

# **From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-century America Study Guide**

**From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in  
Twentieth-century America by Beth L. Bailey**

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# Plot Summary

*From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* is a history of male-female 'courtship' or the system by which American males and females engaged in and initiated sexual and social intimacy prior to marriage from 1900 to 1988. Beth Bailey, a social and cultural historian at Temple University, argues that the system of American courtship has changed dramatically over the past eighty years due to economic, social, and cultural forces. At different times in American history, courtship has served many functions and symbolized various things. Courtship varied according to the appropriate degree of sexual intimacy. It has been pursued at different ages, in different places, and with varying degrees of financial commitment.

The book has six chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, which focus primarily on courtship practices between 1920 and 1965. 'Dating' developed in the early 1920s, which replaced the 'calling' system that existed prior to it. The call system connected men and women by having 'gentlemen-callers' visit women's home by the permission of the woman's family or the woman herself. The call system involved very little if any sexual intimacy prior to marriage.

The system of dating arose in response to the development of a national youth culture due to World War I and a growing public school system. It began first as a response of lower-class women to their financial inability to engage in the call system. But the middle and upper classes started to imitate the poor, often venturing out into public as a pair and entering a private world of youth away from home. The system came to be dominated by money, which the author laments because she sees it as commodifying human relationships.

Dating became a system of intense competition to see who could date the most individuals. This high-frequency low-intimacy form of dating dominated until World War II, when men returning from war were now interested in the security of a permanent relationship. 'Going steady' became widespread and the marriage age fell substantially. 'Dating' still occurred but it was more exclusive, romantic, and involved more sexual intimacy. The 'going steady' system started to break down as the economy grew and women entered the workplace, undermining the need for security following World War II. A new form of insecurity arose about the boundaries between gender identities which caused new norms of 'proving' masculinity and femininity to arise. This system tended to put enormous pressure on women to maintain their 'womanly virtue.'

During this time, a series of experts began to decide that managing marriage through education was a good idea and marriage courses became standard fare at American colleges. The system continued to rigidify courtship rituals and gender roles. The pressure, in the author's view, eventually became too intense and broke down in the not-out-of-the-blue sexual revolution that started in the mid-1960s. The six chapters cover this surprising evolution.

The author concludes that there was no 'traditional' system of courtship. Each period of American courtship had its costs and benefits, from the call system all the way to the contemporary system that trades primarily in sex. The book is noteworthy for its thesis, along with its documentation of how American media and social scientists played a role in these changing trends.

# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

In 1978, author Beth Bailey was a senior in college. She appeared on the Phil Donahue show to defend coed dorms. Her insular college experience left her wondering how anyone could oppose it. The controversy she encountered, she now realizes, was not really about coed dorms but the transformation of dating. Many regretted the collapse of dating and romance but Beth and her fellow discussants said that love was more than mere mystery and romance and that intimacy could come first. Her parents' generation ultimately accepted Bailey's view.

However, the two forms of human connection, courtship and immediate intimacy, reflected different understandings of values. While the latter system won out, many criticized it for making sex meaningless and producing a lack of commitment, generating teen pregnancy and spreading STDs. Many idealized the past as a result, mostly on the right but often on the left.

The book concerns America's system of courtship as it existed primarily between 1920 and 1965, and analyzes the origins of dating and its demise. It focuses on the values on which dating was based and then argues that the results of the sexual revolution have not been uniformly positive. It also argues that returning to traditional courtship will not solve the problem. Americans must look to the future.

Courtship was initially a private act conducted in a public world. Boys and girls left to meet at restaurants and dining. Advice literature made courtship more public, as did social science experts. The content of the expert messages was contradictory. Some argued that the family and relations between men and women should be protected from the public world, creating a private space for escape. But American courtship was affected by the changing ideas of the relation between men and women. The rules of dating were rooted in the idea of man-as-provider. But as women entered the work world, conventions of courtship resisted change.

And yet the new system of courtship also prized competition among potential mates and promoted consumption, seeing women as scarce resources, objects to be acquired. Men and women saw each other as part of a market.

The arguments of the book rest on a number of distinct concepts. First, courtship is the process of wooing, whether or not it produces marriage. Courtship includes many conditions, intentions and actions. Bailey also looks to convention rather than experience; she will analyze the public system of rules and understandings. Convention does not determine action but it structures experience. It is a frame of reference. She is also focused on American courtship between 1900 and the mid-1960s, during the rise of a national system of culture made possible by developing technology, common education and cultural media.



Bailey notes that dating experience was only presented as a national phenomenon, which ultimately meant the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual, and young. The new systems of courtship were tied to an understanding of youth and youth culture. Young people were turned into adolescents and were segregated from adults. Prior to this time, 'youth' was a loose classification of individuals. But in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States, formal education was prolonged and youth were protected. Young people began to develop their own culture. Courtship was transformed as youth were freed from adult responsibilities and decisions.

