

**EPISODE 1188**

[INTRODUCTION]

“**JB:** If you put the success of prioritization on marrying a guy who went to an Ivy League school and he works for Goldman Sachs, you could be waiting forever.”

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**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Hope you had a great weekend. It is Monday, April, 19<sup>th</sup>, and the topic today is love, love and money, whether you're married, single, dating, not interested. I think you'll find this conversation with our guest, John Birger, very exciting, very interesting. You may think dating is not really a money topic, but it kind of is. Who we choose to partner up with has financial implications. John Birger is the author of *Make Your Move*, which is the sequel to his original book on dating called *Date-onomics*. In this book he talks about the new signs of dating and why women are in charge. If you haven't noticed, society is changing, which means it is time for dating to evolve. “Millennial and Gen Z women are more than capable of seeking out what and who they want,” says John Birger. But there is an economic situation at play. There are more young, single college educated women out there and a shrinking supply of men whom they feel are their “equals.” We do talk about the definition of equal. How that should or may already be evolving. Who not to date? And are all these dating apps worth our time? Here's John Birger.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** John Birger, welcome back to So Money. Still talking about dating. You're liking this topic a lot.

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**JB:** Well, I guess so. I had to do something different. I can't write about five stocks to buy now forever, right?

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**FT:** No. I think there is a shelf life for that. By the way, I don't know, for listeners who didn't catch you on *So Money* the first time, they don't know our backstory. You and I worked together all those years ago doing those mutual fund stories and stock picking stories at *Money Magazine* in the early 2000s. And so it's really –

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**JB:** I think you were essentially across the cubicle from me, right?

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**FT:** Yes. Yes. And what a place to work. I always say, I got a chance to really rub shoulders with some of the best in class and learned so much from you and all the senior writers at *Money* who are now doing even more amazing things. Your last book, you were on here talking about *Dateonomics: How Dating Became a Lopsided Numbers Game*. Your follow-up to that is a book called *Make Your Move*. This is what *Publishers Weekly* describes as an honest solution-based guide to finding love that lasts. If you're tired of playing by old rules, look no further. Make your move and win.

What are the new rules, John? And I have a feeling that women are making a lot of the rules.

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**JB:** Yeah. I mean, can I just back up a little bit and just tell you like a little bit of the origin story of the new book? Is that okay?

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**FT:** Yes, please.

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**JB:** As you may recall with *Date-onomics*, that book was like more pop science than an advice book. I was trying to explain why dating had become so hard for college educated women, and the simple version or the boiled down version is that for the past 20, 30 years we've had four women graduate from college for every three men. W we now have this very lopsided dating pool in which because men are scarce so to speak, that men seem to have the upper hand. But with the first book I was just interested in exploring the origins of this curiosity. Why it is that women seem to have a harder time with dating. But when I got out on book tour, and I'm sure this will be no surprise to you, the knowledge is power thing really wasn't enough. Like women would say, "Okay. I get it. I feel better that it's not all in my head that it is really hard out there." But they still kind of wanted me to offer them advice and how to fix their love lives.

And you know me from way back when. I never like thought of myself as the love doctor. Yeah, I didn't – This wasn't like part of the way I conceptualized the first book, but perhaps I should have, and I kind of have some regrets for not kind of trying to solve the dating problem as opposed to just explaining it.

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**FT:** But it does merit its own book. Would you agree? Like you can't squeeze that in. You got to really dedicate –

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**JB:** I guess, but I kind of had this realization when I was on book tour with *Date-omics* that everybody who came to my book event still wanted me to tell them what to do now. I didn't have any skin in the game because like I got married in my mid-20s. I'm a guy. I didn't realized – I treated this as a topic that was kind of impersonal to me. And obviously a woman who intended on getting married and starting a family and struggling with dating, this is not an impersonal

subject. It's very personal. And for me to write a book that doesn't really offer strategies and solutions, which *Date-onomics* did not, in hindsight I realized that was in some ways unfair.

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**FT:** Well, you're right. It is a very subjective area of advice. But you do have some really great –

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**JB:** In the new book I do. Yes.

