



# THE *Prince* *Charming* *Myth*

by Sheila Fields

ONCE UPON A TIME, *there was a beautiful princess. “Soon, my daughter, a handsome prince will gallop into your life, sweep you off your feet, and ask your father for your hand in marriage. He’ll take you to his palace where you will be queen of all the land and queen of his heart,” the queen, told her.*



*“Your prince will possess exceptional physical characteristics, extraordinary wisdom and a noble heart. He will be capable of fixing any situation that arises, striving to make sure no sorrows cross your moat. He will always make you happy and life will be bliss once you marry your Prince Charming.”*

*“Is this what life has been like for you and Daddy?” the young princess quietly asked her mother. With tears filling her eyes and unable to speak, the Queen quickly left the bedchamber, muffling a sob. The princess slowly shook her head, climbed into her four-poster bed and fell right to sleep to dream of her Prince Charming.*

What woman wouldn't want to be faithfully loved and tenderly cared for without ever having to worry about anything? But, as the queen seemed to know, life in the real world can be filled with heartache and broken promises. Current statistics show that approximately 50 percent of marriages in America end in divorce. There are 10.1 million single mothers living with children under 18 in the U.S. and while the rate of domestic abuse is a serious issue, only one percent of abusers ever change into someone who even vaguely resembles a Prince Charming.

But where does the Prince Charming myth begin, how does it take hold and what adverse effects can it have in a woman's life?

### What's a Little Girl to Do?

The fairy tale takes hold practically from birth. Little girls' bookshelves are lined with classics like *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* conditioning girls to expect that someday their princes will come and all will be well. The abundance of princess videos, toys and dress-up costumes encourages girls to look beautiful, capture the attention of the perfect guy and live happily ever after.

Roxanne Galyon, a nursery school teacher at Fishkill Baptist Nursery School for more than 20 years, has witnessed the myth in action. "I have often seen 3- and 4-year-old girls in nursery school dress up in long dresses, heels and a crown...pretending to be a princess," she says. "They will pick out a willing boy to be Prince Charming and play out the happily-ever-after role. Imaginative role playing stimulates creative thinking in children, but as a girl grows up it is important that she differentiates between reality and fantasy."

"Women have been duped by the fairy tales we listened to when we were young," says Donna Christensen, author of *Lord, I Need a Hug* (ACW Press, 2001), which recounts her recovery from divorce after 30 years of marriage. "As we grew up, our dreams ran along the line of movies like *The Runaway Bride*. These stories fail to tell women how dangerous it is to look to a man for fulfillment and satisfaction in life. We've bought the lie that happiness depends on the person I married."

Doreen Wilson, a twice-divorced single mother of three from Fishkill, knows the cost of buying into the myth. "As I grew up, one of my goals [were] to get married and live happily ever after. I tried to conform myself into someone I wasn't in order to make it work. But I could never get the puzzle pieces to fit together into a pretty picture. It was a recipe for disaster that impacted me emotionally, physically and financially and made me feel I had failed myself, my children and the marriage," she says.

### The "Daddy Factor"

A more serious childhood issue that affects girls is their relationship with the first man in their lives: dear, old dad.

"Women who were denied attention or affirmation from their fathers are often times attracted to an outwardly charming, attractive or successful man, while on an unconscious level are drawn to some negative trait of his that in some way relates to a negative trait in their fathers," says Christopher C. Ryan, a social worker from Bridges Counseling and Psychotherapy

Group of Dutchess County. This explains why adult daughters of alcoholics marry alcoholic men—men who at the outset may appear positive, charismatic and attractive. There is an "unconscious desire to redo the past, to set things right, to resolve the issue" and to pull to "what is familiar," Ryan adds.

### Lasting Results

Not only are women affected, but others, as well.

"Unrealistic expectations add unnecessary pressure on a relationship," says Rick Gressett from Stormville, a father of three who has been married for 26 years. "No husband wants to let his wife down. Good old Prince Charming sets a bar that is just plain out of reach for most of us guys."

Banking on a happily ever after with no bumps along the way can lead a woman into a life of disillusionment, disappointment and bitterness which can also have consequences for the next generation. Galyon suggests that for parents it is important to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

"When reading a fairy tale, be sure to ask questions to help youngsters clarify what is real and what's a story," she says. "As young girls reach dating age, it is important to explain to them that good relationships require nurturing. They don't just magically happen. Just like anything else, one needs to work at it to succeed."

Charming behavior, which can be employed to win the girl of one's dreams, can often cover minor faults, a hot temper or bad habits, or even, as Gressett points out to his daughters, "pure deception on the part of the guy."

Ryan says that women who want to break free of the seduction and repetition of the myth must first focus on their own background to uncover and negate the invalidating messages they received in childhood. A believer in "conscious relationships" that include the healing of childhood wounds, growing to full potential and all parties feeling safe and secure, it is possible, he adds, for a woman to see the truth and have healthy future relationships via counseling and other resources such as Imago Therapy. Developed by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., Imago theorizes that people unconsciously choose a partner who has traits (both good and bad) that are similar to his or her parents, giving that partner the potential to help heal unresolved childhood pain.

Women who have fallen hard for Prince Charming can regroup by guarding their hearts in the beginning of a new relationship while keeping their eyes open and feet firmly planted in reality.

"Living happily ever after is the largest fallacy in the Prince Charming concept," Gressett says. "Women need to remember that none of the stories mention that the prince puts on a couple of extra pounds, starts snoring at night, is working 10 hours a day to put food on the table and as a result gradually stops with the flowers, sunset walks, all-night chats, and weekends in the Catskills."

"God created man—a mere mortal with flaws and imperfections—not a white knight in shining armor," Galyon adds. ■

*Sheila Fields is a writer who shares her castle with three teenage princes in Wappingers Falls. This is her first article for Tri-County Woman magazine.*