

## COUNTERINTELLIGENCE; 'Rules' Books Sell Millions, But Mr. Right Takes a Hike

By Alex Witchel  
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IF they had called it "The Suggestions" no one would have bought it.

But Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, co-authors of "The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right" (Warner Books, 1995), instinctively knew better. In an uncertain world, nothing is more alluring than a guarantee: follow "The Rules" (play hard to get, same advice as Grandma's) and a husband will be yours. What marriage-minded gal could resist these junior set yentas and their high-tone marketing plan? And why should she? Consider Salman Rushdie. The man was hunted by international terrorists, lived in hiding for years and not only met someone, but married her. Come on!

Not surprisingly, perhaps, "The Rules" sold two million copies in 27 languages. Its sequel, "The Rules II: More Rules to Live and Love By" (Warner Books, 1997), was also successful (350,000 copies in print), so it was only a matter of time before "The Rules for Marriage: Time-Tested Secrets for Making Your Marriage Work" (Warner Books), due out this week. Though the publisher is moving full speed ahead with a first printing of 75,000, the only teensy wrinkle is that Ms. Fein, the mother of two, has filed for a legal separation from her husband of 16 years and is headed for a divorce. Oops. Guess you can't legislate human behavior, after all.

"Oh, yes I can," Ms. Fein said fiercely, last week. She and Ms. Schneider agreed to sit down and talk about the ticklish situation of having written a how-to on happy marriages when half the team couldn't pull hers off.

They settled at a table in the Fifty Seven Fifty Seven Bar of the Four Seasons Hotel, Ms. Fein with a virgin piña colada, Ms. Schneider with seltzer. At first, the conversation was rough going. These women have faced talk show firing squads of feminists since "The Rules" was first published and have the battle scars to prove it. While Ms. Fein, 43, talked on, defensive and often shrill, Ms. Schneider, 41, frowned silently, arms crossed. The message soon became clear: "The Rules" didn't hurt Ms. Fein's marriage. Fame did.

"I would say, if you become an overnight international celebrity in three days, have a plan," Ms. Fein declared. "And if you have two children and an adorable husband, have a plan. I had a perfect marriage before that. And you know what? I got very, very tired. The most explosive cult movement ever happened to my little family. Sherrie and I have no workers helping us. I think I took too much upon myself."

While this might sound a bit theatrical -- what is a perfect marriage, anyway? -- Ms. Fein has cause for paranoia; when the press got wind of her separation, one reporter called her home and persuaded her 10-year-old daughter to give out her mother's cell phone number. The children are no longer allowed to answer the phone.

Ms. Schneider, however, seems exempt from the rigors of fame. She has been married for seven years and has a 4-year-old daughter. "My husband has been used to me as a 'Rules' author from Day 1," she said. "Also, when you're newly married, you don't get lax."

"I got lax," Ms. Fein said. Though she used to work as an accountant, she said she had planned on getting a master's degree in social work before she and Ms. Schneider, a former freelance journalist, wrote "The Rules."

"My biggest mistake was that I was too tired for date night," Ms. Fein went on. "Or I was upset if someone yelled at me. I was going to be an M.S.W., sit in a room with one person. Instead, I found myself on TV with people screaming at me. Then I got my kids a puppy, thinking it would make them happy. I overwhelmed myself."

Ms. Schneider said quietly: "I got married older. You grow up, you handle things differently."

Ms. Fein nodded. "I should have gone away and relaxed a couple of weekends," she added. "But then we had to do 'Rules II,' and then Sherrie had a baby. More work piled on me. But 'The Rules for Marriage' will work whether I get divorced or not. It doesn't mean they're not viable. I was just stupid for not doing them."

A man at a nearby table wolfed down some food while his friend stared -- understandably -- at Ms. Fein. Long, tall and blond, she was wearing a black micro-miniskirt, high heels and dangling gold earrings. When she had said earlier, "This is a sad time for everyone," referring to her impending divorce, it made you wonder what she wears when times are good. Ms. Schneider, also dressed in black, though less strikingly, let Ms. Fein do most of the talking, seeming to understand her need to vent. The women have known each other for 20 years and have worked together since 1993. Ms. Schneider writes, Ms. Fein edits. Ms. Schneider handles the bulk of personal phone consultations (\$250 for 30 minutes, \$150 for 15 minutes). She also answers the e-mail, while Ms. Fein answers the regular mail.

The sight of two 20-something women standing at the bar caught their attention. The women were well dressed, but Ms. Schneider soon clucked her disapproval. "She talked to that guy first," she pointed out. "You should never do that, even to ask the time. They blew it. This guy is friendly and responsive, but look, he's just being polite." She was right. The women soon sat down at a table alone.

Back to business. Now that Ms. Fein has identified the problem in her marriage, can't she do something to fix it?

She thought a moment. "It's not that I won't answer the question, I can't," she said slowly. "You can't take words back. You can't undo things that have been done. I can't go into specifics, but today is today."

Ms. Schneider said: "The average woman will see incredible results by using our marriage book. The 'Rules' books are about self-esteem, becoming more attractive to men when you take care of yourself."

"The Rules for Marriage" advances that theme, weaving in courtesy ("Say what you mean, but don't say it meanly") and common sense ("Don't find fault with things you knew about when you married him").

"I find this book moral," Ms. Schneider said. "If someone hurts you, forgive them. I don't believe in revenge. Women say, 'Why do I have to forgive first?' Let it begin with you. Just start, make a beginning. One of the reasons we wrote this book was that women were calling us, saying, 'We have the guy, what do we do now?'"

Critics of the first "Rules" books would say the need for instructions is to be expected, because the women's courtships were based on manipulation and lies, holding back and acting mysterious, baiting the men to chase them.

"We purposely write in the extreme because we know women won't follow it exactly," Ms. Fein said.

Well, how literal should women be when following the rules? The general philosophy behind them is sound enough -- get a life and keep it, even when you meet a man -- but is it realistic to expect a woman, flush with the excitement of falling in love, to set an egg timer for 10 minutes to limit phone conversations with her beloved?

"Look," Ms. Schneider said. "We're not quite sure how literally we mean it. It depends on how bad your last relationship was. But if you take it literally, you will get results."

"The rules originated with a group of friends who met regularly at a Chinese restaurant on the Upper East Side, where they told their dating stories. "It was the 90's but dating hadn't changed," Ms. Fein said.

Ms. Schneider added: "It didn't work for women to be aggressive in their relationships. In our group we had management consultants, Wall Street executives, yet no one could get a guy, forget about keeping him. They asked them out, had sex too soon and didn't know why it wasn't working."

The two single women who had broken the rules at the bar got up from their table and left, somewhat dejectedly. The experts nodded at each other, validated.

"The rules work," Ms. Fein asserted. "If anyone feels they don't, ask out a guy, sleep with him right away, fight all the time and see how far it gets you." She glanced at her watch. "I still believe in 'The Rules for Marriage,'" she said. "If I made a mistake because of the book, so be it. I experienced a perfect marriage. Now I want everyone else to experience it."

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