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**FT:** You do. You do. And I really appreciate in some ways the way that you encourage readers to rethink some of perhaps traditional things that they assumed about marriage. One being, for example, if you're a woman who is determined to be career-driven and be financially independent, like your 20s should really be dedicated to achieving that and pursuing that. I was given that advice from my immigrant parents who I wasn't even allowed to tell them if I had a boyfriend in high school. And then suddenly like I turned 30 and my mother was like, "Are you going to get married?" And I was like, "Wait. Wait. Wait. You told me never to date. I don't understand what you want me to do." I feel like my story is not singular in that way. We got a lot of that advice I think in my generation. And you're telling us now that we shouldn't be so black or white about it. Shouldn't be about like reaching 30 and then suddenly focusing on marriage.

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**JB:** Yeah. I mean, the advice you got is what I hear all the time from single women. This notion that career and grad school or education has to come first. And then if you wait until you're 30 to get serious about dating, you'll be kind of more emotionally prepared, financially prepared for marriage and parenthood, and maybe your guys will be more prepared for that too. And I kind of understand the logic, but the problem is, particularly if you want to marry a college educated guy, the dating pool starts out as four women for every three men. Yeah, we don't have to go through all the math if you don't want to, but it actually becomes tougher for women over time.

My message in *Make Your Move* is, “Look. I’m not telling everybody you have to get married.” If you put zero priority on marriage and kids and your highest priority on launching your startup or teaching the next generation of chalice or something like that, I mean, live your life. I mean, do what's going to make you happy. I’m not like telling people what they should or should not prioritize. Just last thing, my point is if you do prioritize marriage and family, live your life that way.

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**FT:** Yeah, without any shame or regret. Why is it that we are so, as women, overwhelmed by the process? Do you think that the dating apps are just creating more of this analysis paralysis? This paradox of choice, which we've discovered is like having too many choices is not a good thing, whether you're trying to decide on ice cream flavor or who to date on Saturday night. In what ways have apps facilitated the dating process and finding your match and how is it a hindrance?

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**JB:** I’m leaning towards the latter, it’s a hindrance. But I will say I didn’t set out to write a book that was going to slam the online dating industry, although I guess if you read the book that’s largely what I do. Although I will say that there are some niche dating apps that I like a lot and I talk about them in the book. But in terms of generally why I’m down on online dating, I mean, there was a survey that came out last year that Pew Research did and they found that 53% of women consider online dating to be unsafe, and 20% of women say they've been threatened with physical violence on dating apps.

If there was a singles bar where one-fifth of the women were threatened with violence, I don't think a whole lot of people would be going back there. First off you have to ask, “Okay. If there is this safety concern related to online dating particularly for women, I mean, that alone is an enormous red flag.” On top of that, the relationships don't work out as well. I mean, there's a professor at Pace University, **[inaudible 00:10:12]**, who looked at this and then one part of her study she found that the breakup rates for online couples were I think four times higher than for

people who met in the real-world, and the marriage rates were basically half that of people who met in the real-world.

And I don't think – You don't need a degree in relationship science to understand why it is that these online relationships fail at a higher rate. I mean, the problem is every online first date is a blind date with a complete stranger. I mean, you don't know the person. Whereas a first date with somebody you met in church or at work or at the dog park or as a neighbor or somebody who it was a setup through friends or family, there's already kind of a level of knowledge and comfort with that connection that makes it easier for people to bond during a first date.

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**FT:** Oh, you don't know how good I can Google people though, John. I mean I'm pretty good –

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**JB:** But you know what? Farnoosh, I'm going to talk about that. For a woman particularly, every first date on a dating app begins with the Googling, right? Like a couple hours of Googling the guy, right? Yeah?

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**FT:** Facebooking, Googling. I mean, I don't know because I haven't done it, but I assume that's what it is.

