

She said he said

Contributed by Laura Nathan-Garner
Saturday, April 3, 2004

Behind John Fate's self-help book for men about women is a woman. Incidentally, I am that woman.

Inundated by images, stories, and people reminding us that love and sex are basic human needs, few of us can avoid working to satiate these essentials. From reality dating shows like *The Bachelor* to the proliferation of online dating services to President Bush's billion-dollar initiative to promote healthy marriages, singles are being encouraged to find love or at least sex in the most unlikely of places. But these schemes don't necessarily pose equal opportunities for bachelors and bachelorettes.

So some singles head down the ominous self-help aisle at the bookstore, or better yet, straight to the Internet, where they can purchase books such as John Fate's *Make Every Girl Want You* and *The Nice Guys' Guide to Getting Girls* without ever having to look a cashier in the eye as if to say, "Yes, I really am buying this book. What's it to you?"

What consumers of these books are purchasing, however, is not merely advice for self-improvement. Perhaps unwittingly, readers of *The Nice Guys' Guide to Getting Girls* and other similar relationship guides also partake in the circulation of certain stereotypes about the male and female genders and the billion-dollar dating industry that helps keep them intact. If gender norms are at least partially socially constructed, then relationship self-help guides have the potential to drastically influence the ways in which we act out our genders.

When men purchase Fate's book, they look to him for advice and assume that his wisdom can send them down the road to romantic bliss. This expectation, of course, is in no small part the consequence of considerable self-promotion and the promise that readers, too, can become genuine Nice Guys simply by taking advice from the pros. According to *The Nice Guys'* website, Fate and *The Nice Guys'* were quickly crowned as the leading experts in the fields of meeting and dating women, as they pertain to both casual & serious relationships. They have since shared their expertise on NBC's *The Other Half*, have gone toe to toe with Bill O'Reilly on *The O'Reilly Factor*, and have served as experts on *The Ricki Lake Show*, MTV's *Urban Myth Show*, & many others.

A tale of two genders

As the female editor of this guide to "getting girls," I had a little *Being John Malkovich* or rather, *Being John Fate* experience of my own. By most standards, I qualify as a progressive woman. Prior to editing this book, I had done significant coursework in literature and advocacy work concerning gender, sex, and sexuality. Quite frankly, I never envisioned myself partaking in the crafting of a dating manual for men. But alas, hell just may have frozen over.

Why did I agree to edit this book if the subject matter and genre weren't really my cup of tea? It certainly wasn't the monetary reward, since I passed the age where \$50 seemed like a generous paycheck long ago. Part of it stemmed from my desire to gain experience and get my foot in the elusive door of the publishing industry. I also thought that editing the book posed a unique opportunity to improve the lot of womankind by ensuring that men treat us better. Although I once naively believed I would never date or associate with a guy who didn't respect women, I have learned that it is impossible to go through life without interacting with (and, unfortunately, even dating) such men. I have had enough experience with such guys to want to help other women avoid having everything from their brains to their beauty degraded by the men they associate with.

In retrospect, my expectations were somewhat shortsighted from the beginning. I assumed that this book, which was written for so-called nice guys by men from the Nice Guys Institute, might characterize women and relationships between men and women in fairly progressive terms given the day and age in which the text was written. To the extent that the book contains no offensive pick-up lines, I suppose it is relatively progressive for its genre. But based on what the text explicitly says, Fate and his book remain intimately tied to the romance industry that helps define and propagate gender stereotypes.

I am sure that Fate doesn't think he is sexist. He did, after all, choose to have a woman edit his book and quotes several female friends in *The Nice Guys' Guide*. But as demonstrated by my interactions with Fate and his characterization of relationships (sexual, romantic, economic, or otherwise), even Nice Guys can embody, contribute to, and circulate sexist and heterosexist stereotypes.

The color of money

It has often been said that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. And thanks to my fateful editorial experience, I am beginning to understand how this gender gap is maintained with the help of Fate's expertise. Fate might call himself an expert on women, but he is no certified love doctor. Educated as an engineer, Fate's knowledge about women derives from his friend Oscar's observations and accounts from Fate's friends. Friends, in my experience, tend to be a relatively self-selected group of people who are not representative of the population as a whole.

In constructing a community of men who fashion their behavior based on his so-called expertise, Fate seeks to maintain a monopoly on the knowledge about gender relations that he circulates. Literally minutes after I put several DVDs and books including the copy of *Make Every Girl Want You* that Fate had given me for reference up for sale in the Amazon.com marketplace, I received an email sent by The Nice Guys. The text of the email simply read: "Selling the book I gave you on Amazon, Laura? Shame on you."