Bailey recognizes that the world she describes ignores many, including the very poor, the very rich, minorities, homosexuals, older people, and so on. However, studying the practices of the majority can have a positive impact on our understanding of social mores as a whole. She also notes that the word love is rarely discussed. It was not much of the practice of convention. Instead, she will focus on desire.



# Chapter 1, Calling Cards and Money

## Chapter 1, Calling Cards and Money Summary and Analysis

Before the mid-1920s, a system of 'calling' was used to link women and men. Dating replaced it soon thereafter, moving courtship from community events to restaurants, theatres and dance halls. There was no implied supervision of the private sphere, where family and community could watch. Also, the public world required money and so men's money became the basis of the dating system. By the 1950s Americans began to think dating was universal though it was only three decades old. Some wanted the old system to return, but the new system was lauded by most and seen as innocent.

By the late nineteenth century, a new and coherent social group started to drive American cultural life, which was the new middle class that arose during the industrial revolution. Magazines and newspapers in this day created a cultural consensus on the practice of 'calling' that included even innocuous conversations on the front steps of a girl's house. Women would designate a day 'at home' when callers could be received; callers would then give call cards to the maid. Their requests to be seen would then be either accepted or rejected. Women largely controlled the system.

When a girl reached the right age, she became eligible for callers. At first, the mother or guardian would invite young men to call but later young women had more choices and could call upon any unmarried man. The call was complicated, governed by many rules covering, among other things, the amount of time between invitation and visit. Following the rules was taken to indicate good breeding.

But by 1910, the word 'date' entered the vocabulary of the middle class. Yet it was initially spoken by the college sorority girl to indicate how exotic she was. Dating as a practice ultimately came to the middle class from the upper and lower classes. Dating was a response of lower classes to the pressures of urban-industrial America. Those who lacked the money and security to protect themselves from the harshness of urban life were shut out by the calling system and so they needed new conventions. Dating came from a lack of opportunities. Many 'factory girls' did not have the room to receive calls. And so they sought public and commercial amusements.

Those couples in upper class homes began to envy the privacy of being together in the public sphere in booming city life. They saw less restraint among the lower-class. Women also had increasingly more opportunities to, say, leave the home without a chaperon. The presence of the automobile substantially accelerated this practice.

Dating changed the distribution of power in courtship. Parental control was reduced and men acquired power from women. Calling gave women control, as she had to invite the man into her home but dating was in the world and the man's sphere. In the calling



system, women took initiative. She had the privilege to ask men to call. Men were originally not to take initiative. Norms however quickly reversed. Men became hosts.

The centrality of money in dating also had important implications; dating became a system of economic exchange. Men came to spend money on women publicly. Courtship was initially based on money, of course, but in the dating system money became a direct part of the relationship. Access to women became dependent on money. Men often complained about the system. But money gave men the power to obligate women; it gave them power inequalities and the ability to control women. The conventions that arose accepted this inequality. Men now asked women out and women who initiated were thought aggressive. Men paid for everything which often was thought to imply that women owed them sexual favors.





# Chapter 2, The Economy of Dating

## Chapter 2, The Economy of Dating Summary and Analysis

The transition to dating appeared to an accommodation to modernity. Dating satisfied a need in a world where few women had parlors and childhood neighbors rarely married. Dating was not about marriage or love. Instead, dating was about competition and consumption in the 1930s.

After World War II, two forms of dating arose. Before the war, youth sought popularity through competitive success resulting from many dates. Afterwards 'going steady' became common because the system made security attainable in an unstable world. Dating was still a way to demonstrate popularity. Being popular meant having an automobile, good clothes, fraternity membership, and money for men and for women, popularity meant being seen with popular men in the 'right' places and giving the impression that those women were in demand. The system started in the college community in the 1920s and quickly spread. A system of national youth conformity constrained the bounds of competition in a self-regulating system.

The system was dominant from the mid-1920s to the end of World War II as demonstrated in magazines and newspapers. The experience of the date had little value and neither did the qualities of the person dated. Going steady was scorned. Often competitive success was demonstrated on the dance floor which involved having many dance partners and not 'getting stuck' with one partner. After World War II, cutting in became rude. By the early 1950s, cutting in completely evaporated. The competitive stresses of early days gave way to having dependable escorts.

Post-war America simply had fewer men. Demonstrating popularity was hard for men before, but women now outnumbered men for the first time. War was not the only source of changing sex ratios, however. Nonetheless, during World War II, sixteen million men simply disappeared and women had to cope.

When men returned to campus, the date revived but it had lost its luster. Fears of scarcity were the rule. An incredibly high marriage rate appeared. Men were not happy that women were unwilling to please them, and American college men saw their coed women as spoiled and selfish. They wanted pretty and sincere all-around girls. American men now knew what they wanted; they were also desired by foreign women.

War produced the highest marriage rate in the world in the United States. Wars made people eager to have something to hold onto and the Depression had made people long for marriages they could not afford. The marriage rate stayed high and the average marriage age fell dramatically. American attitudes toward marriage changed. Marriage no longer ended youth but celebrated it; this national celebration of marriage would last nearly twenty years. By 1959, nearly half of all women married before nineteen.



