alternatives are.

And alternatives are coming forth. A few years ago, when I was working as a sex and relationships writer, I came across the controversial British Demos report into social behaviour. It suggested that a marriage be bound by a five or 10-year contract, with renewable options that allow for consideration of the changing financial, social and sexual needs of any modern relationship.

And in *The Future of Love: The Power of the Soul in Intimate Relationships* (Doubleday), American therapist and relationship expert Daphne Rose Kingma asks us to go beyond conventional thinking to examine the different types of loves that can nurture our souls.

She argues that although many traditional relationships are failing, unexpected arrangements have appeared: gay marriages, step-families and blended situations, happily single casual arrangements and poly-intimate relationships, which can also help our personal growth. These transformations should not be feared; instead, they represent an opportunity to move away from the outmoded message of the unattainable "perfect relationship" towards a deeper, more realistic understanding of love.

In her latest book, *Riding the Sexual Frontier* (HarperCollins), Australian sex therapist Jo-Anne Baker explores male sexuality. A common view about fidelity is

typified by one of her male subjects who explains, "I am monogamous with my heart ... but not with my body." But one solution practised by many of the more pioneering men interviewed for the book was openness with their partners, sharing rather than hiding the truth and negotiating acceptable boundaries rather than simply cheating.

Meanwhile, the Radio National internet page has a pointer at the end of its story to the Beyond Monogamy (Polyamorous) website, which links to literature explaining: "Polyfidelity (group marriage) and polyamory (open relationships) are names for some of the newer, fairer, more honest and more ethical non-monogamous relationships.

"Polyamory is a little-known answer to many people's problem. It's a method of honestly and sincerely loving more than one person intimately. It is a way for three or four dear friends to be lovers too ... Whereas casual swinging is usually about having sex, often with strangers or distant friends, polyfidelity is about having a relationship with a dearest friend and someone you love very much." The site advertises support meetings to deal with jealousy, safe-sex and other relationship issues.

It's clear that, for many, the Judeo-Christian model of monogamous bliss -- one man, one woman, two children and a dog, locked behind the picket fence -- is wearing thin. In Byron Bay, which is an alternative culture, society is evolving to cope with this reality. Many people there have blended families where they separate without anger or hostility, then introduce new lovers into the family unit. It's all very civilised, with exes, currents and children having dinner and spending time together.

There is no perfect answer to the vexing issue of our cheatin' hearts -- particularly when there are children involved. But the way forward is to explore the alternatives with integrity, love and honour. And to continue to have lively social debate on this difficult, emotive topic rather than shut the truth away in the closet.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 17 AUG 2002