

Reading Guide for *THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS* by Stephen Evans

About the Book

THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS began as a screenplay, and the rapid fire dialogue sparkles with the verbal wit and hilarity of the screwball comedies of the 30's and 40's which originally inspired the author as the novel emerged. Oddly enough, this comic novel is simultaneously philosophical, even meditative, a bittersweet study on the nature of true love and marriage as partnership that asks some serious questions: What makes a person, a person? Do we and those we love exist only in one another's imaginations? What is memory and what is imagination and what does the one have to do with the other? What *do* we talk about when we talk about love? What is a "marriage of true minds," exactly?

THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS is set in Minneapolis, where the author once lived for two years and found himself enchanted by it. Accordingly, he invests this singularly beautiful city's Lake of the Isles area and Hennepin Island -- which sits right in the middle of the Mississippi River, right in the middle of the city itself -- with magical qualities and fairy tale elements reminiscent of Shakespeare and medieval romance, mingled with the tall tales of Paul Bunyan. Here, the many bridges of Minneapolis are "rainbow bridges." At sunset on "high-summer evenings," the light sweeps through the floor-to-ceiling windows in Lena Grant's 45th floor office at just the right angle to refract in the crystal edge of Lena's solid glass desk, causing "spectral shards" to blossom across the office walls and ceiling. And Nicholas Ward plays Don Quixote to his English sheepdog puppet, Sancho.

Nick Ward and Lena Grant have been divorced for two years. Nick was Lena's brilliant, passionate, wildly clever -- and eccentric -- environmental law professor: "I don't make plans. I have visions." After they married they formed a professional partnership and, with Lena's head for business, built a successful "boutique" law practice, specializing in environmental, animal welfare, and human rights law. Think Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell. Unfortunately, Nick has gone over the edge into grander and grander gestures on behalf of lobsters, seals, and other living things, suffering from what the wise and world weary psychiatrist Dr. Richardson deems a serious delusional disorder. He has even gotten himself committed and under threat of prison if he doesn't straighten up. Lena is "sentenced" by the court to make sure he stays out of trouble, with the help of her current boyfriend, an assistant DA named -- appropriately -- Preston Winter. Thinking it to be a good fit, Lena sentences Nick to community service at a quintessentially grim animal shelter, run as humanely as possible by another study in temperamental contrasts, Ralph and Alice Wilson, who claim to have given up and gotten married after enduring months of Cranston jokes. There he befriends Wolfram, an elderly Irish Wolf Hound. He also crosses paths by the Lake with his psychiatric aide Oscar, who doubles as a balloon artist and sees the world through the lenses of Marvel Comic superheroes. When after his 30 day stay Wolfram is scheduled for euthanasia, Nick, with assistance witting and otherwise from the Wilsons and Oscar, rises to the occasion with his grandest gesture yet, inspiring Lena to bring the political and legal possibilities to bear which will make his vision manifest, as they are reunited in their marriage of true minds.

Finally, *THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS* is a testament to the power of the imagination as a way of understanding the world and creating the world around us -- a Force. For the author, it is present everywhere in life. The imaginary is what is really Real. Imagination is "the great underlying world." The crust of the earth is the everyday world, but the core underneath is the imagination which feeds us, enables us to envision what we can do in this world, including how we can make it better.

About the Author

Stephen Evans was born and raised in the Washington DC area, where he now lives and works as a computer systems analyst. He says that he entered Georgetown University many years ago with the intentions of going to law school. But he tells us that he spent more time in the theatre than in the classroom and ended up with a degree in Philosophy and English, so now he writes about lawyers instead. He is a trained opera singer, performed for years in musical theatre and drama, and is a producer and playwright, a respected figure in Baltimore-Washington theatre circles. **THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS** is his first novel.

Interview with the Author

You are a playwright, with a strong career in all aspects of the theatre. Why did you decide to write a novel?

It started as a screenplay, which I wrote very quickly, in three weeks. But there were just certain elements that I just wasn't satisfied with in that format. I needed to use evolving points of view, for instance, to do what I wanted to do with it. So I switched to the novel form and I am very glad that I did, because I'm much happier with it now. There were also certain visual elements to it that I wasn't sure I could do, the way I envisioned them. It took me a long time – several years.

