Walter Kirn

Walter Kirn is an American novelist, literary critic, and essayist. He is known for his latest memoir *Lost in the Meritocracy: The Undereducation of an Overachiever* (2009), and his novels *Up in the Air* (2001) and *Thumbsucker* (1999). This article was originally published in *Time* magazine in 2000.

One afternoon when Joanne was nine years old she came home from school and noticed something missing. Her father’s jewelry box had disappeared from its usual spot on her parents’ bureau. Worse, her mother was still in bed. “Daddy’s moved out,” her mother told her. Joanne panicked. She began to sob. And even though Joanne is 40 now, a married Los Angeles homemaker with children of her own, she clearly remembers what she did next that day. Her vision blurred by tears, she searched through the house that was suddenly not a home for the jewelry box that wasn’t there.

Time heals all wounds, they say. For children of divorce like Joanne, though, time has a way of baring old wounds too. For Joanne, the fears that her parents’ split unleashed—of abandonment, of loss, of coming home one day and noticing something missing from the bedroom—deepened as the years went by. Bursts of bitterness, jealousy and doubt sent her into psychotherapy. “Before I met my husband,” she remembers, “I sabotaged all my other relationships with men because I assumed they would fail. There was always something in the back of my head. The only way I can describe it is a void, unfinished business that I couldn’t get to.”

For America’s children of divorce—a million new ones every year—unfinished business is a way of life. For adults, divorce is a conclusion, but for children it’s the beginning of uncertainty. Where will I live? Will I see my friends again? Will my mom’s new boyfriend leave her too? Going back to the early ’70s—the years that demographers mark as the beginning of a divorce boom that has receded only slightly despite three decades of hand wringing and worry—society has debated these children’s predicament in much the same way that angry parents do: by arguing over the little ones’ heads or quarreling out of earshot, behind closed doors. Whenever concerned adults talk seriously about what’s best for the children of divorce, they seem to hold the discussion in a setting—a courtroom or legislature or university—where young folks aren’t allowed.

That’s changing. The children are grown now, and a number are speaking up, telling stories of pain that didn’t go away the moment they turned 18 or even 40. A cluster of new books is fueling a backlash, not against divorce itself but against the notion that kids somehow coast through it. Stephanie Staal’s *The Love They Lost* (Delacorte Press), written by a child of divorce, is part memoir and part generational survey, a melancholy volume about the search for love by kids who remember the loss of love too vividly. *The Case for Marriage* by Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher (Doubleday) emphasizes the positive, arguing that even rocky marriages nourish children emotionally and practically.

The most controversial book, comes from Judith Wallerstein, 78, a therapist and retired lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (Hyperion) she argues that the harm caused by divorce is graver and longer lasting than we suspected. Her work raises a question that some folks felt was settled back in the days of *Love, American Style*: Should parents stay together for the kids?
Listening to children from broken families is Wallerstein’s lifework. For nearly three decades, in her current book and two previous ones, she has compiled and reflected on the stories of 131 children of divorce. Based on lengthy, in-depth interviews, the stories are seldom happy. Some are tragic. Almost all of them are as moving as good fiction. There’s the story of Paula, who as a girl told Wallerstein, “I’m going to find a new mommy,” and as a young woman—too young, it turned out—impulsively married a man she hardly knew. There’s Billy, born with a heart defect, whose parents parted coolly and amicably but failed to provide for his pressing medical needs.

It’s the rare academic who can make a reader cry. Maybe that’s why, with each new installment, Wallerstein’s study has created shock waves, shaping public opinion and even the law. Her attention-getting style has proved divisive. For experts in the field of family studies (who tend to quarrel at least as bitterly as the dysfunctional clans they analyze), she’s a polarizing figure. To her admirers, this mother of three and grandmother of five, who has been married to the same man for 53 years, is a brave, compassionate voice in the wilderness. To her detractors, she’s a melodramatic doomsayer, a crank.

What drew someone from such a stable background to the study of marital distress? At the end of the 1960s, Wallerstein, whose Ph.D. is in clinical psychology, moved from Topeka, Kans., in the ho-hum heartland, to swinging California. “Divorce was almost unheard of in the Midwest,” she recalls. Not so on the Gold Coast, the state had just passed its pioneering no-fault divorce law. Wallerstein took a job consulting at a large community mental-health center in Marin County just as the social dam began to crack. “We started to get complaints,” she says, “from nursery school teachers and parents: ‘Our children are having a very hard time. What should we do?’”

The prevailing view at the time, she says, was that divorce was no big deal for kids. So much for the power of positive thinking. “We began to get all these questions,” Wallerstein remembers. “The children were sleepless. The children in the nursery school were aggressive. They were out of control.” When Wallerstein hit the library for answers, she discovered there were none. The research hardly existed, so she decided to do her own. She had a hunch about what she would learn. “I saw a lot of children very upset,” she says, “but I fully expected that it would be fleeting.”

