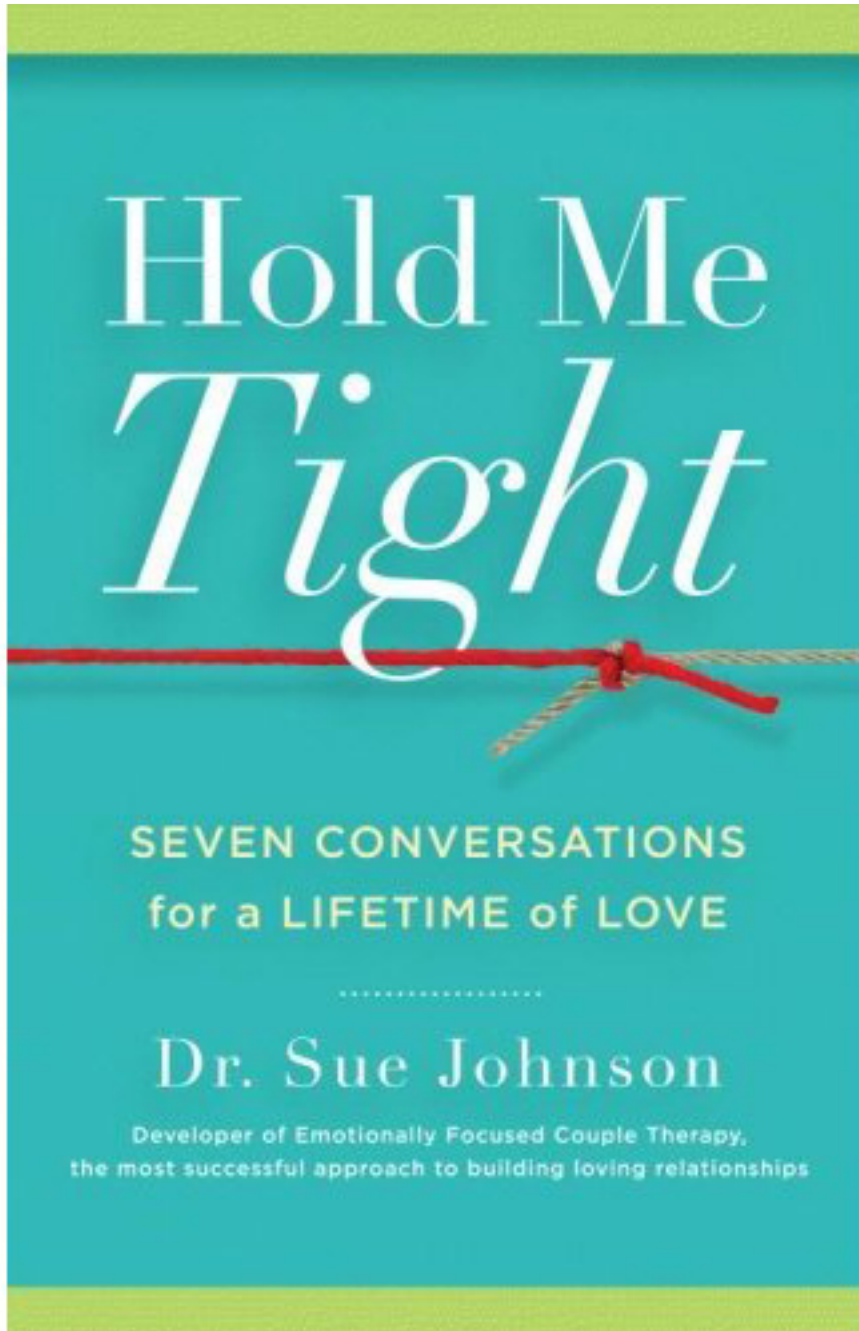


Hold Me *Tight*

Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love
by Dr. Sue Johnson



What Is Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT)? The message of EFT is simple: Forget about learning how to argue

better, analyzing your early childhood, making grand romantic gestures, or experimenting with new sexual positions. Instead, recognize and admit that you are emotionally attached to and dependent on your partner in much the same way that a child is on a parent for nurturing, soothing, and protection. EFT focuses on creating and strengthening this emotional bond by identifying and transforming the key moments that foster an adult loving relationship.