Beyond the scenes, the dialogue, what other elements of play writing show up in this novel?

What you do on the stage is convey emotional transitions for the characters, and those carry the meaning for the story. I think that happens in this novel. The story is patterned after a lot of the old screwball comedies of the 30's, "The Philadelphia Story," for instance, and of course "Bringing Up Baby," and "His Girl Friday." They're almost drawing room comedies, but not quite, and a lot of those started out as stage plays. I hope that influence comes through in this book, because I love those old comedies and they certainly inspired me.

Comedy is something you apparently take seriously. I am thinking of the conversation about the philosophy of comedy between Oscar and Nick. What do you think comedy brings to this novel?

Actually I was trying to write *Wuthering Heights* but it kept going the other way. Comedy can lay something bare, or make something bearable. This book I hope is mostly the latter.

How did this story start for you?

When I learned about the issue of euthanasia in animal shelters. There are millions of dogs and cats every year who are perfectly healthy and don't have homes, and they are euthanized after just a few days of being there. I had not known about that problem, and I wanted to write something about it. I knew that if I wrote a non-fiction book about it, it would be a very difficult thing to read and wouldn't have the reach that it would have if I wrote it a different way, so that was the genesis of trying to imbed the issue within in a different kind of story that would be a little more uplifting.

Well what about Wolfram? Was he based on any dog that you knew personally?

(chuckles) No, he was completely from the imagination. I wanted to pepper the novel with elements of medieval romance just to give it a magical flavor, and that is where he came from. He is one of those oversized mythical creatures from the animal world, and I wanted that to be in there. An Irish Wolf Hound, the largest of all dogs, at least the tallest.

Have you ever known a dog that needed a good lawyer, like Nick mentions?

(laughs) No, I haven't. I did know a horse that needed a good agent, but that was it.

What about the characters of Nick and Lena? Where did they come from?

I really don't know. The book is not biographical, it's geographical, because I set it in Minneapolis, where I once lived for a time, but the characters just came out of the story that I wanted to tell, and then grew to the point where they took over and finally were telling their own story.

Did the setting of Minneapolis inspire the novel or did they just grow together and seem natural?

I think the setting infuses the novel. I really do have magical, luminous memories of my time there and especially the Lake of the Isles area, nearby where I lived, and it just lent this magical sheen to the story I wanted to tell. It was easier to tell this story because I had this kind of a setting. There is a lot of mythology and tall tales, like Paul Bunyan, of that time, and it all builds into a feeling of being lifted off the ground. A lot of it I wasn't conscious of at the time, but later became more conscious as I saw how it was working.

Yes, everything is tall in this novel. You have tall lawyers, tall lawyer's wives, tall buildings – their offices are on the 45th floor and they live on the fourth floor of a building that was once a brothel, or an inn -- and the bridges of Minneapolis, also tall, are mostly imaginary, and show up as magical, like the rainbow bridge.

Yes, they do. Rainbow Bridges. [ed. note: maybe a reference to the myth of the Rainbow Bridge where all our pets who have gone before us will be waiting to greet us when we die]. And I think that contributes to the sense of being a little off the ground. Nothing being quite connected to the ground. And that's Nick's influence. He kind of lifts everybody up around him.

Where did Sancho come from and who is the narrator of this novel?

Literally, he was based on an actual puppet I once owned. But puppets are wonderfully visual, and I wanted to create that sense of being able to react to everything without saying a word, and trying to do that within the confines of the novel. The original relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho is that Don Quixote is the imaginative and delusional one, and Sancho is the down to earth. Well in this case I wanted the down to earth part to be the imaginary – and still down to earth. In my view, Sancho is the ultimate narrator of the novel, but not the same Sancho. As Nick and Lena are getting back together, Sancho is growing in narrative capability as the narrative point of view evolves through each of the nine chapters of the novel. He is the result of their joint imaginations coming back together. He becomes representative of the creative force their partnership represents in the world – the marriage of true minds.