Her hunch was wrong. Paradise for kids from ruptured families wasn’t easily regained. Once cast out of the domestic garden, kids dreamed of getting back in. The result more often than not was frustration and anxiety. Children of divorce suffer depression, learning difficulties and other psychological problems more frequently than those of intact families. Some of Wallerstein’s colleagues, not to mention countless divorced parents, felt they were being guilt-tripped by a square. They didn’t want to hear this somber news.

Now, decades later, some still don’t want to hear her. For parents, her book’s chief finding, to be sure, is hardly upbeat or very reassuring: children take a long time to get over divorce. Indeed, its most harmful and profound effects tend to show up as the children reach maturity and struggle to form their own adult relationships. They’re gun-shy. The slightest conflict sends them running. Expecting disaster, they create disaster. “They look for love in strange places,” Wallerstein says. “They make terrible errors of judgment in whom they choose.”

Marcie Schwalm, 26, a Bloomington, Ill., legal secretary whose parents split when she was four, illustrates Wallerstein’s thesis well. As a young woman she couldn’t seem to stick with the same boyfriend. “I thought guys were for dating and for breaking up with a few weeks
later,” she says. “I would go into a relationship wondering how it was going to end.” Finally, Marcie says, a college beau told her she had a problem. She’s married now, and her feelings about divorce have a hard-line, 1950s tone: “Divorce is not something I am going to go through. I would do whatever it takes to keep the marriage together.”

Kristina Herrndobler, 17, isn’t so sure that harmony can be willed. Now a high school student in Benton, Ill., she too was four when her parents called it quits. She says she has no memories of the trauma, just an abiding skepticism about marriage and a resolve to settle for nothing less than the ideal man. “I don’t want my kids to wind up in a single-parent situation,” she says. “And I don’t want to have kids with a man I don’t want to be married to forever. I don’t believe in the fairy tale. I hope it exists, but I really don’t believe it does.”

And therein lies another problem, according to Wallerstein: the belief, quite common in children of divorce, that marriage is either a fairy tale or nothing. These jittery, idealistic children tend to hold out for the perfect mate—only to find they have a very long wait. Worse, once they’re convinced they’ve found him, they’re often let down. High romantic expectations tend to give way, Wallerstein reports, to bitter disillusionments. Children from broken families tend to marry later, yet divorce more often than those from intact homes.

So divorce often screws up kids. In itself, this isn’t news, though many experts feel Wallerstein overstates the case. That divorce may screw them up for a long, long time and put them at risk for everything from drug abuse to a loveless, solitary old age is more disturbing—and even more debatable. Christy Buchanan, a professor of psychology at Wake Forest University and co-author of Adolescents After Divorce (Harvard), is typical of Wallerstein’s detractors. “I think the main drawback of the sort of research she does is that you can’t necessarily generalize it to a broad population,” Buchanan says. “The other caution I would put forth is that she has a group of divorced families but no comparison group of nondivorced families. [Perhaps in response to this longstanding complaint, Wallerstein also interviewed children of intact marriages for her new book.] There’s some good research suggesting that many of the problems that have been attributed to divorce in children were actually present prior to the divorce.” Not rigorous enough. Too gloomy. Those are the leading raps against Wallerstein. Paul Amato, a sociology professor at Penn state, has researched divorce and children for 20 years, casting the sort of wide statistical net that hardheaded academics favor and Wallerstein eschews as too impersonal. While Amato agrees with her about divorce’s “sleeper effect” on children—the problems that crop up only after they’re grown—he finds her work a bit of a bummer. “It’s a dismal kind of picture that she paints,” he says. “What most of the large-scale, more scientific research shows is that although growing up in a divorced family elevates the risk for certain kinds of problems, it by no means dooms children to having a terrible life.”

And what about children raised from the start by single moms? Last month, TIME ran a story about the challenges faced by single women having children of their own. But in all the coverage about how those women are coping, the impact on the kids is sometimes underplayed—and their issues are not that different from those of kids from divorced households. “Some studies have directly compared children who were raised by mothers who are continuously single with mothers who went through a divorce,” says Amato. “In general, the outcomes for children seem to be pretty similar. It appears to increase the risk for some types of problems: in conduct, in school, in social relations. Neither one appears to be optimal for children.”
Besides her conclusions on children’s long-term prospects following divorce, Wallerstein makes another major point in her book—one that may result in talk-show fistfights. Here it is: children don’t need their parents to like each other. They don’t even need them to be especially civil. They need them to stay together, for better or worse. (Paging Dr. Laura!) This imperative comes with asterisks, of course, but fewer than one might think. Physical abuse, substance addiction and other severe pathologies cannot be tolerated in any home. Absent these, however, Wallerstein stands firm: a lousy marriage, at least where the children’s welfare is concerned, beats a great divorce.

Them’s fighting words.

The shouting has already started. Family historian Stephanie Coontz, author of The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (Basic), questions the value of papering over conflicts for the kids’ sake. Sure, some parents can pull it off, but how many and for how long? “For many couples,” Coontz says, “things only get worse and fester, and eventually, five years down the road, they end up getting divorced anyway, after years of contempt for each other and outside affairs.”

