



CRAZY LOVE

by Leslie Morgan Steiner

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Conversation with Leslie Morgan Steiner

Why did you decide to tell this story?

Perhaps because I'm a writer who specializes in memoir, it seemed natural for me to tell this story. My first book, *Mommy Wars*, was honest about the realities of motherhood—joyful, horrible, frustrating, exhilarating. *Mommy Wars's* readers encouraged me to tackle my secret of domestic violence, which I had mentioned briefly in the introduction, with the same candor. This gave me the push to finish *Crazy Love*.

It's important to emphasize that even though I'm now comfortable talking openly about being a domestic violence victim, for at least five years after I ended my abusive relationship, I couldn't speak to anyone about it—much less write about it. Reliving the experience was too traumatic. But once I'd remarried and become a mother, I felt secure enough to look back. Why had I loved someone with such destructive tendencies? What could I share about staying clear of "crazy love"? Could I help others understand family violence?

I worked on *Crazy Love*, in various forms, off and on for more than ten years. I imagine I could have kept writing for another fifty years. With an experience as complicated as domestic violence, you are always gaining new insights into what made you vulnerable to abuse.

How have the writing of this book and the retelling of your story affected your relationship with your family?

I've been married to my second husband for over fifteen blissful (okay—mostly blissful) years now. We have three wonderful kids together. I'd never

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have this life if I hadn't learned from the mistakes of my first marriage.

I wouldn't wish a violent relationship on anyone. I don't recommend it as a way to learn about yourself or life. But I am grateful for what I went through because the experience made me wiser about love. You make yourself dangerously vulnerable if you love a romantic partner unconditionally.

I've always been very open with my husband and kids about my first marriage. It's important to talk about family violence—it's common enough that anyone might experience abuse, including our children. Writing *Crazy Love* has led to deeper conversations with my kids and our community of school, neighbors, friends, and relatives. Everyone seems supportive of my need to tell my story.

What's surprised me is the number of family, friends, and colleagues—male and female—who've come forward with stories of abuse they suffered that I never knew about. Emotional abuse, child abuse, elder abuse, teen-dating abuse. My being open and honest opens the door to them letting go of their own shame and secrecy.

Would you go through all that pain and anguish all over again to come out of it the person you've become?

Well—I have to say yes, but only because I'm lucky I wasn't seriously hurt or killed during those years with my ex-husband. Every year, thousands of women and children are killed by family violence. I easily could have been one of them.

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I'm also fortunate I did not have children with my abuser. Often people who batter their partners also abuse their children—it's the same intimacy-and-violence paradigm. Even if the children aren't physically hurt, witnesses to violence are irreparably damaged, and many of them grow up to repeat the cycle of family violence.

I never want to repeat the experience or the risks that I took. But I am very, very grateful that I found a way to leave my abuser and start my life over. And I'm also grateful that, unlike a lot of domestic violence survivors, I'm free to tell my story. I don't have ties to my ex-husband or family or cultural pressure to deny what happened.

What, in your opinion, makes a woman vulnerable to this sort of manipulation?

There is no question I've thought about more deeply in the twenty years since I was abused. I had other problems as a young woman—I grew up in a family with alcohol problems, and experienced anorexia and my own predilection to abuse alcohol and drugs. You might think these problems suggested a certain insecurity or vulnerability. But I recognized and overcame those problems before I met my abusive husband, so those are not clear markers in my mind. Based on over four decades of observing my strong, smart, empowered female friends, basically, I think anyone is vulnerable. We've all got chinks in our self-esteem, right?

An insightful, destructive partner can exploit your insecurities to the point where you are being abused, physically or emotionally, without realizing it. So don't fall in love with an abuser. Sounds



simple—but of course we don’t “choose” who we fall for. It’s nearly impossible to tell the difference between Prince Charming and the dark knight at first.

But by minimizing your other vulnerabilities—by making sure you are economically independent, close to your friends and family, and feeling good about yourself—I believe you minimize the chance that you will stay in love with someone driven to take advantage of you. It’s also critical to recognize a destructive relationship and ask for help and support from friends, relatives, and professionals to end it.

What troubles me is how focused our society is on victims of abuse. It is not that difficult to understand why anyone—women, children, or men (because family violence does sometimes happen to men)—could become trapped in an intimate manipulative relationship.

But why would anyone hurt the people who love them most in the world? Why don’t therapists, researchers, police officers, judges, and legislators ask more questions about the abusers who perpetrate the terrible cycle of family violence? Without abusers, we’d have no abuse. I am 100 percent behind efforts to help victims. But I believe long-term change will come only when the hard questions shift to the perpetrators, rather than the victims, of family violence.

What mistakes do you wish you could undo?

It is important to never, ever ignore red flags in a relationship. Potential batterers are surprisingly predictable. They are talent scouts for vulnerable

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women—almost uncannily so. They are looking for a woman who feels safe to them, a woman who won't hurt them, who won't abandon them. When my husband first spotted me on the New York subway, I think he somehow knew—that I was insecure, and kind, and desperate for intimacy.