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**JB:** Okay. All right. No. I mean, that's how it begins. It begins with the Googling and the fact checking just to make sure that Robert, the handsome surgeon, isn't actually Billy Bob the ex-con or something like that. And then on the day of the date there's the escape plan. You tell your roommate or your mom or your best friend, "Look, I'm going to be at the sushi bar at this particular hour. Call me. Or if you don't hear from me, call the police," or something. I shouldn't be joking, but this is how –

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**FT:** How the best rom-coms start. Okay.

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**JB:** But we joke about it, but the fact that you need this level of checking and escape plans just to do a first date to me as an older person is inherently troubling.

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**FT:** Yeah. But you know what? The world is a scary place when you're a woman. And I think that these tactics are not just things that were brought upon us by dating apps. I remember ever since I was a little girl I was told to be not trusting of particularly men and in that any scenario. I don't think the dating apps have created this fear or these protocols. It's just that's how unfortunately women have to live their lives.

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**JB:** Let me tell you a story from the book. There's a woman, Mia, who I interviewed, and she had this really clever turn of phrase. She described um online dating to me as a doubters game, and the reason she said this is that she had had so many experiences of men lying to her on dating apps. Lying about whether they were married or not, whether their jobs or what they said they were, whether they were actually looking for a relationship or just a hookup. She had so many experiences like this that she felt she had to protect herself both in terms of like emotionally and physically.

She started spending her first dates with these online people she made online basically trying to poke holes in these guys stories. Trying to figure out where they were lying. And as you can imagine, that kind of approach to a first date doesn't really lead itself to a lot of second dates. Hold on. She's now engaged to a woman she met through a mutual friend, and she told me that with her first date with the fiancé, she didn't even bother Googling the guy because she knew for

certainty that her good friend would never ever, ever set her up with a man who was unkind or untrustworthy. And even if she didn't know that there would be chemistry, her whole kind of attitude going into the first date was radically different. And she said that because she was more relaxed and because she was more trusting of the situation, it turned out to be the closest thing to love at first sight she'd ever experienced.

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**FT:** I agree with. I think I'm just trying to editorialize a little bit my own experiences, but I think even when I was blind dated in my 20s, I did go to Google before the date. I did have a backup plan before the date just because that's the way that I just operate.

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**JB:** Yeah. That makes perfect sense to me. But I want you to like think back to your 20s and think about how rare a blind date with a complete stranger was back then. A blind date with a complete stranger is every first date for dating app people, right? I mean, we've gone from something being unusual to something being commonplace. And I guess – I mean, I would never diminish the safety concerns, but I guess if you're smart about it the way it sounds like you were and other women certainly are, I guess it could be manageable. But the problem is that the breakup rates for couples who meet online are so much higher.

There's a professor at Stanford University, Michael Rosenfeld, who is like he's often quoted as being really high and really positive on online dating. But if you kind of look at the appendix of his study, he has this table called breakup rates are not much influenced by how couples meet. But this really depends on how you define not much, because in his study he found that the one-year breakup rate for couples who meet online is sixteen percent. For couples who meet through friends and family, it's nine percent. Meet his neighbors, it's eight percent. Meet his co-workers, it's six percent. And co-workers is my favorite. And then if you meet in a house of worship, it's one percent. It's not just the safety concerns. The relationships don't work out as well because you don't actually know each other.

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**FT:** I do think that it helps to have common ground in something to have a bond, a shared experience in something, even if you didn't experience it together at the same time. But my husband and I, for example, went to Penn State not at the same time, but we had a couple classes together, but we were in different friend groups. But I think having that shared experience really anchors us. You talked about workplace dating. That's another potentially high risk place to find love, but you find this really can be successful for couples. How do you do that right now?

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**JB:** Just as context. The reason I'm so high on workplace dating is that there have been multiple studies done on this, and the marriage rate for couples who meet at work is between 25 and 30 percent, which is incredibly high. And I don't think you need to be a genius to figure out why couples who meet at work marry at a high rate. And the reality is that by the time you get to the first date you already know each other. I mean, you already know each other's senses of humor. You know whether the other person is a good person. I mean, is any guy who is deceitful or untrustworthy at work is going to be deceitful and untrustworthy in a relationship. I mean, mean that's obvious.

