

Popular Culture and Mass Media Myths

The following Mass Media Love Quiz is based on the research of "Dr. Fun," otherwise known as Dr. Mary-Lou Galician of Arizona State University. This material is copyrighted and all rights are reserved. Answer True or False to each statement to indicate your own personal belief:

- 1 There's such a thing as "love-at-first-sight."
- 2 Your true "soulmate" should KNOW what you're thinking or feeling (without your having to tell).
- 3 If your partner is truly "meant for you," sex is easy and wonderful.
- 4 The man should NOT be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than the woman.
- 5 Men do not expect the real women in their lives to look like centerfolds.
- 6 The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a "beast" into a "prince."
- 7 'All we really need is love," so it doesn't matter if you and your lover have different values.

Romantic love is often part of the story line on soap operas, such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*. While such stories can be fun to watch, they can also lead to unrealistic expectations of love and real romantic



- 8 The right mate "completes you" by filling your needs and making your dreams come true.
- 9 In real life, actors are often very much like the romantic characters they portray.
- 10 Since mass media portrayals of romance aren't "real," they don't really affect us.

I hope you answered "FALSE" to ALL the above statements from my "Mass Media Love Quiz," which is based on my research examining what people learn about romantic love from the mass media and how these portrayals affect individuals and couples.

The problem is that while most of us "know" the "right" responses to my Quiz items, we still "believe" the unrealistic ones with those "Boy-Meets-Girl" "Happily Ever After" endings our popular culture presents to us!

In our mass culture, mass media are very powerful socialization agents. From the time we're very young, we're barraged with fairy-tale depictions of romantic love in the popular culture movies and television, books and magazines, recordings and the radio, advertising, and even the news-so we shouldn't feel too badly if we wind up with some unrealistic expectations. Remember, mass media rely on simplifications, distortions of reality, and dramatic symbols and stereotypes to communicate their messages.

Unfortunately, these "false-love" images and scripts of coupleship put undue pressure on BOTH women and men to measure up to *Playboy* Centerfolds and Prince Charmings. Some of these media-constructed unrealistic expectations can even lead to depression and other dysfunctions; several can be downright dangerous. So it's smart to become aware and do something about changing our unhealthy views.

With this in mind, let's look more closely at the mass media myths in my Quiz:

- 1 There's attraction - at - first, but real love takes real time. Too many movies give us the op

posite idea. But they have only two hours to spin their tales. And Madison Avenue advertising has only 30 seconds.

- 2 Mind-readers function only in circuses and romance novels. Romantic partners learn a lot about each other over time, especially if they are open and honest about what they want. Romance novels feed our fantasy of having a perfect relationship without really working at it.
- 3 In real life (unlike in the pages of Playboy and Cosmo), the essential element of love is NOT sex. And as with all intimacy, genuinely good sex takes time, trust, and togetherness.
- 4 Many leading men in movies and television shows have to stand on boxes to appear taller than their leading ladies, thus fitting the "Me-Tarzan, You-Jane" cultural stereotypes that the mass media perpetuate. (And even news anchor "couples" have an older male - younger female duo.) These myths block many potentially wonderful relationships from ever getting started.
- 5 Sadly, while men might not consciously think they are looking for an idealized female form, they frequently do use models and actresses as the standard for their own real-life girlfriends and wives, who cannot help disappointing them (unless they, too, have had the surgical and photographic enhancements that pop culture icons get). And even women's magazines reinforce unhealthy female body images.
- 6 Children who see "Beauty and the Beast" should be warned that Belle's attempts to reform her captor would be most unwise in real life. We cannot change others-especially not abusive "heroes" who have a good heart inside if only the woman can be "good enough" to bring it out. This fallacy underlies much domestic violence.
- 7 Opposites frequently attract-but they don't stay together very long except in mass media mythology. Can you imagine a real-life dinner

party mixing the friends of "Pretty Woman" with her stockbroker boyfriend's? Though rarely demonstrated by the mass media, shared values (not "interests") are what form the basis of lasting romantic relationships.

- 8 Although every "love" song of the popular culture cultivates the "Snow White" impression (her big Disney song was "Someday My Prince Will Come"!), seeing a partner as someone from whom to "take" or "get" (a completer, fixer, or rescuer) is about robbery, not romance. But where's the dramatic conflict in well-adjusted self-sufficient individuals who choose to share their already-full lives?
- 9 Even though few of us would confuse actors and their roles, many men and women are less than satisfied with their real-life romantic partners because they aren't like their idealized image of a celebrity they think they know.
- 10 In my own studies of several hundred Baby Boomers and Generation Xers, I've found that heavier consumers of movies and fashion and fitness magazines tend to have more unrealistic and stereotypical expectations about coupleship (such as "sexual perfectionism" and "mind-reading"), and males and females with these unrealistic beliefs tend to have less satisfaction in their own real romantic relationships. Though we might not be aware of the all-pervasive media culture, we subconsciously incorporate its messages.

Does all this mean we should avoid romantic media entirely?

We can still enjoy the "escape" that romantic media myths offer us, but it's not wise for males or females to use them (or media celebrities) as models. It's much healthier and smarter to make yourself the hero or heroine of your own true romance.

My ultimate advice: "Get real!"