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Reader Services

Photo by Dan Brownstein

Matchmaker and memoirist Sue Shapiro

The Fixer

Sue Shapiro's knack for setting up lonelyhearts

By Pamela Ryckman

Susan Shapiro nestles into her regular booth at Cozy's Soup & Burger, the diner near her Greenwich Village apartment where she orders a chef salad they call "Sue's salad" from her favorite waiter, an old-timer named George. She seems to know everyone in this place and every third person strolling past the window. "I am very well-known within a 15-block radius," she says.

With her raw, witty memoirs "Five Men Who Broke My Heart" and "Lighting Up" (Delacorte Press), Shapiro established herself as the "queen of confession," unafraid to expose a history of heartbreak, weed, and therapy in print. Yet Shapiro's latest book, "Secrets of a Fix-Up Fanatic: How to Meet and Marry Your Match" (Delta) is decidedly more upbeat.

And on this particular afternoon at Cozy's, it's suddenly clear that this cynical, naughty Villager doubles as a sweet Midwestern yenta.

"You look like a writer," she says to a young hipster fumbling with multiple newspapers at the counter. "Do you write for the L.A. Times?"

Within minutes, she has learned his name, the newspapers he writes for, and the names of his editors, whom she knows. She hands him a promotional card for her book and, since he's cute and single, plans to invite him to one of her singles' parties.

"Wow," he says, looking overwhelmed, caught in Shapiro's maelstrom of energy and spunk. "You're a good promoter without being aggressive."

The Rules

After meeting her husband-to-be through a former boss, Shapiro began her quest to bring others together. So far, she has fixed up twelve marriages, including her brother's, her book editor's, three couples' from her writing group, the singer Lisa Loeb's (on national television), and countless other couples. Based on this track record, "Secrets" exhorts readers to do something "so retro it is revolutionary": Instead of barhopping and using Match.com, put fate in a friend's hands. Being set up, Shapiro reminds us, is the "oldest, cheapest, fastest, safest and nicest route" to love.

While mainstream in theme and packaging, "Secrets" may be less of a departure for Shapiro than it appears. Like her memoirs, "Secrets" divulges lessons learned on the couch and includes personal anecdotes about Shapiro's own dating pitfalls. She charts her path to the altar at age 35 and examines what has made her ten-year union with a TV/film writer last, though she initially dismissed him as not her "type." It's the success of her marriage that has made her both a believer in matchmaking and qualified to advise others. "I don't want to be a relationship expert who can't have



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Shapiro counsels readers to find the best raw material and then negotiate the incidentals, a strategy that worked for her and her mate. Shapiro's husband, for instance, hated her heavy smoking, and she would have preferred a slimmer man. So to help Shapiro quit without weight gain, he agreed to banish junk food from their apartment. He dropped 60 pounds in the process, and each was suddenly more desirable to the other. "Like I say in my book, you can buy him new shoes, but not a new heart," she says.

Shapiro professes to be "a raging feminist who loves men and marriage." She bristles when female contemporaries dress down and feel the need to act commanding and confrontational early in a relationship; even Shapiro, a literary tell-all who prefers sweat pants to skirts, advocates wearing lipstick and saving some neuroses for the third date. She believes that many strong, intelligent, attractive women fail in relationships because they "stand on ceremony. They say 'I'm not going to play games' and they don't dress up and they pretend it's all about being themselves, but really they're afraid to get close to someone."

And in case the ladies haven't noticed, Shapiro has identical advice for men: Take off the baseball cap and sneakers. Shave. Make yourself presentable. Pretend you're on a job interview or trying to get a bank loan. "A blind date could be the most important interview of your life," Shapiro smiles.

Changing Subjects

Shapiro insists it wasn't hard to change her narrative voice for this book. For her, shifting tones — in this case, from feisty to friendly — really is as easy as changing outfits. On book jackets for "Five Men" and "Lighting Up," she appears in a tight, black, low-cut dress on a rooftop overlooking Manhattan, the sex kitten with the world at her feet. "Secrets" features a close-up of the author smiling amiably, arms folded over a conservative white button-down. She could be your best friend, the woman you love or want to be.

There are also elements of self-help in her previous memoirs. After reading "Lighting Up," addicts often approach her for advice or for a referral to her addiction therapist. And one day, Shapiro found herself searching for "Five Men" in a Borders bookstore, first in Biography, then in Romance. When she found it in the Self-Help section next to "Women Who Love Too Much," she marched up to a clerk and demanded to know why. "You win a guy, you lose a guy, you win a guy, you lose a guy. That's self-help," he laughed.

"Both books led very easily to self-help. A lot of my writing is born from therapy and is about a different obsession of mine," Shapiro says. Now that she's substance-free and married, a self-described "die-hard romantic optimist," her focus has moved past her own relationships to others'. Shapiro is fixated on fixing people up.

Still, she confesses initial wariness in venturing into self-help territory. She had other ideas she thought were smarter. "I feared if I died tomorrow I'd be leaving the world a Cosmo article," Shapiro says. But she got around this by working simultaneously on another book, at whose subject she'll merely hint. In it, Shapiro says, she eschews "Secrets" lighter fare for something "smart, esoteric, and not commercial."

Both books are complementary, and reflective of Shapiro's own personal yin/yang — the neurotic, New York intellectual and the nice Jewish girl from Michigan, whose parents' 52-year marriage she celebrates in her dedication. "As much as I get off on being the dark Villager, I want to play in Peoria," she says.

Sue Shapiro will be reading with another Villager, Marci Alboher, March 29 at 7 p.m. at Borders, 10 Columbus Circle. Find more information about her writing classes and upcoming readings at Susanshapiro.net.
