



Better Food for a Better World

Erin McGraw

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Ideals and reality collide when six college friends band together to start an ice cream store, promising "Better Food for a Better World," but finding a worse world than they had expected.

It seems like a great idea: six friends from college pool their money and energy to start an ice cream store. Natural High Ice Cream: Better Food for a Better World. It's high-minded, with a wink, like the marital self-help group they all belong to. The store finds a ready clientele in its northern California college town filled with amiable ex-hippies who are happy to contribute to a better world, even if all they have to contribute is the price of an ice cream cone.

But the store, like the marriage group, turns out to be work, not fun, and rifts start to appear between the friends. Nancy, who had seemed so easygoing and sweetly sexy when they started, turns stern. Cecilia, who had wanted to be a musician, is openly bored. And flighty, excitable Vivy is crawling out of her skin. She yearns for the old days, before Natural High, when she and her husband Sam traveled around the country with countercultural musicians and dancers. She'd give anything to have those days back again.

And so quietly, without telling the partners, she starts to rev up the old company, contacting her old acts--the fat contortionist, the muscle-bound juggler. She's going to save them all, and Natural High, too. But saving turns out to be harder than it looks, and Vivy isn't the only one with secrets.

Better Food for a Better World Details

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From Reader Review Better Food for a Better World for online ebook

J. Bill says

I first "met" Erin McGraw via her short story collection *Lies of the Saints*. I was browsing through Eighth Day Books (one of the best independent bookstores in the universe) and came across this quirky title (I'm a sucker for quirky titles -- among other things). I snatched it up and read it straight through. I read it again -- hooked by McGraw's lively writing, intriguing characters, and stories with a twist.

I've read everything by her since.

So I was delighted to hear that she had a new novel out -- *Better Food for a Better World*. My delight has not dissipated after reading it. McGraw continues to be a first rate writer and she's well able to sustain a novel.

The premise doesn't sound all that exciting. Three couples from college pool their financial and emotional resources to start "Natural High Ice Cream" with the goal of providing "Better Food for a Better World." Hey, I don't even like ice cream that much (mostly because I can't eat the real stuff thanks to diabetes). And it hardly sounds "life or death"ish.

But then I didn't count on the "Life Ties" marital un-support group they belong to or chubby contortionists or flirtations over ice cream and wine or... Well, you'll just have to read it to see what other "or"s there are. It truly is a matter of life and death -- just not in the physical way, so much.

McGraw's writing draws you in, up, and over -- just like her lives of these non-saints. They are saint-wanna-be's sort of -- but of the vaguely spiritual, not religious type of saints. They're good people who just can't seem to be good. Just like all of us, they're women and men caught up in the holy ordinary of life and missing both the holiness and the blessing of ordinariness.

Of course, their ordinariness is not most of our ordinarinesses -- few of us book feminist comics, struggle with teaching violin, devise healthy ice cream recipes with Ben & Jerry-ish names, or participate in self-help groups that abound with a certain sarcastic saintliness. But Viyy, Sam, Nancy, Paul, Cecelia and David finally see the blessings of their lives amidst the trials -- and, when they do, help us see our own.

Thanks, Erin!

Frederick says

On the surface, this is a marriage novel with the ups and downs of married couples. The heart of the novel is Viyy, who one day discovers that the appearance of happiness isn't happiness. For stories of marriage, I prefer something a bit angrier, like *The Marriage Plot* or *Freedom*, but instead this is more of a coming of age story in middle age.

Bryan Furuness says

"Nobody likes a smartass" is the old saying, but it's not true, is it? Everyone likes a smartass. Or at least I do. If you do, too, check out this book. It's got the crackling talk and razor-wire wit you'll find in all of McGraw's books, but underneath the spiky surface of the main characters, Sam and Vivy, you'll find real pain, real desire, real and rocky love. The smartassery makes me like them; the way they struggle in a marriage makes me love them.

Adele says

How do you change the world for the better? In Erin McGraw's latest novel, *Better Food for a Better World*, three offbeat young couples believe the answer lies in ice cream—at least in part. These ice cream shop co-owners also put great stock in vocational gifts and artful entertainment, from classical concerts to circus contortionist acts. Loving marital relationships are another healthy element of life they crave, as seen in their membership in an often-awkward couples support group.

The reader is unlikely to be surprised when tensions arise among these entangled pairs. Yet this is a far from a predictable read. These complicated characters hunger for the good and true—for what one character calls “the real thing.” They will frustrate you as they chase rightness in the wrong ways. They will also charm you as they painfully change themselves for the better. Thanks to McGraw's superb ear for sharply funny dialogue, they will even make you laugh.

-- from <http://wp.me/p12w21-ua>

Hannah Notess says

The writing is really excellent.