Abusive men can be charming, thoughtful, and romantic at first, and wonderfully openhearted and needy. For months my husband did not make a false move. He never threatened me. I never saw him angry. An abuser will never get upset on a first date—their initial goal is to establish a sense of security. Perpetrators wait until you become vulnerable, say by getting engaged, moving in together, quitting a job so he can "take care of you," or getting pregnant. Then the threat of violence is introduced. Perhaps he pounds his fist on a table or punches a wall, or says "if I weren't such a gentleman I'd hit you. . . ." In my case, my husband first threatened me the night we moved in together in New York City, when I no longer had a place to escape to.

If, like me, a woman doesn't balk at the threat of violence, behavior escalates to a pinch or shove or something "mild" that can be dismissed away. Often the abuser takes steps to isolate his victim from friends, colleagues, and family. My husband convinced me to move to rural New England, where I knew no one and worked at home. By this time, my denial and dependence had developed. His first full-blown attack was five days before our wedding. Maybe someone tougher, smarter, stronger would have left him—but I felt like I had no choice but to stay.



As amazing as it sounds, I didn't even know that I was being abused. My denial was that powerful. I thought I was helping him resolve the problems of his childhood; he had been beaten by his stepfather from age four to fifteen. For me, our relationship was about love, not hate. I thought—no, I KNEW—he was my soul mate. I was going to save him. And in return, I thought he'd never leave me. I've since learned this isn't a terribly healthy approach to an intimate relationship.

So my advice is at the first red flag—the first threat of violence or rage—end the relationship. It is the easiest and also the safest time. Because the longer you wait, the more vulnerable you become. Studies show that the most dangerous time in an abusive relationship is when you leave—because when he feels he's lost you already, he has little to lose by killing you. So leave at the first threat of abuse—while you still can. I have met dozens of women who were hit once, and left right away. These women are my heroes. If you stay, the situation ALWAYS gets more complicated and dangerous. I have never heard of a case where a woman was able to help her partner overcome an abusive temperament; a batterer needs qualified professional help and guidance, not romantic love.

If you had a chance to say one thing about abusive relationships to anyone of any age, what would you say?

First, I'd tell them to read *Crazy Love*! I'll never be able to explain in a few words what it is like to be drawn into an abusive relationship, and then after years, to decide to leave. . . . It took an entire book to capture how confusing and complicated the experience was.

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Love is ALWAYS about respect, joy, and kindness. Violence and abuse NEVER play a role in an intimate relationship—with a lover, a parent, a child, or a supposed friend. You are not showing your love by letting someone take out their anger on you. Over time, rage always trumps love. So no matter how much you love someone troubled, get out now. You can start over, no matter how long or how much you have suffered.



Postscript to Crazy Love

Living in a violent relationship, then writing about it in *Crazy Love*, were solitary experiences. For years I was the only one who knew all I'd gone through, the only person who had read what I'd written. My loved ones knew the basic facts of my four-year marriage to an abusive man, but I worried they'd be shocked or shamed by the details in *Crazy Love*. I imagined my husband of fifteen years reading its pages. My mom. My three children. Neighbors. Parents and teachers at my kids' school. Employers and colleagues from work.

I had doubts about unveiling such a personal, destructive love story. Sometimes I feared that my first husband, whom I hadn't heard from in nearly twenty years, might resurface as a result. I certainly did not want to embarrass my young children or endanger their safety. Occasionally I worried about damaging my current marriage—what husband wants his wife to write about another man? At unexpected moments my stomach unzipped as I imagined my daily life without the privacy I'd taken for granted for two decades.

On the eve of St. Martin's Press's deadline for the *Crazy Love* manuscript, I called a half dozen friends—my personal board of directors—from my car outside an elementary school gym where my ten-year-old son was playing in a basketball tournament. In between referee whistles, I asked for one final vote on whether or not to make my story public. I also interrogated my husband for the fiftieth time.

Everyone expressed support for how important writing the book was to me. Every single person voted that I should not publish it.

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*In Her
Own Words*

Too risky. Too intense. Too personal. At the very least, one said, use a pseudonym! Another practically shouted into the phone, "Thank God you've come to your senses!"

I agreed their counsel was wise. I went to bed that night at peace. I would call my editor in the morning to break the news.

Instead I woke up determined, deep in my center of gravity, to tell this crazy love story. I could not articulate to anyone, even myself, why. I swallowed my trepidation and told everyone I was going forward. My husband gamely responded that we'd face together whatever reactions came.

Then the book went on sale. A positive review in *People* magazine, interviews on National Public Radio, and a spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list—serendipitous achievements I'd not anticipated—meant that people across the country knew I'd been a battered wife. Within days I started receiving e-mails from uniquely gifted speed readers. Most got through all 300-plus pages in one sitting. It was exhilarating (and amusing) to hear that in fewer than twenty-four hours, readers had devoured the book that took me ten hard years to write.

During all that time worrying about the impact on family, friends, and myself, I never considered the impact unknown readers might have on *me*.