The early marriage ideal changed college; many married in college and the media promoted the positive features of married life. Accordingly, not having a steady man was a failure for a woman. Parents and the larger society supported early marriage, claiming that it was healthier and a sign of maturity. The fear of scarcity was a driving force but the public perception of scarcity faded.

But the trend had brought teenagers into the courtship system, which left financial power out of the dating equation. Shopping around had to begin early and parents were supposed to prepare their children for marriage. Yet parents acted in part to control who their children dated. The desire for security buttressed the practice of 'going steady' which stopped being a guaranteed path to marriage. Twelve year olds could go steady. Many treated going steady as play-marriage; this new practice entirely destroyed the dating-rating system. The most popular students went steady; the others tried to avoid being 'square.' The protocol surrounding going steady was strict, often involving a visible token like a class ring or lettered sweater. Dating was exclusive and partners had to know what the other was doing. Greater sexual intimacy was part of the deal. Teens rarely stayed with their steadies forever.

Going steady threatened parents who believed in marrying early; this created a generational battle. Adults reacted very negatively. The fight boiled down to sex which was a frequent part of going steady. Many saw going steady as an occasion to sin; many parents feared that by going steady women had less opportunity to say no to sex. Another source of conflict was security versus competition. Teenagers had factored out competition. The author argues that, contrary to parental criticisms of going steady, both systems had serious problems. In later days, competition was overabundant. Security and human closeness was scarce. Young marriages often failed miserably and twelve-year-old steadies became sexual revolutionaries. Nonetheless, the system satisfied a need for intimacy.

## Chapter 3, The Worth of a Date

### Chapter 3, The Worth of a Date Summary and Analysis

Bailey notes that contemporary women are sexually objectified based on their appearance. Men are objectified as well as human wallets. America's culture of consumption sees paired acts as opportunities for mutual gain. American dating emerged as money became central to courtship, as 'going somewhere' became the thing to do. Spending time with the other sex was not seen as dating. A date meant that the boy pays for the girl. Boys who wanted to date in fact wanted to be seen with a date. Simply having the date indicated success, though some dates were more valuable than others.

The first daters complained about new courtship costs. The costs of special dates were astronomical, like prom. Extravagance purchased what was essential to the experience. Girls often paid for these dates as well. Proms were a major forum for social competition and in college, there were many such events such as dances. The author then discusses some of the major costs and discussions had in previous decades about how to reduce those costs. Women and men were keen on assessing each other's reputational 'worth.' Media constantly portrayed the other sex as commodities.

Women's appearance was always important but as more forms of 'upkeep' appeared, the importance of appearance became more important. Ideals of beauty solidified in the twentieth century and were often set by movie stars. Standards of physical appearance rose. Spending on beauty rose. Media, like magazines, began to offer key advice on the matter. American public culture since the 1920s reiterated that women should compete for men by consuming, by trying to be the most skillful consumer of her social group.

Pressure on women increased as they had 'no excuse' for not being attractive. In the 1950s and 1960s, the large-breasted girl became highly prized. Large breasts came to indicate that a woman was 'expensive.' Breast size was easy to quantify and stores started to offer methods of augmentation. In the same way, other markers of attractiveness and exclusivity of consumption arose, such as engagement rings, wedding gifts and so on. Marriage became a method of entering society and of taking a couple's place in the social and economic life of the United States. Marriage became a form of consumption as well. Youth came to define themselves in terms of their consumption.



# Chapter 4, Sex Control

## Chapter 4, Sex Control Summary and Analysis

The sexual behaviors of youth in the first four decades of the twentieth century did not fundamentally differ from their nineteenth century counterparts. The activities were similar. What changed was how the sexual acts were perceived. The nineteenth century did not focus on 'youth' as the category did not exist. Twentieth-century discourse was based on youth and heterosexual premarital experience.

Many youth defined themselves as youth through public sexuality and sexual experimentation. New sexual conventions grew and produced tension between generations. The rise of national youth culture changed everything. The divisions between young and old mattered more than divisions between boy and girl. The power of the family declined and women left home for work; as a result, local youth cultures started earlier on campus.

Women and men started to touch each other more, often holding hands and kissing freely and publicly before marriage. Those born between 1900 and 1910 grew up with new understandings of sexuality and new ways of life. The young had more freedom. Women were re-sexualized and sex became the symbol of youth culture. 'Petting' and 'necking' were major innovations in courtship between World War I and the sexual revolution. Many had premarital sex at this time, although it was not 'conventional' until the mid-1960s. Necking covers caresses above the neck and petting below. The new significance was again not in the act but in its meaning. Such acts were milestones, representing popularity and group membership.

The dating system continued to normalize sex. It promoted sexual experimentation and women were expected to 'put out.' In response, parents and authorities tried to regain control. They held the same line against sex that their parents had and this attitude remained unchanged for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Parents tried to retain the 'moral integrity' of American womanhood. Many suggested theories about why this was, such as a lack of chances for wholesome recreation.