You've already kind of seen the guy or the woman in action, and by the time you get to the first date you're almost already halfway there. But to your point, the percentage of couples who met at work has basically like been cut in half over the past 20 plus years. And I think part of it is the rise of online dating, but part of it is what you're kind of hinting at that, the politics so to speak of workplace dating have changed a lot. It's changed a lot particularly in the post me too era, although I would probably argue that it was trending. It was becoming more difficult even before that. Would you agree? I mean, that –

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**FT:** Yeah. It's been a while, honestly, since I've worked in a company nine to five. I can't really speak to that.

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**JB:** I love workplace dating because, again, I'm all in favor of dating people you know. And like my whole date who you know line is a line I kind of stole from Peter Lynch with his whole like by what you know when it comes to investing. But I really feel like dating people you actually know is more likely to lead to a deep connection than somebody who's just a stranger. And there's nobody – There are very few people we know better than our co-workers. But the question is how do we manage this? And particularly in today's environment in which employees and employers are really conscious of sexual harassment and wanting to create a workplace where everybody feels safe and comfortable. Like how do you balance workplace dating with this concern that particularly women feel safe and comfortable at work?

There are two companies I think have actually hit upon a really good solution to this, and those two companies are Facebook and Google. And they have a workplace dating rule that basically says that you can ask anybody out on a date once, but only once. And any answer that isn't an explicit yes counts as a no. If you ask somebody on the date and they say, "Yeah, I'm busy that day, or maybe some other time," or some kind of an ambiguous answer like that, that counts as a no.

And to me this is a really smart solution. It prevents this like pestering of particularly women in the workplace, but it also kind of allows relationships to flourish. And I always like to point out, like a lot of our favorite couples like Barack Obama and Michelle Obama. They met at work and she was his supervisor. Tina brown and Harold Evans, and Harold Evans just passed away, but I mean that was a great love story. And he was her editor. I'm protective of workplace relationships because I think there are just so many good ones out there, but I acknowledge that we need to come up with ways to make it better and safer particularly for women.

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**FT:** I mean, we're spending already so many hours at work. It really doesn't leave you much with – Much time to dedicate to dating and meeting new people makes a lot of sense, like one-stop shop.

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**JB:** I actually use that line.

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**FT:** One-stop shopping. Get a career. Get a mate. One question that I often come across given that I write for and about female breadwinners is especially for a lot of the young professional women who are climbing up in their careers, to your point, perhaps more educated than their male counterparts. We know that millennial women in many metropolitan parts of the country are out earning their male peers. It reverses as they get older, but at least like in their late 20s the women are exceeding men sometimes in salary. They want to find their match. This is the vocabulary women come to me with. I want to find my equal. Equal. And what equal means is equal in education, equal in professional rank. And I find that that is a very hard and limiting list of criteria, and like it only like leads to disappointment and especially if you're trying to settle down in your late 20s. And so what do you say to people who want to find their equal. How should we think about finding a partner that meets our equal criteria?

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**JB:** I don't know if this has been your experience, Farnoosh, but a lot of the women who I've interviewed who tell me stories like what you just said, they've had actually all sorts of negative experiences with men whom they consider they're equal. Is that fair?

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**FT:** Yes. Or they say like I don't want to date down, which is so awful.

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**JB:** Yeah, I resist any kind of language like that, dating down, settling, compromising, because it's incredibly pejorative. But the irony is that the women who tell me this, and I'm not blaming

them because I think this is part of the way our culture has socialized. But the irony is that so many of them have had horrendously awful experiences with men who were their equal. The bankers and lawyers and doctors who completely mistreat them that I'm like always baffled, "Okay. That Wall Street guy you dated cheated on you constantly and then ghosted you out of nowhere." Yet, God forbid, you're dating an electrician.

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**FT:** Right. Who treats you like a queen.

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**JB:** Yes.