Coontz doesn’t believe in social time travel. She doesn’t think we can go back to Leave It to Beaver after we’ve seen Once and Again. Unlike Wallerstein, whose investigation is deep but rather narrow (the families in her original study were all white, affluent residents of the same Northern California county, including non-working wives for whom divorce meant a huge upheaval), Coontz takes a lofty, long view of divorce. “In the 1940s the average marriage ended with the death of the spouse,” Coontz says. “But life expectancy is greater today, and there is more potential for trouble in a marriage. We have to become comfortable with the complexity and ambiguity of every family situation and its own unique needs.”

That’s just a lot of fancy, high-flown talk to Wallerstein and her followers. Ambiguity doesn’t put dinner on the table or drive the kids to soccer practice or save for their college education. Parents do. And parents tend to have trouble doing these things after they get divorced. In observing what goes wrong for kids when their folks decide to split, Wallerstein is nothing if not practical. It’s not just the absence of positive role models that bothers her, it’s the depleted bank accounts, the disrupted play-group schedules, the frozen dinners. Parents simply parent better, she’s found, when there are two of them. Do kids want peace and harmony at home? Of course. Still, they’ll settle for hot meals.

Wallerstein didn’t always feel this way. Once upon a time, she too believed that a good divorce trumped a bad marriage where children were concerned. “The central paradigm now that is subscribed to throughout the country,” says Wallerstein, “is if at the time of the breakup people will be civil with each other, if they can settle financial things fairly, and if the child is able to maintain contact with both parents, then the child is home free.” Wallerstein helped build this mode, she says, but now she’s out to tear it down. “I’m changing my opinion,” she says flatly.

The family-values crowd is pleased as punch with Wallerstein’s change of heart. Take David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values. “There was a sense in the ’70s especially, and even into the ’80s, that the impact of divorce on children was like catching a cold: they would suffer for a while and then bounce back,” he says. “More than anyone else in the country, Judith Wallerstein has shown that that’s not what happens.” Fine, but does this oblige couples to muddle through misery so that Johnny won’t fire up a joint someday or dump his girlfriend out of insecurity? Blankenhorn answers with the sort of certainty one
expects from a man with his imposing title. “If the question is, If unhappily married parents
stay together for the sake of their kids, will that decision benefit their children?, the answer is
yes.”

We can guess how the moral stalwarts will answer such questions. What about ordinary
earthlings? Virginia Gafford, 56, a pet-product saleswoman in Pawleys Island, S.C., first
married when she was 19. The marriage lasted three years. She married again, had a second
child, Denyse, and divorced again. Denyse was 14. She developed the classic symptoms.
Boyfriends jilted her for being too needy. She longed for the perfect man, who was nowhere
to be found. “I had really high expectations,” says Denyse. “I wanted Superman, so they
wouldn’t do what Dad had done.” Denyse is in college now and getting fine grades, but her
mother still has certain regrets. “If I could go back and find any way to save that marriage,
I’d do it,” she says. “And I’d tell anyone else to do the same.”

For Wallerstein and her supporters, personal growth is a poor excuse for dragging the little
ones through a custody battle that just might divide their vulnerable souls into two neat,
separate halves doomed to spend decades trying to reunite. Anne Watson is a family-law
attorney in Bozeman, Mont., and has served as an administrative judge in divorce cases. She
opposes tightening divorce laws out of fear that the truly miserable—battered wives, the
spouses of alcoholics—will lose a crucial escape route. But restless couples who merely
need their space, in her opinion, had better think twice and think hard. “If people are
divorcing just because of choices they want to make, I think it’s pretty tough on the kids,”
Watson says. “Just because you’re going to feel better, will they?”

That, of course, is the million-dollar question. Wallerstein’s answer is no, they’ll feel worse.
They’ll feel worse for quite a while, in fact, and may not know why until they find
themselves in court, deciding where their own kids will spend Christmas. It’s no wonder
Wallerstein’s critics find her depressing.

Does Wallerstein’s work offer any hope or guidance to parents who are already divorced?
Quite a bit, actually. For such parents, Wallerstein offers the following advice: First, stay
strong. The child should be assured that she is not suddenly responsible for her parents’
emotional well-being. Two, provide continuity for the child, maintaining her usual schedule
of activities. Try to keep her in the same playgroup, the same milieu, among familiar faces
and accustomed scenes. Lastly, don’t let your own search for new love preoccupy you at the
child’s expense.

Her chief message to married parents is clear: Suck it up if you possibly can, and stick it out.
But even if you agree with Wallerstein, how realistic is such spartan advice? The experts
disagree. Then again, her advice is not for experts. It’s directed at people bickering in their
kitchen and staring up at the ceiling of their bedroom. It’s directed at parents who have
already divorced and are sitting alone in front of the TV, contemplating a second try.

The truth and usefulness of Wallerstein’s findings will be tested in houses and apartments, in
parks and playgrounds, not in sterile think tanks. Someday, assuming we’re in a mood to
listen, millions of children will give us the results.

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