Parents responded by limiting their children's' privacy by setting curfews. Group dates accomplished the same purpose. Universities used similar techniques. The complexity of rules built up as parents realized their children were cutting corners. Youth struggled to find private places. One idea underlying this system of control was the refusal of the older generation to allow the young to overcome gender opposition. Adults tried to block the pairing of youth and sex. The system made women the controllers of sex as they had to enforce sexual limits. Many men refused to give up their control, often resulting in rape or actions and pressures close to it.

Ultimately, the system was dysfunctional. Men would not allow women the power to stop them. Pressures arose on women to 'act like ladies'. Women often responded by trying



to 'seem' respectable but privately engaging in illicit sexual activity, resulting in the rumors about good girls in reality being 'easy.' Women began to be presumed guilty for poor sexual behavior. Women were often blamed for being raped and men were often encouraged to sexually exploit women. Sexually cold women were criticized in particular.

This was a system of sexual politics pretending to be a morality; women were in a no-win situation. Arguments for chastity were often made in economic terms. If women made their sexuality scarce, it would be more desirable and men would be more likely to commit. New sexual freedom threatened to destroy the security of women which in turn promoted a justification for maintaining an unequal system of control.

As a result, the sexual experiences of young people came to be governed by both types of conventions. Youth conventions pushed petting, necking and the like as necessary to belong to youth culture and the demands of culture and authority. These two sets of norms were public, universal, and explicit. Caught between these two sets of norms, youth could not last.



# Chapter 5, The Etiquette of Masculinity and Femininity

## Chapter 5, The Etiquette of Masculinity and Femininity Summary and Analysis

Masculinity and femininity developed an etiquette that Bailey wants to analyze because etiquette reflects gender identity. The paradox of etiquette is that by conforming to certain rules one can develop a stronger sense of gender identity. Gender identity became threatened as people began to realize that gender roles were, at least partly, constructed and fluctuated between generations. A breakdown of barriers between men and women threatened identity.

Mid-twentieth century masculinity and femininity were defined in opposition to one another and are the 'traditional' sex roles of today. This traditional etiquette dominated American manners from the 1930s to the 1960s. These identities had to be acquired and demonstrated and etiquette became a complex code that governed courtship rituals. The twentieth century brought to a head the increasing awareness that gender identity was not set in stone.

Women were blamed for this breakdown. Women raised men poorly, it was said. Women crowded men out of their masculine domains. Many came to believe for biological reasons that being female was natural to humanity and that being masculine required development that could be threatened. Freudian psychology added to this perception with the idea of the castration complex. Many came to see each gender as partly contained in the other and that humans had to be 'educated' to respect proper difference. Men started to be seen as trying to 'prove their masculinity'. Changes in the economy were also threatening masculinity, calling for more cooperative qualities in the corporation and bringing women into the workforce.

The crisis of femininity was subordinated to the crisis of masculinity, but not entirely. Women were encouraged to make an effort to become more feminine, partly to rescue men and partly for themselves. In the meanwhile, men sought respite by retreating into private masculine domains. Many forms of media offered men an escape from reality. But separateness was no solution, for men and women simply had to live together.

Due to the breakdown of the idea of transcendently defined gender roles, courtship evolved further. Men and women turned more towards rules of etiquette. They thought little of thank-you notes, forms of address and the like, but about the rules concerning how to be masculine and feminine. Etiquette columns spread across women's magazine and Playboy created a hideaway for men. In the new media literature, masculinity was associated with dominance and femininity with submission. Dutch dating was harshly condemned but critics pointed to other ways of losing rigid gender identity. Everything

became governed, even intelligence; women were expected to 'play dumb' to avoid insulting men.

There are many reasons men and women submitted to this system. First, it helped to quiet fears about social change that had been going on for awhile. Second, men in American were genuinely concerned that women would invade their territory and women were frightened about what would happen. Other fears like those associated with The Great Depression arose as well.

The rules also gave men and women tools to struggle for power within the courtship system. Men were able to enforce male dominance by tying femininity to submission. Women sanctioned it as well. Women could often dominate men by perfectly conforming to etiquette so as to make men feel unable to meet his demands. Men would feel threatened and unable to fail and so would compensate women with attempts to prove their masculinity. Nonetheless, the new etiquette was ultimately an expression of fear about the power that women were gaining in society.



## Chapter 6, Scientific Truth ... and Love

### Chapter 6, Scientific Truth ... and Love Summary and Analysis

Bailey has examined six themes of courtship. They are control, competition, consumption, the sexual economy, etiquette, and gender. All arose from sweeping social forces that came from modernization. These forces were not checked but produced. The changes were often led by academic experts who came to wield great cultural authority. The roles of these figures must be examined.

A University of Chicago sociologist was one of the most important members of the marriage-education movement in 1952. He argued that the changes in American attitudes towards marriage after World War I were the consequence of technological and associated social changes. Families were once safe and embedded in kinship relations, church, and community. Many agreed that traditional morality and marriage was under threat. Burgess advocated planning by the intellectuals to map new possibilities. Experts could school youth in the best forms of courtship. The experts used their authority to intervene in social life.