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**FT:** Yeah, I think that there is a misunderstanding about what equals should be, and I think what I always like to remind women and men is that when you're looking for your equal, that's fair, but maybe we should look at the other equal parts, like equal in my values, equal in maybe my religion even because sometimes that is really important to couples. It's not about like where you went to college or do you have an MBA or are you making as much as I am? I think that is a very superficial way to look at this equal lens. I think you've got to look at some of the more important things like do we see eye to eye when it comes to things like family? And what are our goals and ambitions in life? And that I think is what ultimately drives longevity in a relationship. And, yeah, you can both be lawyers and doctors. It doesn't mean it's going to be a great harmonious marriage.

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**JB:** Yeah. I mean, I'm a big advocate of what I call mixed-collar marriage, which is basically white-collar women marrying blue-collar guys.

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**FT:** I like that.

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**JB:** I coach little league baseball, and because even though I live in a pretty white-bred suburban community – Oh! A disproportionate number of like the little league coaches and the travel coaches. They tend to be more blue-collar. They own like landscaping companies, or their cops, or their firemen, things like that. I mean, not all of them, but I've either coached with or coached against a lot of these guys and they're now my friends. I'll tell you, they are great guys, and they have more time for their kids because they have more regular hours than your typical lawyer or stock broker, investment banker or things like that.

And the other thing I'd point out, and I know that you know this as well as anybody, a guy who's an electrician or a cop, he's not bringing eighty thousand dollars in student loan debt to the relationship, right? Again, I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but there are few things that can like doom a young marriage more than one member of the relationship's excessive debt. I think that this needs to be part of the equation as well.

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**FT:** And like remind us why it's important to get married. Can you do that?

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**JB:** Oh, yeah. Thank you for prompting me on that. Like I always like to put out like I'm not telling people they have to get married and have kids. I'm not telling people they have to live monogamously. I have this like clear memory of giving a speech to the dating event and saying – Making some snarky remark about polyamory and having a woman like bite my head off afterwards. I'm not telling people how to live their lives. But what I'm saying is that, look, if you do prioritize marriage and you want to find a life partner, live your life that way. But in terms of your philosophical question of why marriage, maybe that one's above my pay grade.

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**FT:** What you were saying earlier about mixed-collar marriages, it reminded me of something I was reading about, the marriage divide, and how it's widening. And so this pursuit of finding your educational match, your economic match, it sort of widens the wealth gap. It widens the economic gap within the dating culture, because then we're like assuming that working class and poor Americans need to just pair up and then the rich need to pair up. I wonder, do you think that the marriage divide is a real thing that we almost force upon ourselves because of how we've been culturally and socially conditioned? Or is there hope for the marriage divide?

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**JB:** I mean, you're going to kill me if I reframe the question a little bit?

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**FT:** No.

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**JB:** it worries me deeply when I speak to sort of single marriage-minded women is this desire to kind of hold out for the perfect guy who checks off all the boxes, the ones we're talking about. The guy who earns more than them and who went to the right college and that kind of thing. And to me, I mean, the whole like holding out thing just carries so much risk. It's what you prioritize. And if you put the success of prioritization on marrying a guy who went to an Ivy League school and who works for Goldman Sachs, you could be waiting forever, because those guys, particularly if they're good looking, they know they're in demand and they behave accordingly. And when I say they behave accordingly, I mean, they behave badly.

Actually, I've come around to the idea that those guys, if they're unmarried into their late 30s and early 40s, I actually think they might in the end be unmarriageable, because they're in such high-demand and they live their life that way that I think almost like they're too jaded and too –

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**FT:** It works for them.

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**JB:** It works for them, but do you want to marry them? There's also this this numbers game problem, in which you start out with a dating pool of 40 women and 40 men and this is for people who only want to marry other college grads, and essentially this is the dating pool that Gen Z is graduating into in which there's four women for every three men. You start out with like an imaginary dating pool with 40 women and 30 men and 20 of the women marry 20 of the men. The remaining dating pool becomes 20 women and 10 men, a two to one ratio. Once five more get married, the ratio becomes 15 to five, or a three to one ratio.

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**FT:** But some of those marriages will break up and they'll –

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**JB:** Yeah, I hear you, but like I'm always like using the musical chairs like comparison. Like in the first round of musical chairs you basically have to be a moron not to get a chair, but by the last round when there're two players in one chair, you have a 50 chance of losing the game. And the point I always like to make is, "Look, if you prioritize marriage, waiting until you're 33 to get serious about dating does not make sense."

