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Book Reviews

The Ann Landers Encyclopedia

Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, N.Y., 1978. 1202 pp., index, \$17.50.

Don Juan would have loved this book. Fans of Ann Landers might consider that an undeserved put-down, and they could make a case for their viewpoint.

The book is a good compendium of general knowledge on many subjects and on problems which trouble many people. It treats — often well — such diverse topics as acne, anorexia nervosa, alcoholism, cancer, cleft lip, drugs, hypnosis, head injuries, self-confidence, posture, procrastination, ulcers, sun lamps, and warts. It has good articles on hyperactivity, hearts and diseases of the heart, widowhood, breast feeding (by Edwina Froehlich of La Leche League), and budgets for married couples. The essays on interfaith marriages by Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish clergymen are lucid and quite objective. Catholics will be surprised to learn that most Jewish and many Protestant congregations are far more restrictive on interfaith marriages than they are. The treatment of child abuse is timely, and the case for gun control is well-documented. The general approach of the book is to have authorities in each field give factual information coupled with common-sense advice.

It is generally known, too, that Ann has, in previous books and articles and in her daily columns, deplored heavy petting, making-out, and easy morals. One of her books is entitled *Teen Age Passion — How to Cool It*. Why, then, line her up on the side of a callous seducer and why concentrate this review primarily on the parts of the book that concern sex, marriage, and the male-female relationship? Answering the second question first, this critique deals mostly with the boy-girl theme because, in the view of her public, that is Ann's forte, and the area in which she is usually consulted. Most people looking for answers on the plethora of other topics treated here would find ready replies from doctors, counselors, ministers, and others close to them. Also, the factual information is, in numerous instances, subject to constant updating, so that much of it will soon be old hat.

Where, then, do we find her lacking in her chosen field? To begin with, her position on many moral matters is either no firm position at all, or else it is contradictory. I will assume that if only one position is given on a particular topic, Ann accepts that position, whoever the writer is. In only two instances are contrasting views given — abortion and homosexuality. It may be significant that the pro-abortion and pro-homosexuality articles are given first. (The anti-abortion article by Father Burtchaell of Notre Dame is very well done.)

The line taken by pro contributors on these two topics and such others as masturbation, oral sex, virginity, and sexual fantasies (by Father Andrew Greeley) are not only contrary to Catholic and much other Judeo-Christian religious teaching, they are often directly opposed to the explicit words of Christ in the Gospels. The article by Father Greeley is perverse and curiously naive. Has he never heard of psychological infidelity or the occasion of sin? Even our modern truncated *Confiteor* scores sins of thought as well as those of deed.

But what of Don Juan's approving of this book? He would not only approve of it, he would learn a new line from it. In her article on virginity, Ann has this to say: "Through the years some of my ideas have changed. Virginity is one of the subjects about which I have done some rethinking. Twenty-five years ago I held the firm conviction that a girl should hang onto her virginity until marriage or death — whichever came first." (The college audiences must love this one-liner.)

She goes on: "I no longer believe this. I am still opposed to high school sex since I believe very few girls under eighteen years of age are emotionally equipped to handle a sexual relationship. If, however, the girl who goes to college (or to work) is mature and has her head together, meets someone with whom she becomes emotionally involved, and if there is a genuine sense of mutual caring, respect, and commitment, it seems to me a physical relationship would not be inappropriate. In fact, for a young, in-love couple nearing twenty years of age, not to express their feelings in this way would be unnatural." That's Ann's considered judgment. The key words are "very few," "mature," and "head together."

The flaws in her thesis are obvious. For one thing, in this ecumenical age, it violates the standards of many religions, including the Catholic — the "fundamental option" and "internal forum" cadres notwithstanding. Perhaps an even stronger objection is that it provides the rationale for doing the very things Ann professes to be against. Healthy girls or boys of 16 or 17, or less, feeling a yen for sex, would readily convince themselves that they are "mature and have their heads together." Also, in many states, a girl can go to work at 16, if this is to be taken as a sign of maturity. Ann's own article on maturity in this volume could be cited even by a bright 12-year-old as proof that he or she possesses it.

There are numerous other deficiencies. One of the articles gives the lie to Ann's own thesis on the possible beneficial effects and maturity of college sex when, in discussing one form of venereal disease, the author says, "When school is in session, in some college towns, the sale of medication for this kind of VD is almost equivalent to that of mouthwash."

In many pieces, there is smugness and an attitude that "this and this only" is the answer to a problem. This is annoying, unscientific, and even anti-intellectual. The bland toleration of oral sex and masturbation are cases in point, as is the position on sex education. With regard to the likely salutary effects of oral sex, doesn't Ann know that some medical circles are really alarmed at the spread of VD related to it? Doesn't she know also that this is a phenomenon now not of the ghetto but of the upper and middle classes? And isn't she aware that the worst name a Jewish business or professional man can apply to a sleazy confrere is the street epithet for one who indulges in just this practice?