- EFT has an astounding 70 - 75% success rate and results have been shown to last, even in the face of significant stress.
- EFT is recognized by the American Psychological Association as empirically proven.

HOLD ME TIGHT presents a streamlined version of EFT. It walks the reader through seven conversations that capture the defining moments in a love relationship and instructs how to shape these moments to create a secure and lasting bond. Case histories and exercises in each conversation bring the lessons of EFT to life.

Seven Transforming Conversations:

Recognizing Demon Dialogues—In this first conversation, couples identify negative and destructive remarks in order to get to the root of the problem and figure out what each other is really trying to say.

Finding the Raw Spots—Here, each partner learns to look beyond immediate, impulsive reactions to figure out what raw spots are being hit.

Revisiting a Rocky Moment—This conversation provides a platform for de-escalating conflict and repairing rifts in a relationship and building emotional safety.

Hold Me Tight—The heart of the program: this conversation moves partners into being more accessible, emotionally responsive, and deeply engaged with each other.

Forgiving Injuries—Injuries may be forgiven but they never

disappear. Instead, they need to become integrated into couples' conversations as demonstrations of renewal and connection. Knowing how to find and offer forgiveness empowers couples to strengthen their bond.

Bonding Through Sex and Touch—Here, couples find how emotional connection creates great sex, and good sex creates deeper emotional connection.

Keeping Your Love Alive—This last conversation is built on the understanding that love is a continual process of losing and finding emotional connection; it asks couples to be deliberate and mindful about maintaining connection.

Excerpt from *Hold Me Tight*

Conversation 3: Revisiting a Rocky Moment

Auntie Doris, a very large lady with peroxide hair and whiskers on her chin, was pouring rum over a huge Christmas pudding. She was also arguing with my almost inebriated Uncle Sid. She turned to him and said, "We is getting into a doozy here. One of them dead-end doozy fights we does. You are half cut and I sure as hell don't feel like no shiny Christmas fairy. Are we going to fight it out? I'll swing like always and you duck if you can. Both feel bad then. Do we need to do it? Or can we just start over?" Uncle Sid nodded solemnly, softly muttered "No doozy, no ducking," and then, "Lovely pudding, Doris." He patted my aunt on the backside as he tottered into the other room.

I recall this little drama vividly because I knew that Uncle Sid was going to be Santa Claus that night and any "doozy" probably meant that I was going to be out of luck for presents. My Christmas was saved by a compliment and a pat. But now, all these years later, I see their interaction in another less self-centered way. In a moment of conflict and disconnection, Uncle Sid and Aunt Doris were able to recognize a negative pattern, declare a ceasefire and re-establish a warmer connection.

It was probably pretty easy for Doris and Sid to cut short their fight and change direction because, on most days, their relationship was a safe haven of loving responsiveness. We know that people who feel secure with their partner find it easier to do this. They can stand back and reflect on the process between them and they can also own their part in that process. For distressed lovers, this is much harder to do. They are caught up in the emotional chaos at the surface of the relationship, in seeing each other as threats, as the enemy.

To reconnect, lovers have to be able to de-escalate the conflict and actively create a basic emotional safety. They need to be able to work in concert to curtail their negative dialogues and to defuse their fundamental insecurities. They may not be as close as they crave to be, but they can now step on each other's toes and then turn and do damage control. They can have their differences and not careen helplessly into Demon Dialogues. They can rub each other's raw spots and not slide into anxious demands or numbing withdrawal. They can deal better with the disorienting ambiguity that their loved one, who is the solution to fear, can also suddenly become a source of fear. In short, they can hold onto their emotional balance a lot more often and a lot more easily. This creates a platform for repairing rifts in their relationship and creating a truly loving connection.

In this conversation, you'll see how to take charge of moments of emotional disconnection, or mis-attunements, as attachment theorists call them, and tip them away from dangerous escalation and towards safety and security. To learn how to do this, I have couples revisit rocky moments in their relationship and, applying what they have learned in Conversations 1 and 2 about the way they communicate and their attachment fears, figure out how to smooth the ground. In my practice, we replay turbulent big-bang arguments as well as quieter continual disconnections. I slow down the action, asking partners questions ("What just happened here?"), guiding them to key moments when insecurities spiraled and showing them how they could have cut their conflict short and moved in a different and more positive direction.

