



*The*

How I Found  
Happiness with  
a Partner I'll Never  
Understand

*Rye Bread  
Marriage*

A MEMOIR

MICHAELE WEISSMAN

**BOOK CLUB KIT**

# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Lovely Readers,

I am thrilled that you will be reading *The Rye Bread Marriage*. You might find it helpful to understand the origin of this unexpected book.

After writing a book about coffee, I thought I would write a book about Latvian rye bread. The dense, earthy bread that my husband, John, loves and venerates. The bread of his lost homeland. The “old soul,” old world bread that sometimes feels like a third partner in my marriage.

I thought I knew my subject.

I thought this would be an easy book to write. But books, like children, rarely turn out as planned.

To my surprise, *The Rye Bread Marriage* is not a culinary history. It’s a memoir about a complicated yet loving marriage in which sourdough rye bread—the kind our family eats every day, the kind John’s pagan ancestors in Latvia celebrated in song, the kind my grandmother Hannah, a poor Jewish girl born in a Belarus shtetl, ate with herring—is both subject and metaphor.

Writing *The Rye Bread Marriage* required me to: unearth ancient poetry celebrating the gift of grain; discover the nuance surrounding the story of John’s family’s dramatic escape from Latvia at the end of World War II; and excavate the provocative subject of *Differences in Marriage*. How do people like John and me, opposites in religion and ethnicity, stay together without throttling each other? To answer this question, I had to discover the truth of my husband’s life on his terms. And the truth of my own.

I had to unveil stories—hundreds of years of stories—that made each of us who we are. Eventually these stories transformed me. Taught me, to my surprise, to love Latvian rye bread.

When I began, I thought bread was bread. It is so much more. I thought I would tell John’s story; I wound up telling both our stories. I thought my subject was tangible, a thing. In time, I discovered a more mysterious subject: that subject is marriage. That subject is love.

Warmest, warmest regards,

*Michaele*



# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Michaele Weissman divided *The Rye Bread Marriage* into three sections containing more than two hundred chapters, some long, some very short. Weissman says she chose this structure because it helped her weave together three distinct themes—rye bread and its history; the story of her husband’s wartime childhood; and the nature of marriage, especially differences in marriage. Were you able to follow those themes throughout the book? Do the chapters coalesce into a unified whole?

2. Weissman presents five different definitions of marriage. The first comes early in the book:

*“Marriage: A common skin enveloping two separate beings who shape each other’s lives and affect each other’s concerns and interests. This semipermeable membrane nourished by memories of a shared romantic past evolves continually and yet, paradoxically, remains constant.”*

Do you think they knew each other when they married? What do you think the author means when she says a marriage is a semipermeable skin? What is she saying about the role of shared memories in a marriage?

3. Weissman has said one of her motivations for writing *The Rye Bread Marriage* was her belief that few writers tell the truth about marriage. Writers, she suggests, either sentimentalize marriage or demonize it. Have you seen this in other books? And how does that statement relate to her second definition of marriage?

*“Marriage: An intimate relationship existing on a continuum between love and hate, with partners perpetually suspended between the two.”*

4. At the beginning of Part Three, Weissman asserts that the stories we inherit from previous generations play a large role in forging our identities. What does she mean by that, and what does she mean when she presents her third definition of marriage?

*“Marriage: A common skin enveloping two individuals, each possessing their own set of vivid stories and memories—personal memories and cultural memories that pertain to the moment in which they were born and to the cultural and political history of their group.”*





# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

5. Weissman's story unfolds over five decades, and one of her subjects is the impact of time on marriage.

*“Marriage: Two people who have tasted mortality. Two people walking hand in hand into the sunset.”*

What are the events in her marriage that lead her to an understanding of her own mortality and that of her husband? How are mortality and marriage intrinsically intertwined?

6. Take a look at Weissman's final definition of marriage, then go back and read her first definition. How are the two related? What role do you think the shared romantic memories she refers to at the beginning of the book plays in fostering compassion?

*“Marriage, the Last Definition: A long-term relationship between individuals who, if they are lucky, become more compassionate toward each other as the years pass.”*

7. Weissman and her husband both describe themselves as foodies; food and hospitality are tremendously important in their marriage. How does their need to share their table with friends and family play a role in the book? And what are your thoughts about their food-related differences? What does she mean when she writes about inheriting “Jewish Food Joy” from her grandmother Hannah, while her husband's attitudes towards eating stem, at least partially, from an inherited sense of “Baltic restraint”?

8. “Other people are real,” Weissman writes. “That is my morality.” What do you think she means, and why is it important to her to have developed her own sense of morality?



# 10 FACTS ABOUT LATVIAN RYE BREAD

1. You can store Latvian rupjmaize (rye bread made with 100 percent rye flour) in a bag on the kitchen counter for three weeks and it will still taste yummy. You can keep it in the fridge for months at a time. In the freezer, it will last for years and still be tasty when you defrost it.

2. Rye is truly a wonder grass! Rye flour is more nutritious than wheat flour, has more fiber than wheat flour, and yes, stays fresher far longer than wheat flour. And because rye's roots grow so deep, it helps prevent soil from eroding.

3. Latvian rye bread is baked in a wood-burning stove at 900° F.

4. The bread consumed by poor Jewish peasants in Eastern Europe 150 years ago resembled Latvian rupjmaize. It was dense, nutritious, full of fiber, and had little in common with what came to be known as Jewish deli rye, which has as much wheat flour as it does rye, maybe more.

5. Any bread labeled "rye bread" in Germany must contain at least 90 percent rye flour.

6. In Latvia, rye bread crumbs are added to stuffing, sprinkled on top of gratins and pasta, and used them to flavor ice cream and yogurt.

7. The popular Russian drink called kvass is made by pouring boiling water over the stale crusts of dark rye bread, adding sugar, then leaving the mixture to ferment.



# 10 FACTS ABOUT LATVIAN RYE BREAD



10. You can't bake sourdough rye bread without a sourdough starter. In San Francisco during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, some eager rye bread makers swapped sourdough starters in a socially distanced manner by attaching bags of the stuff to utility poles and then posting their locations on frequently updated Google Maps. An entire laboratory at North Carolina State University is devoted to the study of sourdough starter around the world.

8. When visiting newly married friends and family in the Latvian region of Zemgale, the gift of choice is rye bread and salt. Bread and salt as the symbolic—and actual—foundations of life figure prominently in Eastern European and Russian cultures. In 2014 in Belarus, Vladimir Putin caused a ruckus when, apparently fearing poison, he refused to take a ceremonial taste of bread and salt.

9. How do you know when your rupjmaize is sufficiently kneaded? When beads of sweat appear on your forehead after kneading and kneading, then you know your rye bread is ready for baking.



Photos by Black Rooster Food