Can you talk about all the rainbow imagery in the novel?

The image of the rainbow and of white light splitting into parts means a lot of things to me, but perhaps most important, it represents the presence of creativity in everything we do, and the power of the imagination.

What about the sentence that comes up over and over in the novel – “Memory in reverse is imagination?”

Imagination is the great underlying world. You have the crust of the earth that is the everyday world and then underneath you have the core of the imagination, and memory -- the way we remember ourselves and the way we remember our lives -- is imbedded in the imagination and feeds through into what we can envision of our lives and what we can envision of the way we want the world to be. Imagination for me is

like a sense, it's a way of understanding the world, it's not just a way of creating images. It's a way of reaching out and understanding and at the same time creating the world that is around us. It's a Force.

How did the darker theme of serious mental illness evolve to become an integral part of this novel? Were you by any chance using the extreme as a way to better illuminate what we think of as the "ordinariness" of marriage, or something we take for granted?

That came about indirectly actually, because I wanted to create the Quixote and Sancho dynamic between the two characters [Nick and Lena]. I wanted a character who could reach beyond the bounds of normal behavior, to do the heroic action. And yes, I did want to find a way to focus on the extraordinary and special nature of married love by looking at extreme behavior.

What about the question of identity, per se? Isn't a lot of this novel about what makes a person who they are, essentially? For instance, when Lena meets with Nick in the mental hospital at the start of the novel, she waits for him to speak first, so that she will know which one of the 12 Nicks she has separated out in him is speaking.

That's there, true, but underneath all this concern about what makes a person a person is the question of how people are joined together. Marriage is the subject of the novel. And the way people come together and are joined together and grow together in a partnership in such a way that they are no longer separable from one another, even after the papers are signed, and they are divorced. That identity on the imaginative level for me is still concrete and in a sense untouchable. And that is the marriage of true minds.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison

-- Listen to the podcast of Stephen Evans on www.unbridledbooks.com

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel? What did you enjoy most about the novel? What did you have problems with, if anything? Why?
2. How would you describe the tone of the novel?
3. Think about the setting of the novel. In what ways did you find it appropriate for the novel, or not, and why? Evans describes the novel as “geographical, not biographical.” What do you think he might mean by that?
4. How many subjects and/or themes can you identify in this novel? What do they seem to have in common with each other, in your opinion?
5. How do you interpret the statement that comes up repeatedly in the novel: “Memory in reverse is imagination?” What does the author apparently think to be vital, or important, about imagination?
6. What are the various qualities or definitions of Love that you found in the novel? Why are these important to understanding the novel?
7. Think about the Wilson’s and their marriage. How does it compare/contrast to Nick and Lena’s marriage?
What is it, finally, about Nick and Lena’s marriage that makes it “a marriage of true minds?”
8. How would you describe the characters in the novel? What roles do each of them play in developing the characters of the other “players” in the novel? In plot development? Especially think about and discuss Sancho as a character. How would you describe his role and importance in the novel?
9. Go to the conversation between Nick and Oscar about superheroes, comic books and the nature of comedy on pp. 99-100. Can you apply them to the types of wit and humor used in the novel? What are some of your favorite jokes in the novel? Why do you think the author might have chosen comedy as his approach to such a serious subject, including the subject of animal welfare?
10. Why do you think the author used serious mental illness in a novel about marriage? How does he handle this aspect of the story?
11. Just for fun: If you were going to make a movie of this novel, who would you cast to play Nick and Lena? The other characters?

Recommended Reading

Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes, by Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein.

Don Quixote, by Miguel De Cervantes.

Sonnets #116, #18, #29, #68, #138, by William Shakespeare.

The Tempest, by William Shakespeare.

As You Like It, by William Shakespeare.

Bringing up Baby, a film by Howard Hawks (some people call this **the** screwball comedy of all times).

It Happened One Night, a film by Frank Capra.

Devils in the Sugar Shop, by Timothy Schaffert.

The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God, by Timothy Schaffert.

The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters, by Timothy Schaffert.

Small Acts of Sex and Electricity, by Lise Haines.