When Claire and Peter fight they don't mess around. They qualify for the Oscar in marital spats. This time it starts with Claire

pointing out that Peter could have done more to help her during her bout with hepatitis. "You just went on like nothing unusual was happening," she says. "When I suggested you do some chores, you were nasty and irritable. I don't know why I should put up with that."

"Put up with!" exclaims Peter. "Oh, you don't put up with anything as far as I can see. You make sure I suffer for every little error. Of course, it doesn't count that I was working like mad on a big project. I am just one big disappointment to you! You make that perfectly clear. You weren't so sick when you turned around and give me a lecture on the proper care of bathrooms." He turns his chair as if he is about to leave.

Claire throws back her head and yells with frustration, "Little errors! Like the fact that then you frosted me out, wouldn't talk to me for two days. Is that what you mean? A creep is what you are." Peter, his face turned to the wall comments dryly, "Yeah, well this 'creep' doesn't feel like talking to the task master." Expert demolition of love relationship is now in progress.

Now let's replay this little drama and see how they can create a new kind of dance. Here are the steps that can set them on the path to greater harmony:

* Stopping the Game. In their argument, Claire and Peter were totally ensnared in attack and defend, who is right, who is wrong; who is victim, who is villain. They are antagonists, using the pronouns "I" and "you" almost exclusively. "I am entitled to caring here," Claire belligerently declares, "And if you can't step up and do that, then I can do without you." The victory is a little hollow though since this isn't what she wants. Peter quietly responds, "Can we stop this?. Aren't we both defeated in this spiral?" He has changed the pronoun to "we." Claire sighs. She changes her perspective and her tone. "Yes," she says thoughtfully. "This is the place we always go to. We get trapped here. We both want to prove our point so we do that till we end up totally exhausted."

* Claiming Your Own Moves. Claire complained that Peter tuned her out, that he didn't try to hear her point when things got hot

between them. They name their moves together. Claire reflects, "It started with me complaining and getting very angry and you, what did you do?" "I got into defending myself, attacking back," he replies. Claire continues, "And then I really lost it and accused more, really I was objecting to your withdrawing from me." Peter, calmer now, risks a quip, "You missed a bit. Then you threatened, remember? The bit about how you could do without me?"

Claire smiles. Together they come up with a short summary of their moves: Claire loses it while Peter plays impervious; Claire gets louder and threatens, Peter sees her as impossible and tries to escape. Peter laughs, "The impervious rock and the bossy broad. What a conversation. Well, I can see that talking to a rock must be frustrating." Claire follows his lead and acknowledges that her angry critical tone probably triggers his defensiveness and contributes to his moving away after this kind of fight. They both agree that it is hard to be honest.

* **Claiming Your Own Feelings.** Claire is now able to talk about her own feelings rather than, as she puts it, "focusing on Peter and disguising them in a big fat blame." She shares, "There is anger here. Part of me wants to tell you, 'Alright, if I am so hard to live with, I'll show you. You can't get to me.' But I feel pretty shaky inside. Do you know what I mean?" Peter murmurs, "Oh yes, I know shaky." Clear admissions like these of the roiling surface emotions, of anger and confusion, are the beginning of being accessible to your lover. Sometimes it helps to make these admissions by using the language of "parts." This seems to help us acknowledge aspects of ourselves that we don't feel great about and also helps us express ambiguous feelings. Peter might say, "Yeah, part of me is numbed out here. It's my automatic response when we get stuck like this. But I guess part of me is shaky, too."

* **Owning How You Shape Your Partner's Feelings.** We need to recognize how our usual ways of dealing with our emotions, pull our partner off balance and turn on deeper attachment fears. If we are connected, my feelings naturally will affect yours. But seeing the impact we have on our loved ones can be very difficult in the moment when we are caught up in our own emotions,

especially if fear is narrowing the lens. In the fight, things happen so fast and Claire is so upset that she really does not see how her critical tone and the phrase "put up with" hits Peter on a raw spot and triggers his defensiveness. In fact, she states that his behavior is all just about his personal flaws. He is a creep!

