

# health & wellbeing

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## What You Wish You Had Brought to the Second Date Instead of the Moving Van:

Dr. Marny Hall is a San Francisco Bay Area psychotherapist with twenty years experience specializing in lesbian relationships. In her book, *The Lesbian Love Companion: How To Survive Everything From Heartthrob To Heartbreak*, she tackles issues of lesbian relationships, sex, break-ups, rituals, and jealousy.

"I had had a painful break-up," she told me in a recent interview, "and decided to find some long-term couples who had managed to weather the difficulties that had undermined my relationship. I was particularly interested in finding couples who had survived outside affairs." She located a handful of long term lesbian couples and contacted them periodically over a number of years. She asked how they met, how their relationship progressed, and how they handled difficult situations such as jealousy, conflict, desire, homophobia, work, and illness.

"I was searching for a formula," said Marny, "but I didn't find anything. Then five years into this experiment, two of the model couples I had been tracking broke up. I had come to think of them as perfect couples. I felt a bit shell-shocked but I decided that I would continue to interview both ex-partners. It was then that I found the answers I was looking for. Now the ex-partners started talking about their relationships in entirely different ways. One woman, who had said that she was really in lust now told me that they had never had any passionate chemistry! Another woman used to say that her community of friends kept them together; now she said that she never felt a sense of community! A third said she wanted to be with her partner until her breath was no longer in her body. After the break-up she told me that even if her partner were available, she wouldn't go back. These 180 degree turns made me realize that so much of how we process relationships is through the tales that we tell. The tales do all sorts of things—they certify legitimacy, they heal broken hearts, and they explain betrayals."

After this revelation,

## An Interview with Dr. Marny Hall

by Esther Rothblum



Photo: Nanette Gartrell

Marny Hall, author of *The Lesbian Love Companion*

Marny decided to go back and reread the transcripts from the interviews she had conducted with the couples that were still together. Now she could see shifts in their stories too, over time. Their stories had kept them going through hard times. For example, if one partner had had an affair, the other discovered a motive that explained everything. Perhaps the straying partner had been depressed about her job or angry at her partner. The affair had been a coded way of announcing these dissatisfactions. In other words, the two partners collaborated on a story that turned an unpardonable betrayal into a forgivable misdemeanor. By reconstructing the potentially damaging revelation in more positive ways, they were able to stay together.

"So I thought, why not think of more stories?" said Marny. Her book focuses on stories that provide alternatives to the "master stories" about forever-after, about terrible betrayals, about bad times. "If I could tell stories about small break-ups or trivial passions or benign other women then I could contribute to partners' flexibility and give them more staying power,"

Marny told me.

Originally planned as a book about successful long-term couple relationships, *The Lesbian Love Companion* took on a life of its own. "I love the story of 'happily ever after,'" Marny said, "but we can tell other stories too. Everyday stories about contentment instead of epics about do-or-die love affairs. Stories of downsized disenchantments instead of major dyke dramas. The first time you realize that your lover snores and you love her anyway is not exactly a swash-buckling bodice-ripper. But it does qualify as a modest tale about a small turning point. Our lives are packed with all kinds of minimalist romances. We just have to tune in to them.

"The same thing is true about sex," Marny continued. "We're all so familiar with the story about the earth-moving sex. But we can tell a lot of different stories about sex—maintenance sex that depends on cultivating orgasmic habits, sex for comfort or fun, psychodrama sex that exorcises old demons. Even the fond sexual memories we share with ex-lovers is another form of sex. We might call it ex-sex. These