While Fate could only afford to pay me \$50, he makes plenty of money off of selling these books directly from his website for \$15 a pop, teaching courses, appearing on talk shows, and giving emergency advice to men in the midst of relationship crises. And yet he has the nerve to reprimand me for making money off of a book that I obviously had no use for once I finished editing *The Nice Guys* Guide. Nice, guy.

I suppose that Fate likes to see how his books are faring and who is selling them. But this interaction was nothing short of creepy. Not only was my personal email address hidden from public view on Amazon, but I had also used an alias when I put the items up for sale. Maybe my location gave me away, though it seems highly unlikely that I was the sole person in Austin who possessed Fate's book. Was he tracking my ISP number? I don't want to know. Either way, his email only confirmed that the economics of the Nice Guys only flow one way - Fate's way - as he tries to ensure that he remains the master of the knowledge he circulates and that only he reaps the benefits.

What lies beneath

Little does he know, I might have gotten the last laugh. While I struggled to reconcile the tension between my personal opinions of Fate's work and my responsibility toward a book that I was asked to copyedit and make more enjoyable to read, I waged a little behind-the-scenes sabotage. Making a mockery of Fate's characterization of women, I threw around a few stereotypes of men, partially in hopes that readers would get annoyed and pick up on what I was doing. Capitalizing on my sarcastic wit when I grew bored and annoyed with the triteness of Fate's content, I found myself mocking the writer and his audience for writing and reading this book in order to entertain myself. For instance, Fate wrote:

This book is really intended to be a sequel to *Make Every Girl Want You*, the book that I co-authored with my good friend Steve Reil. Steve and I used to be pathetic. Back in college, we were absolutely pathetic. We were so bad that not only wouldn't women sleep with us, and not only wouldn't women date us, but women would not give us the time of day

Oh, sure, if I were sitting next to a girl in class, and she didn't understand something the professor said, she may turn to me and ask for clarification. I may even have been able to chat with her for a few minutes in class. But if I saw her out at a bar or frat party later that night, I couldn't get more than a 30-second conversation out of her.

Underscoring my sentiment that Fate was a bit pathetic for penning this book in the first place, I edited this section to read:

This book is intended to be a sequel to *Make Every Girl Want You*, the book that I co-authored with my good friend Steve Reil. We wrote that book and this one not because we were natural-born ladies' men looking to teach some dogs new tricks, but because we know firsthand what it's like to go for months or even years without a date. Back in college, there was a good chance that if you looked up the word "pathetic" in the dictionary, you would find the definition followed by, "See also: Steve Reil and John Fate." In those days, Steve and I didn't just fail miserably at wooing women sleep with us - much less date us! - but we couldn't get women to give us the time of day if our lives depended on it. It felt as if every woman on Earth had signed a pact and agreed not to acknowledge our very existence.

Oh, sure, if the girl sitting next to me in class didn't understand something, she might ask me for clarification. I might have even chatted with her briefly during class. But if I saw her at a bar or a frat party later that night, I would be lucky if I got more than a 30-second conversation out of her. Truth be told, I was never actually that lucky.

Later in the manuscript Fate explained:

One great way to convey interest in a conversation is by facing the woman. I've observed a lot of guys who will turn and talk to a woman with their face, but their bodies face a different direction. When you turn and face someone with your body, it sends the signal, "Hey, I'm interested in talking to you."

I was certain that readers would fall asleep (and probably ask for a refund of the \$15 that Fate charges for the book) thanks to the mind-numbing and banal nature of his advice. Accentuating male stereotypes in hopes of giving readers a wake-up call, I edited this paragraph to read:

I've observed a lot of guys who will turn and talk to a woman with their face, but their bodies face a different direction. Unfortunately, this isn't going to cut it. Just as your TV would think that you didn't care about the football game on the screen if you kept looking out the window and up at the ceiling (like that would ever happen!), a woman is going to assume that you're not interested in what she has to say if you're not facing her. In order to convey interest in a conversation, then, it's important to face the woman. When you turn and face someone with your body, it sends the signal, "Hey, I'm interested in talking to you."

But given the overwhelmingly positive reviews of *The Nice Guys' Guide* on Amazon.com, I don't think Fate and his readers picked up on the behind-the-scenes ridicule waged by the editor. Then again, his self-selected audience is probably too concerned with "getting girls" to think critically about literary conventions, so perhaps this was to be expected.