J.A.A. Purves says

An enjoyable read about three married couples who have somehow been taught to think about their lives and marriages in a string of cliches and truisms. By the time you're halfway through the book, you suddenly realize that you are reading one of the most fascinating and unique take-downs of a marriage "support group" that you've ever heard of.

The mottos and slogans and buzzwords start to take on an oppressive and almost dictatorial tone. The characters actually think in these slogans. Then, a few of them realize that they are thinking in cliches. Then they start to find this fact alarming. The progression is a pleasure to watch unfold and the results are somehow refreshing.

Juliana Gray says

A very funny sendup of marriage, new agers, and California in general. The Life Ties marriage support group (kind of an AA for straying spouses, complete with platitudes and bad coffee) made me laugh at the same time I ground my teeth in irritation at the characters' well-intended meddling. But the novel isn't just satire; the characters are full of life, and their problems are quite moving. Highly recommended!

Laura says

It's a hot day at the ice cream shop co-owned by three married couples and unspoken tensions are starting to surface. Let me just say it this way: the oil was already sizzling when I opened the book, and before I knew it, kernels were popping. Tensions between Vivy and her spouse, her business partner, and her stifled ambitions start bursting to life within the first few pages and the momentum of all these conflicts is what drives the story forward until the very satisfying last page.

For me, this novel ranks up there as one of the most intimate, true-feeling portrayals of a marriage I've ever read. To be clear, I've never experienced the kinds of betrayal or tension that these three marriages endure, but I recognized in this story the vivid life that marriage takes on. Marriage is more than the sum of two people, it becomes its own entity that is larger than either partner and can't be dismantled by either partner single-handedly (or by an outside force. Especially by an outside force). I'd try to describe McGraw's insights on marriage in more depth, but I fear I'd have to resort to one of the corny mottoes from the Life Ties group all the characters belong to, mottoes they all seem to secretly believe in even as they smirk at them. (A very clever authorial trick, I thought.)

Mainly, I just liked Vivy. I understood her even if I'm not nearly as ambitious and selfish and secretive as she was. I loved that the narrative described how she took her own secret pleasure in having the upper hand in her marriage at moments. I mean, don't we all have those moments where we know we've got him right where we want him? And then just when I thought she might play her trump card, she recognizes the unique privileges of being married to Sam--the inside jokes, the shared history, the way they've come to interpret the world together--and in doing so, she reveals her tenderness towards him.

That said, I was haunted throughout the book by how little concern either of them showed for their children--apparently ages 7 and 10, far too young to have parents who are that self-involved and absent. I wonder if Erin McGraw doesn't have kids? I kept thinking "Wait, Sam is at work and Vivy is driving up the coast and WHO IS WATCHING THE KIDS??" Perhaps this is just a sign that I've been stuck at home caring for my kids for too long and that is basically all I think about is "WHO IS WATCHING THE KIDS?"

I hate to oversell the book because I really came to it with almost no expectations. I don't even remember why I checked it out. But it is the kind of book I feel fortunate to have found and read, so I can't help wanting to pass it on to others.

Kara says

I quit on this book. Just couldn't get into it.

Tori Kline says

Just couldn't really seem to get into this book. It didn't start off with a plot that caught my attention. I didn't end up finishing it, but really couldn't get through it after the first four chapters.

Jane says

The plot, as described, seems silly: six college friends, who have assembled themselves into three couples, open an ice cream store in El Campo, California to earn a living while propagating their values. (These values -- like "The Boat of Commitment Can Sail Over the Waters of Uncertainty" -- are printed on their store napkins.) More than 10 years into their shared enterprise, things look fragile, with their dedication to the store and with the marriages. The novel takes place over several months time, in which work and marriage ties are observed minutely by the narrator. Another reviewer likened this novel to a Jane Austen one, and that seems apt to me. Erin McGraw is really good at describing the complex ways people relate, through both talk and action. The moral compass of the book is Vivy, who is married to Sam and wants out of the ice cream store for sure and possibly from marriage, too. Other strong characters (although lesser) are Sam himself, and also another couple Cecilia and David. (The third couple, Nancy and Paul, are minor -- more foils and provocateurs than anything else.)

I really enjoyed this novel. The chapters on the main story are punctuated by little scenes from a weekly marriage-encounter group that the three couples attend faithfully, and the group meetings seem both absurd and necessary for the people who go to them. Although there was nothing earth-shaking about the novel itself (all the surprises, though enjoyable, are small ones), I found the ending to be unexpectedly profound, and both pragmatic and hopeful.

Pat Morris says

New author introducing the complicated relationships between couples that partner in a small business. A bit slow in the beginning, but ended up being a great story.
