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### Book Review: The ABA Guide to Family Law: The Complete and Easy Guide to the Laws of Marriage, Parenthood, Separation and Divorce

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**The ABA Guide to Family Law:  
The Complete and Easy Guide  
to the Laws of Marriage,  
Parenthood, Separation  
and Divorce**

By Jeff Atkinson (New York, NY:  
Random House/Times Books, 1996).  
179 pgs. Softcover. \$12. To order, call  
(212) 572-2872.

*Reviewed by*  
**Judith G. McMullen**

I remember my first visit to Family Court. I was a new lawyer, full of idealism. Pleadings in hand, I appeared for routine motion call and took my place in a line that stretched past the length of the courtroom and into the hallway. Forty-five minutes later, my turn came, and I faced a surly clerk, who berated me for some error. My groveling

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and apologizing did not interrupt her tongue-lashing, until at last she allowed me to escape. I was humiliated, but not enlightened about what to do next. I reflected that between the oddities of the law and the procedural red tape, any pro se client would be eaten alive. Yet it seemed to me that family law should be accessible to *all* people who are affected by it, and not just to experienced lawyers.

While it cannot make court officials uniformly helpful or the procedure less cumbersome, the *ABA Guide to Family Law* does make the substance of family law accessible to lawyers and nonlawyers alike. The guide gives a clear and surprisingly detailed overview of the general principles of family law in the United States. Chapter topics cover the main issues in divorce law (property division, maintenance, child support and custody), and other important topics, such as cohabitation, marriage agreements, adoption, issues concerning intact families and domestic violence. Discussions are refreshingly free of legalese and clearly describe the majority rules and exceptions to them. Many rules are followed by illustrating examples taken from actual cases; however, the *Guide* does not cite cases, nor does it include the sort of procedural details only a lawyer would understand or care about. Longer examples are set apart from the main text in boxes. For instance, the discussion of proper consents from biological parents in an adoption case includes a page-long boxed description of the infamous Baby Richard case.

Chapters include charts and diagrams listing states and the doctrines they follow. For example, the discussion of the grounds for divorce is followed by a chart showing which states use fault, no-fault or combination systems, and what the residency and domicile requirements are. The chapters are divided by subject headings, which make it easy to locate discrete topics. The index is extensive and actually lists topics where you would expect to find them.

My only criticism of the book is that Chapter 7, "Deciding Whether or Not to Divorce," should be omitted. Unlike the other chapters, which are packed with concrete information, this one is full of platitudes and homespun advice better suited to a popular magazine article than a practical guide to the law. However, this is a minor criticism of an otherwise useful and well-written book.

Family lawyers could recommend this book to their clients to give clear answers to commonly asked questions. Lawyers will find the charts comparing states to be informative, but most discussions of general rules should already be well-known to family law practitioners. However, a lawyer new to family law will find this a useful introduction to the subject.