Although I'd accumulated forty years of books too treasured to give away, I never dreamed of being able to communicate personally with writers who had shaken my psyche, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley, Eudora Welty, Margaret Drabble, Tom Wolfe, and hundreds of others. For most of my life, writing to an author was akin to contacting the Tooth Fairy: you sent a letter care of the pub-

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lisher and then prayed the note would make it through the postal service to an overburdened office mail room, to the right editor, and eventually to the author. A reply was inconceivable.

By contrast, following *Crazy Love*'s publication my in-box brimmed with poignant correspondence from strangers reaching out across the blank air space of the Internet. Hundreds of headlines crying out "You Told My Story" or "I Left Too" or "No Longer Ashamed" popped up again and again. Some were like books themselves—candid, wrenching mini-memoirs from people I might never meet.

The diversity astonished me, although I know firsthand that domestic violence follows no stereotypes. I heard from teenagers—and grandmothers. Fathers worried about daughters. Police officers. Therapists. Doctors. Gay men and straight men who had been battered by lovers. Husbands struggling to understand wives who had been abused long ago. Ivy League graduates and people who could not spell—but could tell their stories beautifully.

These e-mails made me cry. During the decade I wrote and edited *Crazy Love*, I'd often worried that my words weren't good enough, strong enough, powerful enough. That I wasn't a talented enough writer to tell my story effectively. Any lingering shame I might have felt about being abused, or doubt about the importance of sharing my story, was scrubbed clean by strangers' confidence and kindness. This opportunity to connect with readers is the joy of being a writer today.

Now, every time I square my shoulders in front of a podium, a radio mic, or TV camera, I relive the day I decided not to publish *Crazy Love*. As I

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muster the courage to speak, a voice inside asks, "Now, you numb-nut, remind me exactly why you chose to share the humiliating, devastating details about the worst relationship of your life?"

After telling my tale, fresh e-mails flood in—I guess it's easier to divulge a painful secret within the relative anonymity of cyberspace. When the audience is live, at least one man or woman reaches out afterward. They hover until I'm alone, then lean in. "I was abused too," they whisper, because they are more private than I am, or because they've been made to feel more ashamed than I was made to feel. "I got out too," each one confides, ruefully but with pride.

These people always touch me—physically—as if to cement our commonality. But of course the real connection is emotional, as with the people who send e-mails. Every person who has read *Crazy Love* has been with me in that terrible bedroom I shared with my husband, where he beat me one final time and I became convinced I was going to die alone at the hands of the person I thought loved me more than anyone on earth. Readers have changed my story. You've excised the emotional scar tissue that comes from being abused by a loved one. I am no longer alone because of you.

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Recommended Reading

I believe the best memoirs are all survival stories, one way or another. Although the books listed below don't all deal with abuse—and some of them are fiction that read like memoir—as I was tackling *Crazy Love* I found them meaningful and inspirational in their own unique ways.

Lucky
Alice Sebold

Driving with Dead People
Monica Holloway

Miracle in the Andes
Nando Parrado

Ellen Foster
Kaye Gibbons

The Secret Life of Bees
Sue Monk Kidd

The Bitch in the House
Cathi Hanauer

Sarah's Key
Tatiana de Rosnay

Losing Mum and Pup
Christopher Buckley

The Year of Magical Thinking
Joan Didion

Reading
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*Keep On
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Leslie Morgan Steiner opens her book by explaining that as a well-educated, successful woman from a good family, she doesn't "look the part" of a domestic abuse victim. Before reading *Crazy Love*, did you have any preconceptions of what a victim of family violence would look and act like? Did Leslie's memoir change your understanding of these women? And if so, how?
2. Leslie's love for Conor could be considered crazy given how he treated her. And, crazy as it seems, Conor treated her the way he did because he loved her. Not to use the term too carelessly, but aren't we all a bit "crazy" when it comes to love? Why, in the face of logic and reason, do you think women (and men) love at all costs?
3. Take a moment to talk about key scenes involving Conor and Leslie's relationship. Which ones were the most powerful to read? Sad? Scary? Discuss the elements of foreshadowing employed in the narrative as well.
4. For those who've never experienced abuse it can be hard to understand why such a seemingly self-confident woman could have stayed with a person who treated her so badly for so long. How would you explain it? In what ways was this book an eye-opener for you?
5. Discuss your thoughts about Conor. Do you despise him for his behavior? Feel sorry for him (as Leslie did) given his own history of domestic abuse? Is he a criminal? Or psychologically impaired?



6. Take a moment to talk about the other characters in Leslie's life—Winnie, Ed, her parents. How did they help or hinder her survival with Conor? How did their actions contribute to Leslie's becoming the woman she is today?
7. How do you feel now that you've read the conversation with the author in this Gold guide? Are your impressions of her different in any way? How?
8. Per above: Are you still left with further questions about the author—about her past before Conor came along? Her current marriage? Other plans for the future? You can submit them to Leslie if you wish; please see her postscript for contact information. (Author replies not guaranteed.)
9. Leslie is obviously sympathetic toward victims of abuse. But how do you feel about her assertion that we should devote more time, as a society, toward understanding and rehabilitating the abusers?
10. Now that you know Leslie's story—and have learned about how challenging it was for her to tell it—ask yourself (if not the book group): What if that had been me? What would I have done?

*Keep On
Reading*