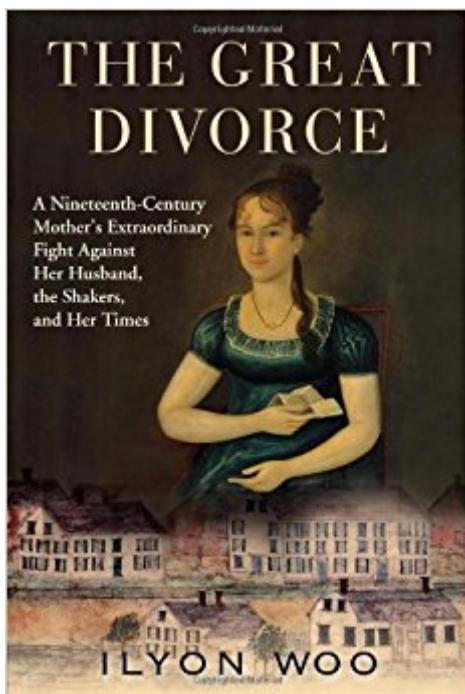


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# The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight Against Her Husband, The Shakers, And Her Times



## Synopsis

Ilyon Woo's *The Great Divorce* is the dramatic, richly textured story of one of nineteenth-century America's most infamous divorce cases, in which a young mother single-handedly challenged her country's notions of women's rights, family, and marriage itself. In 1814, Eunice Chapman came home to discover that her three children had been carried off by her estranged husband. He had taken them, she learned, to live among a celibate, religious people known as the Shakers. Defying all expectations, this famously petite and lovely woman mounted an epic campaign against her husband, the Shakers, and the law. In its confrontation of some of the nation's most fundamental debates—religious freedom, feminine virtue, the sanctity of marriage—her case struck a nerve with an uncertain new republic. And its culmination—in a stunning legislative decision and a terrifying mob attack—sent shockwaves through the Shaker community and the nation beyond. With a novelist's eye and a historian's perspective, Woo delivers the first full account of Eunice Chapman's remarkable struggle. A moving story about the power of a mother's love, *The Great Divorce* is also a memorable portrait of a rousing challenge to the values of a young nation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Known today for their elegant hand-hewn furniture, in the early 19th century the Shakers were a radical religious sect whose members renounced sexuality, property, and family to join a Christian

utopian community. And if a father joined the Shakers with his children, as James Chapman did in 1814 in upstate New York, his estranged wife had neither parental rights nor legal recourse. In his smoothly narrative and revealing debut, Woo objectively deciphers this segregated society that, despite its stance in the Chapman case, believed in gender equality and was led by its own "Mother Lucy." Eunice Chapman successfully took her case against the Shakers and her husband to the New York legislature, where she obtained a divorce and regained legal custody of her three children, forcibly taking them back in 1818. Full of information about women's lives and status at the time, the book makes the case that Eunice's charisma and obsessive determination helped her overcome the usual rejection of women in the public sphere. Both Eunice's struggle and the Shakers' story fascinate equally while dispelling romanticized myths of utopian societies in the tumultuous postrevolutionary period. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Back in the 1800s, when a woman married, she ceased to exist. She had no legal rights—zero. Thus the story of a woman like Eunice Hawley Chapman has real potential for drama. Indeed, this uppity woman's five-year struggle to gain custody of her children at any cost is most deservedly the stuff of an HBO miniseries. When Eunice's abusive, alcoholic husband, James Chapman, decided to clean up his life by joining a reclusive religious group called the Shakers, they asked that he face up to his marital and paternal responsibilities. His membership rested upon convincing Eunice to join him. She declined. So he sold all his worldly possessions, left Eunice with little but the clothes on her back, and abducted their three children to live with him inside the Shaker compound. While the U.S. was engaged in the War of 1812, Eunice launched a personal war on both governmental and religious authority. Alas much of the empathy we might feel for this dirt-poor mother and her quest gets lost amidst Woo's ponderous, thesis-like approach. --Donna Chavez

I am a history junkie. I especially enjoy works that give a rich, full flavor of a time as well as presenting different views of the same event. This book delivers nicely on both counts, relating the atmosphere in New York State and the country in the early 1800's, especially in regards to religion, the condition of women, and women's rights. The centerpiece is one woman's battle to regain her children, who had been spirited away by her husband. At a time when a woman had little recourse against those that harmed or mistreated her, Eunice Chapman's battle was an amazing one. What could have been a small family drama escalated into a war that caught up politicians, lawyers, the Shaker religion and such luminaries as Martin Van Buren and Thomas Jefferson. All that aside, the

author makes the book highly accessible to the reader, writing in an engaging style that makes this a page-turning historical mystery. It is just plain great storytelling!

A deceptively easy read, but thought provoking. One almost immediately sympathizes with both Eunice and her husband James, if for different reasons. Opens a window on early 19th century life in America. Unlike similar works that strive to be scholarly and pretentious, this is a good old fashioned story that happens to be true.

Reads like a novel...very well written and researched...lots of history of the times as well as the Shaker sects. EXCELLENT.

Illyon Woo tells the story of Eunice Chapman, who fought to regain custody of her children and some control of her own fate, when her husband joined the Shakers in the early 1800s in New York state. Woo presents her detailed research into the Shaker communities and the life of the Chapman family in a readable, riveting story. Her prose is always grounded in fact and the footnotes are available for checking her sources. Woo was able to present both sides of the conflict evenly and fairly. She set the whole situation into the cultural context of the day with clarity and insight into the biases and advances of the Shakers and the complex personalities of the main characters. She doesn't whitewash anything, but tries to tell as complete a story as the evidence will support. The book is also full of interesting details about the Shaker's theology and way of life, beyond the plain facts that they lived simply in sex-segregated communities.

Of how many impeccably researched histories can it be said, "I couldn't put it down!" Illyon Woo has meticulously pieced together mostly original sources into a book that has the sweep and pace of great drama. She does not invent, but has sources for details right down to the weather and the condition of roads. (I know this because I read both her Sources and Acknowledgments sections, so curious was I about her methods and so reluctant was I to let go of this book!) As for the story told, it is an extraordinary commentary on the roles and rights of women, the struggle of a new nation to create and then bend and amend its laws, the power of marketing (yes, even in the early 19th century), and the peculiar nature of Shaker culture. Woo says in her Epilogue that the *sui generis* nature of Eunice Chapman's story has made it a footnote to legal history. But Woo rescues the footnote, showing how both the Shakers and Eunice's struggle against them were peculiarly American, and can tell us much about how we - American women and men of all religious stripes -

live today. And why. Whatever Woo writes next, I'm there.

Once in awhile, a book comes along and changes your perspective of what one person can accomplish despite the rules. This is a testament to Eunice Chapman's extraordinary commitment, endurance, and faith. I applaud Ilyon Woo's extensive research and meticulous detail to capture the story from multiple points of view. She managed to capture each main character in their true light as both aggressor and victim. It is a brilliant story and one that every book club group should read.

shipped quickly , good condition, thank you

I would recommend this to people who like reading historical books. In this day and age - we tend to forget how things were "in the day" - I am a child of the 1950's and can remember how scandalous divorce and pregnancy out of wedlock were - not that long ago! I feel that our female population doesn't really understand the progress that has been made in our rights. In this day and age it is a given that the mother will get custody of children...this wasn't always the case.... I really enjoyed the book - hope others will also.

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