Folk wisdom was rejected. Scientific knowledge was superior. Society would be governed in a scientific fashion. Love and marriage were to be regulated by elites. Burgess and his adherents were part of a large twentieth-century movement to centralize power in response to the unorganized forces of modernization. Progressive intellectuals found the world too complicated and too risky to leave it to 'chance' and 'blind hope'. Men had to control their future. But the attempts of these individuals were shaped by the fact that they were the products of the social situations they attempted to fix.

Marriage experts became tied to centralization and to the associated progressive movement's strengths and weaknesses. Their advantage was hope for progress, but their weakness was arrogance and insensitivity to error, their desire to control individuals and communities.

Marriage education courses begin at the University of North Carolina in 1927 when Ernest Groves, a family sociologist, was hired to teach such a course by those with interest. The course was merely an example of placing traditional social practices in a scientific mold, such as home economics, eugenics and sex-and-hygiene courses. Groves' department was dominated by Howard Odum whose research was focused on planning culture. Quickly hundreds of thousands of college students took marriage courses and the courses were often mandatory in the middle of the century. But such training only reached a fraction of American youth. However, the movement still affected them through media, and so college marriage courses were visible in American society.





The courses aimed to be 'functional' and 'practical' and meant to cultivate scientific attitudes toward human bonding. Functional education for marriage was part of a broader movement for functional education generally. It was aimed at giving all citizens skills to navigate their world and had an egalitarian, democratic appeal. Students thus often had a lot of control in marriage courses. Leaders of courses often felt bound to students' demands and interests but they still accommodated them.

Anti-academic bias, ironically, flourished in these courses. Students and teachers wanted to put the personal above the societal and came to think that college was about developing personality rather than acquiring skills. A number of marriage educators tried to develop a rapport with students, often sharing intimate personal details of their lives to move students to do the same. Marriage educators tried to fill many roles, those of both expert and friend, and tried to be the role models students didn't have. Nonetheless, the educators maintained their professionalism and pushed the coursework's scientific validity.

The studies on which the prescription was based was usually rooted in survey research which always reflected a white, middle-class bias. With few exceptions, experts ignored regional, racial, gender and religious diversity. Marriage educators not only claimed to be scientific, however; they also conceived of themselves as on a mission to replace authority that had been lost in the community. These experts often pushed a traditional sexual morality and thus imposed a certain morality on students, often dismissing contrary evidence.

By the early 60s, marriage educators were falling from prominence. Youth started to attack the movement and what it stood for. These courses were too centralized, based on expertise and the like. The youth culture was rejecting normative and authority generally. Marriage education ultimately fell victim to its own contradictions. Teachers never knew whether they were scientists or counselors. The movement never quite achieved academic respectability and having moral authority and being a scientist did not mix well.

The marriage education movement shows that American courtship has displayed a struggle for the power to define what is normal and to hold final authority. The marriage educators show that they could make a difference but that the forces of convention and custom could not be overlooked.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary and Analysis

From the Front Porch to the Back Seat was published in 1988. Bailey notes that it had been twenty-five years since the dating system lost its coherence and dominance. Courtship has been replaced by sex. Sex now is the currency of contemporary courtship and can be traced to the sexual revolution. The sexual revolution was not an overwhelmingly sudden event. In fact, the groundwork had been laid for it long before. In an age of abundance in postwar America, it was not clear why anything needed to be conserved including sex.

The sexual revolution was primarily a revolution in meaning. Intercourse replaced petting as the youth convention. Woman's value was once linked to her sexual morality. The sexual revolution was about the right of the unmarried to express love sexually and the rejection of the tie between a woman's value with her sexual virtue. Living together became acceptable and sex became assumed within long-term relationships even among teenagers.

Bailey proposes that just as metaphors of economy replaced metaphors of home and family that metaphors of revolution replaced metaphors of economy. Change was in the air and unmasked power was at stake. Sex became a power struggle for freedom, equality, and autonomy. Both men and women achieved new freedom in some ways, though the revolution may not have offered true freedom.

The new freedoms made dating less certain. It ruined the rules. Revolution involves change and unclear rules. It is not clear what the relevant signals are in today's world of courtship. The natural progression of stages of intimacy was clear, but no longer. The lack of clarity stresses out many people in the youth culture. However there never was a golden age of courtship and modern people are quite different from those of the past.

# Characters

## American Youth Culture

Prior to the early 20th century, there was no real social category of 'youth' and no semblance of a 'national youth culture' that Bailey discusses in the book. Young people quickly went to work and sometimes married early but largely spent most of their time with people in their community who often were not their age. Limited mobility meant that community was more important and generation unimportant. But with the rise of national media, like movies, magazines, and the radio, the increasing presence of national public schools and the generational linking that occurred as the result of World War I a gradual national youth culture came into being. In school, children were segregated according to age and spent most of their days separated from their elders. As a result, they spent most of their time with those of their age group and so a sharp cultural division between parents and children arose.

