

# THE AGE-OLD STRUGGLE TO FIND

# Mr Right

Psychologist Sophia Ledingham traces the history of romance and ponders the modern-day problem of finding The One

**ONCE UPON A TIME, BACK IN THE 10TH CENTURY, A GOOD HUSBAND WAS ESSENTIALLY A GOOD CARETAKER OR PROVIDER.** Mr Right's role was to care for you, like he cared for his other property and animals. So you were probably looking for a man who was kind to his mule. Mr Right would be willing and able to provide for you; essentially your relationship was a practical arrangement and marrying for love was considered a foolish enterprise.

Moving on to the 18th and 19th centuries, the list of qualities Mr Right had to possess started to get longer... In addition to being a good provider, he had to be attractive, too. This idea of Mr Right was popularised by the romantic novel and authors such as the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen; Austen herself turned down a proposal from a wealthy but unattractive suitor.

Sales of romantic novels were propelled by the rise in literacy rates, thanks to public education and the affordability of the paperback. Romantic novels outsold all other genres by 10 to one in the year 1900.

Perhaps surprisingly, sexual fulfilment wasn't a key requirement from Mr Right until the early 20th century.

Whilst sex in marriage could be expected, pleasure was not. However, the First World War brought about a heightened awareness of mortality and as a result people were more joy-seeking and explicit about fulfilling sexual desires. Essentially the sentiment of the day was: 'Who knows if I've got a long time, may as well have a good time'.

Marie Stopes – champion of women's rights and founder of the first birth control clinic in Britain – published *Married Love* in 1918, which was essentially the first sex manual for married couples. It was considered scandalous in many social circles and was banned in the US until 1931. Nonetheless, this work helped to place sexual compatibility firmly on the list of things women were expecting to find with Mr Right.

## LAUGHING OUR WAY TO LOVE

During the mid to late 20th century, good conversation and a shared sense of humour became increasingly important in relationships. Couples were more often depicted in movies and on TV having fun banter, with characters falling in love over a punchline. The screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1950s, such as *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *Pillow Talk* (1959), evolved into romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *You've Got Mail* (1998).

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Behind the jokes and mishaps of the romcom, you can see the underlying importance of having an emotional connection with Mr Right. Women want The One to be their best friend, too. Research with teenage girls in the 1990s showed they placed great value on having someone to talk a problem through with; after all, they had grown up in a period of unprecedented divorce.

In addition, it was increasingly common for men and women to be friends.

This was a product of women entering the workplace in the 1970s and striking up friendships with male colleagues; before the 1970s cross-gender friendships were uncommon. In the 2011 film *Just Go With It*, a plastic surgeon played by Adam Sandler turns down the beautiful and youthful Palmer – Brooklyn

Decker – in order to marry his frumpier loyal assistant and friend, played by the admittedly not-so-frumpy Jennifer Aniston. But is best friend Sandler on every woman's hottie list?

George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Chris Pine and Will Smith are rarely hired to play the woman's best friend or to represent emotional availability. Leading male roles today still reflect that 20th-century, or James Bond, type, of Mr Right. Yet it seems emotional closeness is key to contentment in today's relationships. According to research published in the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* most divorced people say that they lost a sense of closeness and didn't feel appreciated or loved anymore.

Esteemed historian Lawrence Stone suggested that our need for emotional support from Mr Right comes from a lost sense of community – he called it affective individualism. In our grandmother's day, assuming she lived in the same town all her life, emotional needs were met via forged female friendships within the community. The hair salon or social club might well have been the place to share deep concerns and find emotional support. But today we are demanding our future husband fulfil this intimate friendship instead.

Professor Anthony Giddens' book *The Transformation of Intimacy* details compelling sociological reasons why few men are currently prepared for this job – largely due to a lack of role models – and the continued incompatibility of emotional sensitivity with mainstream ideals of masculinity and male attractiveness.

Neuroscientists can now confirm that men's brains work differently from women's when it comes to feelings. The insula – the part of the brain that responds

10th

The Provider



# Mr Right THROUGH THE CENTURIES

18th

+Attractive  
+Age appropriate  
Mr Darcy; handsome and wealthy but emotionally detached



19th

+Chemistry



20th

+Sexual fulfillment  
James Bond; masculine and passionate yet emotionally contained



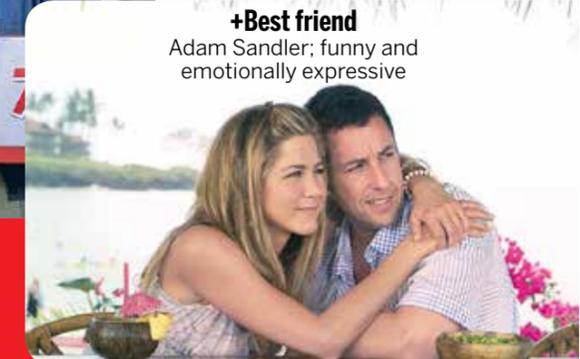
Mid 20th

+Sense of humour  
+Emotional support



21st

+Best friend  
Adam Sandler; funny and emotionally expressive



relationships

to the feelings of others and helps with empathy – operates in a solution-focused manner for men. For them, the insula triggers but rapidly moves to the problem solving part of the brain. However, a woman’s insula stays active for longer, thus resulting in a more empathetic response.

Clearly there is physiological and sociological evidence that men are not skilled – or wired – for emotional intimacy in the way women want them to be. It seems to me that we are setting up Mr Right to fail.