With respect to sex education, there are the usual fulminations against "Victorian" ignorance and the pushing of sex education classes as the cure-all for VD, abortion, unwanted pregnancy, marriage breakups, and sex-related crime. As a matter of fact, as sex education has become more prevalent and more explicit in our schools each year, these ills have not decreased but have escalated.

Furthermore, there is in this encyclopedia far too heavy a reliance on psychology and psychiatry. It isn't that these disciplines aren't good and helpful, but that, as used here, they shut out the spiritual as a motivating factor for right conduct. The professional counselor in one field or another seems to be Ann's all but infallible authority on almost everything. Few of these people can even make reference herein to the spiritual, so one can only get the impression that it has little practical value. True, there are many articles by religious leaders, including an inspirational one by Cardinal Cody. However, these cover areas where there is no real conflict with secular values. Nowhere is religion asked or permitted to suggest that spiritual motivation might be applied to help young people master illicit sex urges. In fact, there seems to be no such thing as an illicit sex urge, only an inappropriate age or situation or locale. One is permitted to indulge in sex — almost any kind — provided it is neat and discreet and does not result in emotional hangups or unwanted issue. The mild warnings against it are almost on a par with cautions against eating too many chocolate eclairs or Napoleon slices.

This contrasts oddly with Ann's strident condemnation of smoking. Here there is no question but that youth can be convinced that to continue to smoke is wrong, wrong, wrong. Not so with "sexually active" youth, the current jargon for

youthful license. Ann echoes the thesis that once a youngster has become thus "active," all you can do is see that he/she takes precautions against VD or becoming pregnant. Again, on the subject of smoking, she has a curious ambivalence when it comes to marijuana. Of course she writes against it, but since the article on it says, "It probably carries the same lung risks as would occur with the use of an equivalent number of cigarettes," and since it also cites the often addictive effects, why isn't it, too, wrong, wrong, wrong?

There are other oracular pronouncements in the book that are ill-timed and harmful. In point of numbers, a leading contributor is Eugene Kennedy, the psychologist and former Maryknoller. His eight articles are adequate, and more than that, but in the one on adultery there is this sentence: "It is possible that one can discover through adulterous behavior the first truly generous concern for another that the individual has ever experienced." Often true enough. One can think of many famous instances: William Parnell and Kitty O'Shea, Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton, among others. The point, though, is that this is an insight to be used by a professional counselor or confessor. Trotting it out here for general perusal is foolish and counter-productive. To cite another example in which the Judeo-Christian ethic is undermined, there is Phil Donohue's piece on "When a Father Gets Custody." He says, "If you are involved with a woman and expressing yourself intimately, you are now coming face to face with single parenthood's most distracting problem, whether or not to share the same bedroom. . . . If it (the relationship) ends, how soon can the kids expect you back with another woman? With how many women can you share a bedroom in front of your kids without affecting their moral perception?" The ethical answer is, of course, none — unless you are married — and the kids know that even if Phil doesn't.

Another indictment against this book is the easy use of code words to cover some very unlovely actions: "terminate a pregnancy" for abortion; "sexually active" for promiscuous; "sexual preference" for all manner of aberrations; and "physical relationship" for the earthier but more accurate "shacking up."

A minor disturbing note is that Ann allows, uncharacteristically, one rather cheap shot at Catholics. In the article on divorce, the author says, "Interesting that in 1946, James Curley, the mayor of Boston was re-elected while in jail. Had he been divorced he wouldn't have had a chance." This is just the kind of put-down we now associate only with our Catholic left. To begin with, it isn't true that Curley enjoyed total Catholic support. The clergy in authority in Boston, notably Cardinal O'Connell, were not in his camp, to say the least. Further, he was not re-elected because of or even despite his conviction for corruption. Neither, in more recent times, were Adam Clayton Powell or Representative Diggs. All three men were re-elected because, in the eyes of their co-religionists or fellow blacks, they were, whatever their failings, the champions of their people's rights against an alien establishment. Agreed that their constituents took too narrow a view, but that's how they sincerely saw it.

In addition to the great number of articles by various experts, the book contains many of Ann's own columns. According to her, these are the reruns most requested. Curiously, though, they seem to fall rather flat the second time around. What was pert or trenchant on first reading just seems captious, smug, or glib on rereading. Maybe that's just because news columns, like news stories, go stale quickly.

It is perhaps significant that the word "sin" does not appear in the index, nor, as far as I can recall, in any of the articles. Indeed, if it is in any piece, it must have been given so little credence, or been dismissed so blithely that one would take no note of it.

Truly, Don Juan would have treasured this book. So would Casanova. I don't believe either of them smoked.

— John J. Farrell