National youth culture had dramatic consequences on the development of society in the twentieth century. One reason that the call system broke down is that many poorer youth tried to participate in the calling system of richer Americans but found themselves unable. When poorer youth started dating, wealthier youth became aware of their practices and found the privacy enviable. Thus the dating system came into being.

Similarly, due to the fact that youth structured an entire social hierarchy, with the most popular at the top, youth started to emulate the most popular figures within their age group, often copying their styles of dress, speech, and courtship. This form of imitation drove a great deal of social change.

## American Media and Social Scientists

Beth Bailey is relentless in her emphasis on how American media and social scientists affected the development of courtship throughout the twentieth century. It was American media that helped to create a national youth culture and it was through the national media that youth developed a common identity based on public perceptions about what was popular, normal, and so on.

All of this generational information was filtered through the media, youth magazines, and newspapers, and later within movies and television shows. Bailey shows how American media constantly met the demands of national youth focusing on their most important questions and concerns as they varied from age to age and how they integrated 'experts' in the form of advice columns which often generated social changes by giving the changes the appearance of being widespread.

Social scientists also played a major role as their work was employed to make the particular rituals and styles they endorsed appear scientific, rational and reliable. In the middle of the twentieth century, progressive intellectuals were major proponents of



social and economic planning and the centralization of such power in the hands of government. Consequently, marriage experts came to dominate public discourse about marriage and courtship relations and marriage courses were instituted across the United States. While the authority of marriage experts broke down, the authority of presumed experts had exerted its influence and helped to set the stage for the sexual revolution.

## **American Parents**

American parents were made into a generation by the developments that led to a national youth culture. Their norms were reflective of the norms they grew up with and they often imposed those norms on their children.

## **College Students**

Initially in the twentieth century, few American youth went to college. Those that did became trend-setters and colleges became experimentation grounds for new social practices which would eventually spread to the broader population.

## **Beth Bailey**

The author of *From Front Porch to Back Seat* and a social and cultural historian at Temple University.

## **The Gentleman Caller**

A boy would bring a 'calling card' to the home of a girl he was interested in. If she was interested in courting him, she would receive him into the house.

## **The Popular Girl**

The 'popular' girl in the dating system was initially the girl who was in most demand for dates. As time progressed, however, she was the girl who went steady with the best boys.

## **Pressured Women**

Women were regularly pressured by the social mores of their day. The dating system, Bailey argues, pressured women into trading sex for money boys spent on them during dates. Women were also later made the guardians of their own sexual virtue, even when men deliberately abused them.



## **The Truly Masculine Male**

When it became clear that masculinity was a constructed ideal that could be achieved or fail to be achieved, many men felt threatened that they would be unable to achieve the truly masculine ideal.

## **Date Partners**

Early on in the dating system, dating partners had little interest in one another and more interest in being seen with one another in public.

## **'Steadies'**

Later on the dating system became dominated by the practice of 'going steady.' A 'steady' was one's long-term partner.



# Objects/Places

## The United States

From Front Porch to Back Seat focuses exclusively on the history of courtship in the United States.

## College Campuses

Students on college campuses often started courtship trends that spread to the wider population over time.

## The Call System

The call system was the system of courtship dominant prior to dating.

## Dating

The dating system took over with the rise of national youth culture and in the aftermath of World War I.

## Going Steady

'Going steady' was the response pushed by men due to the anxiety caused by World War II and the need for stability.

## Sexual Intimacy

While sexual intimacy was restricted within the dating system, it became looser over time.

## Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are shown in the book to be highly variable and responsive to changes in social attitudes and economic developments.



## **Gender Identity**

Gender identities became more fragile as the fifties and sixties progressed. As a result, masculinity and femininity became ideals to be achieved. Struggles for such achievement often proved dysfunctional.

## **Marriage Courses**

In the 1950s, marriage experts began to institute marriage courses for college students.

## **The Sexual Revolution**

The mid-1960s and 1970s reaction to the standards of courtship prevalent in the 1950s.

## **The Depression**

The Great Depression had a major impact on courtship. Dating was expensive and so there was less dating in the Depression and men and women waited longer to marry.

## **World War II**

World War II made men and women long for security. Consequently, the dating system developed into a system of going steady.

## **Money**

Money became the major medium of exchange in relationships in the dating system.

# Themes

## Cultural Evolution and Trend-Setters

Beth Bailey is focused in *From Front Porch to Back Seat* to explode the myth of 'traditional' courtship. While some standards of sexual propriety and distance between the sexes prior to marriage were prevalent in the United States prior to the mid-1960s, the ideals of courtship changed substantially. The twentieth century began without a national youth culture. Most individuals grew up without a concept of being part of a generation and spending most of their time with their communities and with people of all ages.

Once a national youth culture got going, cultural evolution took off on a national scale. The dating system arose in response to a number of social and economic factors but the dating system was rooted in, according to Bailey, the commodification of others and the exchange of money for status. The system developed throughout the century.

Trend-setters ranked among the most important pressures in cultural evolution. While economic pressures would change general attitudes and technology would make new forms of relationship available, popular figures in two social domains made an enormous difference: popular, often college youth and the national media.