For the love of the game

What exactly Fate's audience might have enjoyed unnerves me, however. Was it the title, which I would have encouraged Fate to change to *The Nice Guys' Guide to Meeting Women*, had I been aware of it before publication? Fate's phrase of choice "getting girls" suggests, after all, that women are merely a form of booty (plenty of pun intended). Sure, women are often the objects of male pursuit. But this particular phrase implies that women are passive in relation to men, the aggressors who must pursue the chase. In fact, as Fate tells readers in his discussion of online dating, "Like offline dating, the male plays the pursuer while the woman waits to be pursued." While the idea of being treated like royalty might seem alluring in the abstract, most women are not sitting around waiting for their knight in shining armor to show up. From what I hear, women talk, speak, and even make the first move sometimes.

Although many people "regardless of their gender" manage to botch things up when approached by an attractive stranger, Fate never so much as mentions what a man should do if a woman approaches him first. Worse yet, Fate focuses almost solely on how to initiate a conversation with women and get their phone numbers, offering scant advice on how to behave on a first date, make the transition from casual dating to exclusivity, and conduct a relationship. Yet, because these areas often produce the greatest conflicts and leave many people "regardless of gender" needing or wanting a little guidance, things do not bode well for Fate's readers. Perhaps Fate should have more aptly titled his book *The Nice Guys' Guide to Getting Women's Phone Numbers* or *The Nice Guys' Guide to Scoring a One Night Stand* to avoid misleading his audience.

Fate advises readers not to think of their interactions with women in terms of picking them up, but given his advice, how can it be anything else? With Fate suggesting that readers get to the airport five hours early to meet women, wait until a woman gets up to go to the bar or the restroom to approach her (to avoid seeming like a stalker, paradoxically), or shoot pool near the restroom at a bar in order to meet women, it seems difficult to imagine that his readers would do these things without thinking about picking up women (particularly getting to the airport five hours early!). Similarly, Fate advises readers to find out where women are from when meeting them at the airport in order to determine whether it is worth pursuing. But why worry about whether it is worth continuing a conversation unless, of course, you have a particular goal in mind, say, seducing the woman?

W.W.O.D.? (What would Oscar do?)

Consider the way in which Fate's book takes guys who repeatedly fail with women and creates a new community of men "Nice Guys" who suddenly have all the luck. What exactly distinguishes a nice guy from a Nice Guy, you ask? As Fate explains, "Nice guys . . . need their own approach" since typically, the only guys who succeed with women are "rich, famous, or good-looking."

Modeled after Oscar, whom Fate mimicked after noticing his knack for dating, Nice Guys have their own terminology, including CCR (compliments, compassion, and reassurance) and know that airports, cruises, gyms, bars with a particular type of layout, and even the Internet are the most optimal places for meeting women.

For each of these locales, Fate provides a "step-by-step guide to meeting women." While some of Fate's advice is us

for teaching readers a little tact (i.e. not talking about oneself constantly), his guidelines amount to a one-size-fits-all formula for interacting with women. Typically rife with complications, dating is suddenly the easiest of LSAT logic problems in Fate's book: "If you are male and see a beautiful woman, do X, Y, and Z, and you will have her phone number within ten minutes."

Yes, Fate actually contends that ten minutes is just long enough to get any woman's contact information. (Incidentally, Fate also instructs readers to speak with every woman in the room at a bar or a party for ten minutes to increase their odds of landing a date). The problem with Fate's logic, of course, is that aside from biological characteristics, there are not any personality traits that are intrinsic to all women or men, for that matter. What works on one woman may backfire with the next.

Fate's target audience may be fairly self-selected, but it is troublesome nevertheless that many of his assumptions are necessarily universal in reality. For instance, he writes that Oscar epitomizes what every guy wants to be "a truly nice guy who women love" and the slogan of the Nice Guys Institute is "Dedicated to helping nice guys make themselves more attractive to women." But does everyone with a penis want to be "truly nice," much less desired by women? And are all women attracted to so-called Nice Guys? Ever heard of the "bad boy syndrome" or James Dean? Or better yet, lesbians?

Since Fate fails to tell readers what to do when they discover that not every woman can be wooed by a Nice Guy no matter how nice he is their reactions to these women might end up offending the objects of their pursuit. In fact, Fate's attempt to prescribe our responses to the sex we desire based upon gender differences risks bolstering many of the misunderstandings between men and women that he seeks to remedy.

In the book's afterword, Fate writes, "When you have patience . . . women will be amazed and shocked." While some women may be impressed with a guy who gives them the time of day and isn't excessively pushy, it is foolish to suggest that many people do not expect this as a common courtesy from men and women alike. Sure, it might be exciting to meet someone who is exceptionally nice, but in this day and age, women are not so naïve as to be "amazed and shocked" by a friendly, mellow guy. I would even venture to say that some of us expect that.