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**FT:** I did see that the divorce rate is actually on the decline. The Institute for Family Studies, it's at a 50-year low divorce rate. Why do you think that is? And it's not just the pandemic forcing people to stay together.

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**JB:** I have to admit, I've always been interested in the divorce rates, and I've always wanted to write about them, but the numbers geek in me makes me nervous about it because in order to get divorced you have to get married, right? And I have two thoughts in this. One, I think there are a lot of very monogamous and happily coupled couples who are together nowadays and are not getting married. And I think once upon a time marriage was a pretty good proxy for monogamy, but I'm not sure that's still true today.

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**FT:** And economic security for women, frankly, which now we don't need to get married for that reason.

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**JB:** Right. But also I'm sure – I mean, I know, and I'm guessing you know couples who are living monogamously, but they've never actually gotten married, right? And they're very happy together. Yeah, but they're happy together and everybody thinks of them as a family and they are a family, but they just haven't gotten married. I think that that kind of messes with the marriage and divorce data. And the other thing that's problematic is so let's say you have – hopefully this won't be too confusing, but let's say you have 20 married couples and five of these couples keep getting divorced and remarried over and over and over again. Between these 20 couples, you could have 20 or 30 divorces among them. If I say, “Oh! There were 20 couples who had 30 divorces.” You'd say, “Well, the divorce rate is higher than the marriage rate.” But in fact only five of those couple – Like it only involves a small minority of the population.

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**FT:** I'm sure there's a way to get to a real number here, right? A more true number somehow. Because I really think it could change the narrative around marriage, if we've been assuming and saying forever, that marriage is – 50% of marriages at least end in divorce when that could actually be an unfair characterization.



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**JB:** No. I think technically it's true. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, but what they aren't saying is fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce. I just distrust the divorce data, but maybe you're right. Maybe if I was smarter and I had a better like sense of how to like go next level with the numbers. But every time I see one of these like bustle articles on divorce rates, I see the holes in the logic in the third paragraph.

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**FT:** Well, I will let everybody who wants to learn more about the new science of dating to pick up your book. It's called *Make Your Move: The New Science of Dating and Why Women Are in Charge*. You can learn not just about everything we talked about, but also John's views on why the play hard to get method is outdated and grounded in bad science. Why it's better to choose than to be chosen, and lots more. Maybe your third book will be on the divorce statistics and what to do when you're out of a marriage looking to date again, because —

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**JB:** Do you have time for a quick funny story?

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**FT:** Yes. Yeah.

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**JB:** I had that idea after I wrote the first book. I was like, “Well, I could do divorce-onomics.” My then agent um said to me, “Well, I have this thing that I call the Scarsdale train platform test.” And I’m like, “Well, what's that?” And he said, “Would you want to be seen reading the book on the Scarsdale train platform?” And the divorce-onomics does not uh pass the Scarsdale train platform test.

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**FT:** Listen, I think most books these days, the titles you'd be caught dead reading in public. Well, that's why you know Kindle sales are actually doing better than book/print sales I guess.

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**JB:** That's a very good point.

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**FT:** As the self-help department grows at Barnes and Nobles, the titles get a little bit too revealing and we want to learn in private. John Birger, thank you so much for joining us. This has been really fun.

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**JB:** Farnoosh, thanks for having me on again.

[OUTRO]

[00:34:11]

**FT:** Thanks so much to John for joining us. To learn more about his book, please visit [johnBirger.com](http://johnBirger.com), that's B-I-R-G-E-R.com. All this info including the transcript available at [somoneypodcast.com](http://somoneypodcast.com). If you like what you're hearing, please, oh please, subscribe, leave a review, tell a friend. If you leave a review and I happen to pick it in our Friday episodes of Ask Farnoosh, you will receive a free 15-minute money session with me just putting that out there.

Thanks for tuning in everybody. I hope your day is so money.

[END]