In the moment, Peter does not see how his statement about not wanting to talk to the "task master" leads Claire to escalate into threats about how she can do without him. To really take control of Demon Dialogues and soothe raw spots, both partners have to own how they pull the other into negative spirals and actively create their own distress. Now Peter can do it. He says, "In these fights, I defend and then stop talking. That's when my shutting down gets you all freaked out isn't it? You start to feel like I am not here with you. I do shut down. I don't know what else to do. I just want to stop hearing about how you are so angry with me." * Asking About Your Partner's Deeper Emotions. During the fight and the period of alienation that usually follows the fight, Peter and Claire are way too busy to tune into each other's deeper emotions and recognize that they are touching on each other's raw spots. But when they can look at the big picture and slow down a little, they can begin to be curious about the other's softer, underlying emotions, rather than just listening to their own hurts and fears and assuming the worst about their lover.

Now Peter turns to his wife and says, "I get into thinking that you are just out to put me down. But in these situations, you are not just mad are you? Under all that noise and raging you are hurting, aren't you? I get that now. I know your sensitive spot is about being left and abandoned. I don't want you to hurt. I guess, I used to just see you as the righteous principal busy proving how useless I was as a spouse." When Claire asks Peter about the softer feelings that came up for him in this fight, he is able to look inside and pinpoint how the phrase "put up with" ignited all his fears of failure.

And Claire then, remembering their raw spot conversations, adds on, "So it's like whatever you do, I am going to be disappointed. And that feels so bad, you just want to give up and run." Peter agrees. Of course, it really helps here if partners have been able to be really open about their raw spots in previous conversations,

but assuming you have a big impact on your partner and being actively curious about his or her vulnerabilities helps too.

* **Sharing Your Own Deeper, Softer Emotions.** Voicing your deepest emotions, sometimes sadness and shame, but most often attachment fears, may be the most difficult step for you, but it is also the most rewarding. It lets your partner see what's really at stake with you when you argue. So often we miss the attachment needs and fears that lie hidden in recurring battles about everyday issues. Unpacking moments of disconnection like this helps Claire explore her own feelings and risk sharing them with Peter. Claire takes a deep breath and says to Peter, "I am hurting but it's hard to tell you. I have this sense of dread. I can feel it like a lump in my throat. If I stopped coming to you, trying to get your attention, you might just watch us drift off into more and more separateness. You might just watch our relationship fade out, go off the screen. And that is scary." Peter listens and nods. He tells her, "It helps me when you risk telling me that. I feel like I know you in a different way when you say things like that. Then you are more like me somehow. It's easier to feel close. And it makes me want to reassure you. I may zone out sometimes but I wouldn't let you drift away from me."

* **Standing Together.** Taking the above steps forges a renewed and true partnership between lovers. Now a couple has common ground and common cause. They no longer see each other as adversaries, but as allies. They can take control of escalating negative conversations that feed their insecurities and face those insecurities together. Peter tells his wife, "I like it when we can stop and turn down the volume. I like it when we both agreed that this conversation was too hard, that it was out of hand, and scaring both of us. It feels very powerful for us to agree that we were not going to just get stuck the way we usually do. Even if we are not quite sure where we go next, this is a lot better. We don't have to get caught in that stuck place all the time."

All this doesn't mean that Peter and Claire feel really tuned into and connected with each other in a secure bond. But it does mean that they know how to stop a rift before it widens into an unbridgeable abyss. They are aware of two crucial elements of de-escalation: first, that how a partner responds at a key

moment of conflict and disconnection can be deeply painful and threatening to the other, and second, that a partner's negative reactions can be desperate attempts to deal with attachment fears.

Couples won't always be able to apply this knowledge and the specific steps of de-escalation every time they disconnect. It takes practice, going over an unsettling past encounter again and again until it makes coherent sense and, unlike the original event, can draw a possible supportive response from the other partner. Once couples have mastered that, they can begin to integrate these steps into the everyday rhythm of their relationship. When they argue or feel distanced from each other, they can take a step back and ask, "What's happening here?"

They won't always be able to do it; the heat may be too high at certain times. Normally, when my husband misses my signaling for connection, I can step back and reflect on our interaction. I am still balanced and can choose how to respond. But sometimes, I suddenly become so raw and vulnerable that the universe instantly narrows down into what feels like a life and death struggle. I react harshly to create some sense of control, to limit my helplessness. All my husband sees is my hostility. When I'm calmer, I search him out. "Hmm, can we just go back and do that again?" I ask. Then we press the mental rewind button and replay the incident.

