



**Eckler, Rebecca. (2019). Blissfully Blended Bullshit: The Uncomfortable Truth of Blending Families. Toronto: Dundurn Press.**

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“Blissfully Blended Bullshit” is a first-person account of one young woman’s experience with cohabitation. Rebecca Eckler’s story details many of the effects the relationship had not only on herself, but on her short-term boyfriend, his two children, and her seven-year-old daughter. She includes descriptions of many of the problems that can come with blending families and writes about some of her friends and family members’ experiences and opinions about what being in a blended family is like. She details for readers her quick romance, pregnancy, cohabitation, and eventual demise of relationship with “Boyfriend.” She shares what personal consequences befall the members of the blended family due to their lack of planning, communication, and experience with a blended family dynamic. The reader learns what can happen when two individuals choose to wear “rose-colored glasses” (p. 69) and ignore all “warning sign(s)” (p. 153) when entering a new cohabiting relationship with someone who has children from previous relationships. Eckler describes many examples of her ineffective communication methods, using humour and crude language, and it becomes obvious to the reader that she really does believe that blending is “bullshit.”

The overarching theme of this book is that of an immature, short-sighted approach to

blending families. Eckler writes multiple times throughout the book that neither she nor Boyfriend are willing to “be the Bigger Person” (p. 41). Numerous examples exist that highlight the contentious relationship that existed between the two of them. She admits that their relationship progressed “from zero to sixty like a fucking Lamborghini” and that “consequences are afterthoughts” (p. 105). Love was mutually professed within the first three months of meeting, and Eckler intentionally became pregnant within the first year of dating, after paying for Boyfriend’s reverse vasectomy. Shortly after she got pregnant, Boyfriend moved his belongings and two daughters into the home Eckler and her daughter shared, which was paid for by the father of her daughter Rowan. Eckler describes her own personality as “dark, jealous, resentful” and admits her feelings are often “completely irrational and immature” (p. 14). She is a person who tends to take things personally and was “legit hurt by [her family members’] lack of enthusiasm” (p. 14) about her publishing this bare, uncensored, critical account of their blending story. She is also “not great with change” (p. 27). A reader could predict from the introductory chapter that these difficult personality qualities that Boyfriend may not have learned before rushing into a relationship with Eckler would cause serious problems between the two.

Eckler and Boyfriend appear to lack open, honest communication from the beginning of their relationship, though they do write letters to one another throughout their relationship in which they express their feelings – initially, poems professing love; later, arguments. Eckler does not tell Rowan’s father that Boyfriend and his daughters are moving in until moving day. Some believe that a prerequisite to any cohabitation should be some discussion of finances, such as how the living costs will be divided and who will pay for what going forward, as well as (at least a dis-

cussion of) a cohabitation agreement. Some also believe that when children are involved in the blending, these early conversations should include acceptable methods of disciplining the other's child(ren) and ways to help them adjust to the new living situation. Unfortunately, these topics of discussion did not happen between these adults. In her defense, Eckler does acknowledge in retrospect the importance of these conversations. Money is the main issue between her and Boyfriend, as Eckler has a much higher and steadier income than Boyfriend, though she never actually asks him how much he makes. She maintains a lifestyle that Boyfriend cannot, including living in an expensive neighbourhood, hiring a gardener and a nanny, and taking regular trips to the condo she purchased in Mexico. Boyfriend never offered to chip in with any sort of rent, but Eckler didn't speak about it either. A relationship therapist is eventually involved, but as money is a main area of contention between the couple, and Boyfriend is unwilling to pay the high costs of the many sessions necessary, the therapist is not given enough time to get to the root of their problems. Communication fails in Eckler's interactions with her new stepdaughters also, their first problem labelled the "Hi/Bye Fight" (p. 66): a debate about who should say "Hi" or "Bye" first when Boyfriend's children arrive or leave. Eckler thought the debate was ridiculous, so while she did make more of an effort to acknowledge the girls when they arrived and left, their perceived slight stressed her out and thereby soured her attitude toward them and toward boyfriend, as he took his daughters' side in the debate. Throughout Eckler's relationship with Boyfriend's daughters there were many texted apologies and even times of full non-communication. Many of Boyfriend's attempts to create healthy lines of communication were met with an aggressive, hostile attitude,

which only served to create an environment in which neither Boyfriend nor Eckler feel safe to share with the other. Boyfriend and his daughters seem to have healthy lines of communication, as do Eckler and her daughter Rowan, though their methods of communicating with their respective children are often at odds.

Had Eckler and Boyfriend communicated more before combining their lives, they would have realized that their parenting styles were very different. Rowan meets Boyfriend (who was at that point called “One-Night Stand”) at the same moment Eckler does, when Boyfriend is picking Eckler up for their first date, and Eckler has no problem with this. By contrast, Boyfriend doesn’t introduce Eckler to his children until several months pass. Not until they are on their first blended family vacation do their differences in parenting styles become evident. Rowan has a massive meltdown when her stuffed animal “drowns” in the hotel swimming pool. While Eckler encourages and participates in Rowan’s belief that her stuffed animal is, in fact, alive, Boyfriend does not believe a child of Rowan’s age should still believe in fantasy. When CPR is performed on the stuffed animal by Eckler after the “drowning,” their opposing reactions to the event create an uncomfortable situation between them, as their differences in parenting styles appear conflicting.

Eckler clearly and unapologetically favors her daughter above all other family members, even her chosen partner. When Boyfriend and his daughters move into Eckler’s home, the idea of Rowan giving up her room is out of the question and so his daughters share the basement. In the meltdown situation mentioned in the previous paragraph, Eckler declares to be “unapologetic about that, too” (p. 104). Eckler and her daughter have a somewhat co-dependent relationship and

there is an obvious lack of boundaries between them. The two of them co-sleep until Boyfriend moves in, and even after he moves in Eckler sleeps in Rowan's bed with her a couple nights a week. Boyfriend thinks Rowan is much too old to still be co-sleeping, and this creates friction between them. Eckler writes that "in a way, I choose my daughter over him, right from the start" (p. 46). She reassures Rowan constantly that it will always be she and her "against the world, which, yes, includes the rest of the family" (p. 98). She believes there to be no shame in this attitude and doesn't care if everyone in the family knows or is bothered by it. Boyfriend feels excluded, sees the effect Eckler's unconscious division of the family is having on his daughters, and decides to approach the topic, letting Eckler know that the all of the other family members notice her overt favouritism. His concern is met with hostility and defensiveness, and she refuses to see the effect her choosing Rowan over all others in the family is having on her partner and his children.

One would hope that anyone reading this book is not attempting to use this author as a role model for their own blended relationship, as her attitude overall is not one of loving acceptance, nor do her tactics lead to relationship cohesion. This type of book seems best suited as a beach read, for those who love real-life family drama. Academically, I could see this being of interest to sociologists who study family dynamics, who are interested in getting an inside look at what happens when young, ignorant, neurotic people with children cohabitate prematurely. It might be revealing to hear the points of view of the other family members involved, as Eckler takes little accountability for the petty interactions described. She does admit that her "reactions while blending reveal a lot about" her and that she did learn from the experience (p. 13).