Bailey focuses on the powerful effect that college youth had in setting trends and on how high-status individuals within high schools would introduce new norms in their communities. She also focuses on how media spread information and created public perceptions about common norms. Magazines such as *Esquire* and *Ladies Home Journal* were very powerful.

## The Commodification of Human Relationships

Bailey finds the dating system partly repulsive because she felt that it disrupted a more communal form of courtship that existed without major monetary exchanges. The call system involved suitors getting to know family members, associating with communities, and linking families together. With the rise of a national youth culture and pressure among the poor and immigrant communities to date, as they had no parlors in which to receive suitors, dating began to spread. Once upper classes appreciated the freedom that came with going out in pairs in public, the dating system spread.

Quickly dating became a symbol of status. Boys and girls dated numerous members of the opposite sex just to appear in demand. They would dance together desperate to quickly switch partners so as to appear popular. Money entered the equation as going out in public meant men spending money on women. Consequently, the ties between individuals were cheapened and people began to see each other as assets to be collected rather than as genuine human beings. The 'going steady' system reduced this





commodification element to some degree but Bailey still sees an element of commodification in it.

While Bailey understands that the sexual revolution has had drawbacks, she prefers the untying of sex from money that was prevalent in decades prior to the 1960s. In her view, while the system current when the book was written was superior to what came before in at least this respect.

## The Exploitation of Women

Bailey is regularly focused on how different forms of courtship impacted women. While sexual norms were rigid and parental controls strict under the call system, ultimately men had less power. They had to seek out women and could be rejected easily. The women waited on her home turf and in later years, had exclusive control over who she would see.

The dating system changed things. Women were desperate to have as many dates as they could. They began to feel pressure to exchange sex for money because men were responsible for financing dates. The system of implicating money-sex trading was bad for women because their bodies were treated as commodities that men often felt they were 'owed' for financial services.

Later, the 'going steady' system made sexual pressure worse. If men committed to women, they regularly expected sexual intimacy without marital commitment. As gender roles became less solidified in response to research into the fluctuating contours of masculine and feminine identity, women were also pressured by their culture and parents to 'stay pure' and maintain their 'womanly virtue' lest they be branded as sluts and whores and lose their value. Female worth was tied to upholding chastity against men who simply could not be expected to control themselves. At least, this was how the culture saw it at the time.

This system also required women to act submissive, stupid, and unambitious to avoid threatening the masculinity of their partners. In many cases, if women were sexually exploited and raped, they were blamed for not being more cautious. Bailey believes that the dating system broke down because women were unwilling to handle these pressures particularly when a growing economy and more egalitarian attitudes about gender became available to them.

# Style

## Perspective

Beth Bailey is a social and cultural historian who currently teaches at Temple University. She promises in the book that her perspective will be displayed, but surprisingly her own views only come through indirectly. The reader will form the impression early on that the author intends to argue for her own view but instead she refrains from doing so until the very end. The reader will wonder whether the author is a conservative or a feminist for much of the book. On the one hand, Bailey is consistently concerned about the exploitation of women. On the other hand, she does not see cultural progress as necessarily improving women's position with respect to men.

The most noteworthy feature of Bailey's perspective is her focus on exploding the idea that there is such a thing as 'traditional' courtship. Each generation forms their own conception of what is normal and appropriate in courtship and this conception is often influenced by a number of factors, including political events, economic conditions, male-female population ratios, and technology. The call system parents condemned the dating generation, the dating generation condemned their going-steady children, and the going-steady generation opposed the sexual revolution. Earlier stages often gave women more autonomy than later stages and the sexual revolution has not had unambiguous results for women.

Towards the end of the book, in the epilogue, Bailey makes clear that she largely approves of the sexual revolution despite its drawbacks. She sees it as an understandable reaction to the exploitation and commodification of women in the previous two generations.

## Tone

The tone of *From Front Porch to Back Seat* is largely narrative although it often includes notes of criticism and disapproval. The beginning of the book discusses the call system, pointing out how very different it is from the norms of today and from the norms that followed it. The author then describes the factors that led to the dating system but the tone shifts when she discusses how important money became among youth who dated. On the one hand, men and women were able to spend more time alone together. On the other hand, men had to have money to spend on women and women displayed it prominently. Men often used the fact that they spent money on women to manipulate them into sexual activity as well.

When Bailey describes these processes, she is hostile and critical. In fact, the theme of the commodification of intimacy arises in many places and in all of them Bailey's tone turns from that of the historian to that of a social critic. Bailey's tone also turns critical when she discusses the role of marriage 'experts' in shaping social norms in the post-



war period. While Bailey mostly tells the story of the marriage-education movement impartially, her tone turns dark at the beginning and end of the story. Such darker tones in the book also come up in discussions of attitudes toward courtship in the national media and the pressures placed on women to maintain their 'womanly virtue' in the late dating system period.