## GROWING PAINS

More than 10 years ago, Anna meets Ben. She’s a teacher and he’s an accountant. He’s also a competitive sportsman and she finds him attractive, there’s chemistry, and she detects he’ll be a dependable father. Ben, she thinks, is her Mr Right.

Several years pass and three children later Ben is in therapy, driven by Anna’s insistence on emotionally expressing himself. He’s always been a line guy – our line guy – and he’s in therapy whatever it is, but he’s not in his family unit.

Anna pushes him to unpick feelings, thoughts. Despite Ben doing his best, she thinks he looks a little silly. He can’t catch flies. I suspect Anna’s Mr Right is no more. It’s not that Ben, meanwhile, finds the sessions with her helpful. He’s trying to sort himself out and exploring his feelings. He can’t communicate. Yet he is not able to meet Anna’s expectations. So what’s going on?

Anna chose a traditional 20th-century Mr Right – a self-contained, strong, masculine type – and

expected, located within, there to be also an emotionally compatible being.

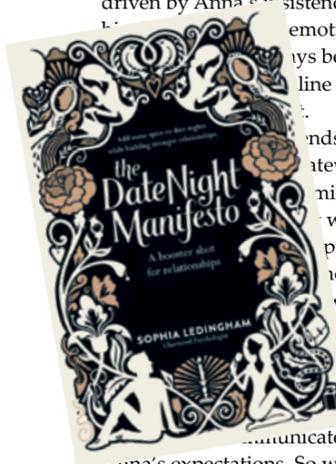
Anna is not the only one. Carol, a 42-year-old divorcee, is seeking the traditional Mr Right, like those portrayed by Mr Clooney and Mr Pitt, and is alarmed when I caution that emotional finesse is not always guaranteed. She also scoffs at my suggestion of a Mr Right more aligned to the character played by Mr Sandler, where emotional expression is readily observed. Her reaction signals, to the psychologist in me, the entrenched allure of the 20th-century Mr Right.

And there is something more at play here. Research shows that the emotional intelligence gap widens between men and women when they move into their thirties. So it’s possible that Anna and Ben were more alike on the emotional intelligence scale when they first met.

My research on emotional intelligence shows that men and women in their twenties report comparable results. As women pass the big 3-0, their emotional intelligence increases; it is surmised that navigating challenges like motherhood and crafting self-identity help to accelerate this maturity. Yet the emotional intelligence of men remains largely static over this period. Did you know that the emotional intelligence of a typical 35-year-old man is comparable to that of a 25-year-old woman? Men do play catch-up. The emotional intelligence of men is thought to go through a growth spurt between their mid-forties and mid-fifties – perhaps triggered by the mid-life crisis.

As for Anna and Ben, ironically it seems that it is Anna who needs a shot of empathic concern. She is

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chat at length with all your BFFs, and to keep yourself busy socially. On the upside, he probably looks good without his shirt, takes the garbage out and watches out for your safety. You will need to make sure that you’re paying him enough physical attention and show appreciation for all the practical things he does.

## THE REAL MRS RIGHT

I have fleshed out the problem of having too many expectations of Mr Right, but is there a Mrs Right? Do men set women up to fail in the same – or different – way? In my discussions with men they appeared more realistic about a future wife or Mrs Right. I hear men talk about seeking a life partner who likes a laugh, and whom they respect, someone who can help them to grow as a person – and who they fancy, too. Men don’t dream up the female equivalent of Mr Darcy – or perhaps they chose not to share those fantasies with me.

Hendrik, a 24-year-old in his first serious relationship, tells me, ‘There’s no Mrs Right, you need to work together to be right for each other.’ Similarly Lee, 55, who has been happily married for 20-plus years, suggests that men, when compared to women, are ‘less romantic, more pragmatic’.

I notice male characters asserting the same mantra: ‘There is no perfect. There will always be struggle. You just need to choose who you want to struggle with,’ says Harry in the movie *Before We Go* (2014). Does this eschewing of idealism offer a potential new direction for women? Or does it mark a return to earlier centuries, when expectations were low? And is a marriage based on romance foolish after all?

Sophia Ledingham is a psychologist and author of *The Date Night Manifesto*, a guide for couples looking to add spice to date night while building stronger relationships. Visit [www.datenightmanifesto.com](http://www.datenightmanifesto.com). Turn over to find out how you can meet Sophia and get tips from her at this month’s *Aquarius Supper Club*. **AQ**

lacking compassion for Ben and that, in itself, suggests some bigger issues.

## LET’S GET REAL

In a logical attempt to mitigate the continuation of the Mr Right meltdown, I propose that there are multiple different kinds of Mr Right, and they all require reducing your number of requirements and exercising empathy. Here are just two to ponder:

### The modern Mr Right

If you seek the funny, sensitive, best friend Mr Right, you may need to compromise on other traditional masculine traits. You might find yourself changing your own car tyres and checking the engine oil. But hey, there are garages with mechanics for that. On the upside, this Mr Right probably cooks and not many people get divorced from guys because they are too nice. You’ll need to ensure you’re paying him enough emotional attention and show appreciation for all the thoughtful things he does. Because he has his own set of BFFs and you don’t want them getting too close!

### The traditional Mr Right

If you seek the classic masculine Mr Right, then please don’t expect deep and meaningful conversations with him. It’s not that he’s being uncaring or unloving, but that he is probably less capable of such discussions; you may have more chance when he approaches 50. Until then, you’ll need a separate outlet for emotional exchange, so invest in your female friendships – he won’t be cool with you having too many male friends. You’ll do well with an unlimited calling plan, so you can

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