

Nena O'Neill, 82, an Author of 'Open Marriage,' Is Dead

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By MARGALIT FOX

Nena O'Neill, one half of the husband-and-wife team whose best-selling book "Open Marriage" helped spread the youthful sexual revolution of the 1960's to the middle-aged, middle-class Middle America of the 1970's, died on March 9 in Manhattan. She was 82 and lived on the Upper West Side. The apparent cause was respiratory failure, said her son Michael.

Part anthropological survey, part marriage manual, "Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples" caused a sensation in the United States and abroad when it was published in 1972. Written by Ms. O'Neill and her husband, George, the book spent more than 40 weeks on the New York Times best-seller list.

Published by M. Evans & Company, "Open Marriage" remains in print in paperback. It has been translated into 14 languages and has sold more than 35 million copies worldwide, according to the company's Web site. "Open Marriage," as the book's champions said emphatically and often, was never intended to be a guide for swingers. Indeed, the book embraced marriage. Its purpose, the authors wrote, was simply "to strip marriage of its antiquated ideals and romantic tinsel and find ways to make it truly contemporary."

Read today, "Open Marriage" is a period piece, a window onto a distant age of experimentation and abandon. Its ideas can appear shockingly ordinary, even quaint. In the shadow of AIDS, its bolder suggestions seem not so much daring as painfully naïve. Much of the book's marital counsel was conventional even in its day. "The time to tell your wife she's shooting the budget to pieces with the amount she spends on clothes is not when she comes rushing home full of pleasure with a new purchase," the authors wrote.

Trained as anthropologists, the O'Neills devoted other passages to the ethnography of marriage. ("No self-respecting Nama Hottentot owns a jointly held his-and-hers cow.") In keeping with the growing feminist consciousness of the period, they stressed women's need for meaningful lives. Tying the text together are liberal doses of 70's-era popular psychology. Three of the book's 287 pages explore, ever so tentatively, the elastic properties of marital fidelity. Forever after, those pages were all anyone seemed to remember about "Open Marriage."

Ms. O'Neill was born Elizabeth Dross in St. Lawrence, Pa., on Nov. 29, 1923, and was known in her younger days as Betty. An early marriage ended with the death of her husband during World War II. In 1945, she married George O'Neill, who called her Nena (pronounced "NENN-uh"), a Spanish term of endearment. Ms. O'Neill earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Barnard in 1946 and later did graduate work at Columbia.

When "Open Marriage" appeared, some readers interpreted its choicest lines

("Sexual fidelity is the false god of closed marriage") as a license to cheat. But on the very next page, the O'Neills seemed to back away from that provocative stance: "We are not recommending outside sex, but we are not saying that it should be avoided, either. The choice is entirely up to you."

George O'Neill, a professor of anthropology at City College in New York, died in 1980. Besides her son Michael, of Brooklyn, Ms. O'Neill is survived by another son, Brian, of Cascais, Portugal; two brothers, David Dross of Augusta, Ga., and Gerald Dross of Hampstead, N.C.; and four grandchildren.

The O'Neills also wrote "Shifting Gears" (M. Evans, 1974), about career change. In 1977, Nena O'Neill published "The Marriage Premise" (M. Evans), which argued that fidelity was perhaps not such a bad thing after all.

"The whole area of extramarital sex is touchy," Ms. O'Neill told The New York Times in 1977. "I don't think we ever saw it as a concept for the majority, and certainly it has not proved to be."