

Abstract: Reading *Married Love*: History, Heterosexuality, and Marriage in the Inter-war Years

In 1921, a naval telegraph operator stationed abroad wrote Marie Stopes a letter asking about reliable birth control. He was a married man who saw his wife on leave and he worried that he might saddle his wife with another child. His own mother's life had been dominated by fifteen children and a least six miscarriages and he wanted a different life for his wife. His letter is one of the roughly 5000 such letters written to Marie Stopes in response to the publication of her books, particularly *Married Love* (1918) and *Wise Parenthood* (1919).

These letters were written for a reason—to get particular sexual advice, to get (legal) birth control, to get (semi-illegal or illegal) abortions, to get a sense of how one's behaviors fit into the scale of normality—so they are not un-self-conscious productions of people's sexual histories. Nonetheless they are an extraordinary valuable way of seeing how men and women began to organize their own sexual stories and began to set themselves out as sexual beings—as individuals both acted against and as acting, as responding to information and as creating information.

This paper explores the ways that men and women adopted, adapted, rewrote their sexual histories and the history of sexuality to self-consciously fashion new identities for themselves. Though individuals showed themselves as mechanistic, naive, and ill-informed, they nonetheless developed a belief in the redemptive powers of heterosexual union and actively engaged with the process of change. Thus, this paper will show the ways readers reinvented and reconfigured the stories at their disposal to chart out a brave new world of marital satisfaction.