Bodies that matter and personalities that don't

Many of us even expect or at least hope that people would outgrow some of the age-old stereotypes about the female body. But alas, this is easier said than done. For instance, in a chapter Fate saved for the sequel to *The Nice Guys Guide*, he discusses how men are inevitably faced with what to do and say when women ask their significant others if they are fat. Many women are in fact insecure, and body image concerns certainly haunt many of us. But body image insecurity is hardly a universal characteristic of all, or even most, women. Moreover, this problem isn't restricted to women. Men of all sexual orientations also struggle with body image concerns. But by attempting to displace these insecurities onto women's bodies, Fate reinforces the fallacy that a woman's identity is defined largely through her body and that a certain female body type is more desirable than others.

Fate's recurring reference to "beautiful women," a phrase he uses more often than the solo term "women," is a problem. It is unclear what Fate means by "beautiful women," though I get the impression that it is a stereotypical, Cindy Crawfordesque notion of beauty defined primarily by a woman's physical features. After all, Fate implies that one can meet beautiful women without knowing anything about them beforehand. Peculiarly, Fate never once uses "cute," "cool," "smart," or "funny" to describe women one might pursue. Perhaps beauty encompasses all of these features for Fate; if this is the case, why not diversify his choice of adjectives to describe what types of women one should pursue?

When Fate tells readers that he can point them in the direction of "these [beautiful] women" and warns them, "I'll tell you to chase after ugly or below-average women now," his double-standard for men and women becomes evident. While Fate complains that he always had trouble with women because he was not rich, famous, or good-looking, he does not hesitate to single out women who are "ugly or below-average."

By encouraging readers to pursue women who appear desirable at first glance, Fate also lends credence to the stereotype that men are shallow. For Fate and the Nice Guys, it seems, individuality and differences those ominous characteristics that make us unique and which make us attractive to some people and not to others can be overlooked (unless, of course, we are talking about "beautiful" versus "average or below-average women"), making any beautiful woman the appropriate object of a Nice Guy's pursuit. As Justin Marks, spokesman for the Nice Guys, said, "We don't care what comes out of a woman's mouth when we meet her. As long as she's attractive, we want to go out with her." Qui prodest charmer, eh? Perhaps someone should write a self-help book targeted at the Nice Guys.

The irony of the Nice Guys' focus on "getting beautiful women," of course, is that Fate tells readers that he had no luck with women initially because he was not rich, famous, or good-looking. Yet, while Fate gears his book toward "average guys," he still gives an advantage to guys who can afford to pay and seeks to improve his own standing through his money-making schemes.

Not only can men get Fate's advice from his books, classes, and talk show appearances, but they can also email "The Nice Guys" with their questions during their times of need. Whereas men who pay a whopping \$25 are guaranteed a response within 48 hours, those who do not pay should not expect to receive a reply. In order to determine which women are worthy of pursuit, I had a male friend email Fate and ask him to qualify what he means by "beautiful women." Needless to say, the Nice Guys never replied. Perhaps they would have if he had paid the \$25.

But alas, money talks. And these days, the dating industry is trying to convince us that wealth and beauty still determine one's dating success. It appears, then, that even if money can't buy men love, it just might buy them guidance on the coveted "Woman Question" and some good old-fashioned gender stereotypes.

STORY INDEX

MARKETPLACE >

(order from Powells.com and a portion of each sale goes to InTheFray)

Against Love: A Polemic

By Laura Kipnis. Published by Pantheon Books. 2003.

Purchase this book from Amazon or Powells

PUBLICATIONS >

"Bush Leaves No Bride Behind"

By Arianna Huffington. Published by AlterNet, January 21, 2004.

URL: <http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=17624>

'Nice Guys' Do Finish Last With Their Misguided Advice Book"

By Justin Dickerson. Published by The Hoya, February 20, 2004.

URL: <http://www.thehoya.com/guide/022004/guide15.cfm>

"Nice Guys still finish toward end of pack"

By Mike Forgey and Katie Silver.

URL: <http://press.creighton.edu/021304/thescene.html>

TOPICS > THE NICE GUYS >

The Nice Guys' Guide

website of The Nice Guys' Institute

URL: <http://www.theniceguysguide.com>

TOPICS > IDENTITY >

Quirkyalone

"The home of the quirkyalone movement." "Quirkyalones are romantics who resist the tyranny of coupledness."

URL: <http://quirkyalone.net/qa/>

Judith Butler/Gender Trouble

An introduction to Judith Butler and the arguments put forward in her 1990 book Gender Trouble

URL: <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>

"