

Kay: Love and marriage doesn't necessarily go together

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I optimize my daily walks or bike rides with audiobooks, taking special enjoyment in well-narrated classics. For balance, I add the guilty pleasure of lightweight movies. This summer's annual holiday in Maine produced a mishmash of highbrow and low, with a common theme: marriage.

The rom-com film *Crazy Rich Asians*, featuring a stupendously wealthy Singaporean family, was my guilty pleasure. Afterward, I tweeted, "Crazy Rich Asians are a lot like Crazy Rich Jews, except they eat just as much and stay slender (so envious)."

(I was kidding on the square. Rich Jews are often disturbingly materialistic and their bar mitzvah and wedding blowouts are a source of discomfort for less wealthy members of the tribe. Nobody in *Crazy Rich Asians* seemed embarrassed, though. Not a single one asked, "What will the Caucasians say?")

The film's presenting conflict – the family scion's choice of a beautiful, brainy, high-achieving Chinese-American woman as his bride – highlighted the stark contrast between traditional attitudes toward marriage and the modern paradigm of love as the only thing that matters. The Singaporean "bubbe" seemed sweet and welcoming to the "foreign" girlfriend, but turned frosty and unreceptive when marriage was proposed. However attractive as a person, the American girlfriend was not seen as adding value to the dynasty.

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In this family, which is sophisticated and outwardly Westernized, what seem like vestigial attitudes in the West still linger on. Love in the eyes of the elders is a sidebar in an institution perceived as a mechanism for achieving a profitable alliance on both sides. More than an ocean separates the Singaporean Chinese from the Americanized Chinese. The film reminds us of what the institution of marriage's purpose has been for most of human history, and for most peoples.

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Reinforcing the motif of marriage as a conduit to augmented prosperity and social status were my two audiobooks: John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. I had read both in my university days, but I had forgotten much of the content – and in any case was curious to see how life experience and age had altered my perspective.

The *Forsyte Saga* covers English social history from the 1890s to the 1930s, through three generations of an upper-class family. Following the vicissitudes in the lives of five aristocratic families, *War and Peace* illuminates the changes wrought by the Napoleonic wars of 1805 and 1812 on tsarist Russia. In both cases, the common motif is marriage: happy marriages, unhappy marriages, the crushing sorrow of love matches denied for their material impracticality, the scandal of marriage breakdowns and, above all, the inescapable and powerful influence, on both men and women, of social status and family fortunes as primary considerations in choosing mates.

The individuals in these families are cogs within kinship and social wheels. Those who attempt to challenge the system, like Irene Forsyte and Sonya Rostov, are punished severely for privileging love over duty.

I first read these novels in the late 1950s. I could relate to the marriage tensions, as I was forbidden to date non-Jews. I did occasionally date "out," but without serious intention. The pool of attractive Jewish men was big enough. Why cause family dissension and possible estrangement, if I didn't have to?

Natasha Rostov and Fleur Forsyte admired their supposed "good matches," but felt no sexual chemistry with them. They came to love them deeply as they matured, partly because they appreciated the pleasure and security their marriages bestowed on others, in turn enhancing the happiness of their children.

The elders in *Crazy Rich Asians* felt entitled to dictate matrimonial constraints to their children, reminding me of how things stood in my generation. The film had to end with individualistic love triumphing over compromise for the sake of the collective. If this were a true story, would such a couple's children end up in the family business? Realistically, the odds are against it.

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