## Structure

*From Front Porch to Back Seat* is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. The introduction serves as a general overview of the book, though it is nearly as long as some of the major chapters. It introduces Bailey's conception of courtship, the common social element shared by all periods of courtship in the twentieth century. She discusses why she has decided to focus on white, middle-class American, why she has decided to focus on perceived conventions and her view that 'traditional' morality is something of a misnomer.

Chapter 1, 'Calling Cards and Money' explains the call system and the economic and social forces that led to its demise. Bailey discusses how the dating system brought a monetary element into male-female interactions. Chapter 2, 'The Economy of Dating' expands on this theme and discusses the role that dating played in youth society and in American society at large. Chapter 3, 'The Worth of a Date' discusses the symbolism of dating and also focuses on the role of 'going steady' as it developed in the post-war period.

Chapter 4, 'Sex Control' explains how various courtship norms controlled the sexual activities of youth. Chapter 5, 'The Etiquette of Masculinity and Femininity' explains how the increasingly popular view that gender roles were acquired rather than transcendent threatened masculine and feminine identity and how the responsibility for masculinity was placed on women. Chapter 6, 'Scientific Truth...and Love' analyzes and critiques the marriage-education movement and explains how it set up the social conditions for the sexual revolution. Finally, the Epilogue reviews some of the book's major themes and concludes that the sexual revolution did not come out of the blue.



## Quotes

"In our search for freedom, honestly, love, and equality, many of them claim, we have found only meaningless sex, loneliness, and lack of commitment" (Introduction, pg. 2.)

"While some of the fruits of America's sexual revolution have not been sweet, we cannot simply look to traditional courtship for remedies" (Introduction, pg. 3.)

"The transition from calling to dating was as complete as it was fundamental" (Chapter 1, pg. 14.)

"The practice of dating was a response of the lower classes to the pressures and opportunities of urban-industrial American, just as calling was a response of the upper stratas" (Chapter 1, pg. 17.)

"Money purchased obligation; money purchased inequality; money purchased control" (Chapter 1, pg. 23.)

"Dating filled a need in an urban society in which not all respectable young women had parlors in their homes and childhood friends infrequently grew up to become husband and wife" (Chapter 2, pg. 25.)

"The rating-and-dating system was individual competition expressed through conformity" (Chapter 2, pg. 27.)

"Competition was overabundant, security and human closeness too scarce" (Chapter 2, pg. 56.)

"In this system, men and women often defined themselves and each other as commodities, the woman valued by the level of consumption she could demand, and the man by the level of consumption he could provide" (Chapter 3, pg. 58.)

"In their courtship, youth defined themselves through acts of consumption and in terms of consumption. Thus they celebrated their lives and their loves" (Chapter 3, pg. 76.)

"What changed were not sexual acts so much as what those acts meant—how they were perceived, what symbolic freight they carried" (Chapter 4, pg. 77.)

"This argument provided a further rationale for maintaining the inequitable systems of control" (Chapter 4, pg. 96.)

"Fears about the fragility of gender in twentieth-century American stemmed from the slowly developing belief that masculinity, as opposed to maleness, and femininity, as opposed to femaleness—were not states of being declared by God or by nature, but were changing codes of behavior produced by culturally and historically specific forces" (Chapter 5, pg. 97.)



"Even though the etiquette of masculinity and femininity offered women a path to power within the dating system, it more importantly expressed fundamental fears about the amount of power women were gaining in society" (Chapter 5, pg. 117.)

"They [marriage experts] were part of a much larger twentieth-century movement toward centralized power, a movement that sought to control the chaotic forces of modernization by vesting power in a new class of experts and professionals" (Chapter 6, pg. 123.)

"Certainly it mattered what the experts said. Certainly the arbiters of convention had a profound impact on the way youth understood courtship. Certainly it made a difference that modern youth received advice with the imprimatur of science and not of religion or of custom. But the power of forces other than convention, science and expertise, other than the struggle for control in courtship, cannot be overlooked" (Chapter 6, pg. 140.)

"What has replaced courtship's metaphor of economy? What structures our public language and behavior today? Anyone who has spent time glancing through popular magazines in the grocery store checkout line could volunteer the obvious answer: sex" (Epilogue, pg. 141.)

"Our past does not contain a golden age of courtship and the 'security' of the postwar era was bought at great price" (Epilogue, pg. 143.)



## Topics for Discussion

What was the call system? Why did it collapse?

What were dates originally? What did they symbolize? What social function did they serve?

How did the date system evolve into a system of 'going steady'? Why did this change occur?

Why does the author think that the sexual revolution occurred in response to pressures placed on men and women in the previous generation? What pressures were these? Do you agree with the author? Why or why not?

What motivated the marriage education movement? How were marriage courses structured? Why did the system break down?

How did the date system commodify human relationships?

What is the difference between the dating system prior to 1965 and courtship thereafter? Name two major differences.

Explain the relationship between economic forces and dating rituals.

How did the development of a national youth culture change courtship?

How were women exploited by the dating system as it existed following World War II?

What is the author's opinion about each period of courtship that she describes? Which does she think is best? Why?