By doing this sort of thing over and over, couples develop a fine sense of when they're stepping onto faulty territory. They feel the ground shaking sooner and they are able to escape it faster. They develop confidence in their ability to take charge of moments of disconnection and so shape their most precious relationship. It will take a while though before most couples develop the abbreviated, almost shorthand, de-escalation language of Auntie Doris and Uncle Sid.

Recognizing Your Impact on Your Partner

Kerrie and Sal provide a detailed example of the ins and out of the de-escalation process. An upwardly mobile, cool-looking couple who have been married for 20 years, the only thing they

agree on is that the last four have been "hell." They're continually getting into a negative spiral over the fact that Kerrie, busy with a new career after years of being a stay-at-home mom, is coming to bed much later than Sal. They have tried negotiating about this but deals get made and broken.

They have been sniping at each other for about ten minutes in my office. I ask if this sniping is the usual way they relate to each other. Kerrie, a tall, elegant woman dressed all in red, including her Italian leather briefcase, told me incisively, "No. Usually I just stay real calm. I prefer politeness. And I go off into my head when he does his aggressive thing. But just recently I have felt more and more cornered, so I just come out swinging to get him to back off for a while." I suggest that the mutual attack cycle I was seeing was then maybe a minor deviation from a pattern of Kerrie holding back emotionally and Sal trying to get some sense of control and engage his wife more. They agree.

Sal, an articulate corporate lawyer with a touch of gray at his temples, launches into a diatribe about how deprived he is in this marriage. He is offered no affection, attention, or sex. He is not listened to. He is mad and he is entitled to be mad. Kerrie raises her eyes to heaven, crosses her legs and begins to wave her red high-heeled clad foot up and down. I point out how the pattern is occurring right here. He is getting mad and demanding attention. She is giving "You can't get to me" signals.

Kerrie breaks the tension here, openly laughing as she recognizes her own strategy. Sal then offers a few insights into how Kerrie's upbringing has damaged her ability to be empathic and some advice about how she can address that. Kerrie of course hears only that she is the problem and must work to fix her deficiencies. The tension returns.

We talk a little about attachment and love and how our primal programming dictates that when Sal feels disconnected, he will aggressively reach for Kerrie, and she, seeing only his anger, will defensively withdraw to try to calm herself and the relationship. This basic "It's not your inadequacies, it's how we are wired" message seems to help a lot.

This couple's pattern of "You will listen/You can't make me" had been in place throughout their marriage but had become more powerful and toxic once Kerrie had started her successful career as a real estate broker. Each began to fit their fights, rifts and everyday hurts into this pattern. In an intellectual sense they get that this pattern now runs their relationship and that they both end up being, as Sal puts it, "victims of the vortex."

But there was something missing. It is clear that Kerrie sees Sal through a narrow prism of distrust. She does not really understand the impact her distancing has on him in the here and now and how it pulls him into their cycle. She doesn't truly see how she unwittingly shapes his response to her.

At one point she turns to him and asks pointedly, "So why is it that you get so pushy then? Okay, so there is this wired-in need for contact and I can be kind of cool, that is my style. But I have been a pretty good wife to you. Don't you think so?" Sal nods solemnly, staring at the floor. "But like this morning, you just launched into this thing about how busy I am, how I didn't come to bed till late last night. This is a real issue with us. It comes up all the time. If I don't go to bed with you or come later than you want, you go ballistic. There is something I don't get here. It's like nothing matters except what you want in that moment, even if we have had time together during the day."

Sal starts into an elaborate set of points about how he is not really so demanding. Kerrie is off in some other world before he finishes his first rational sentence.

We need to change level of dialogue here and get a little more emotional engagement. I ask him if he remembers how he feels, waiting for Kerrie to come to bed. He takes a moment and then retorts. "Oh, it's great waiting for your wife all the time. Wondering if and when she is going to deign to turn up!" At first glance, he looks like just what he is, a man used to being in charge of a huge law firm and having people jump to please him. But underneath the reactive anger, I hear the doubt about her "turning up" to be with him.

I ask, "What is happening to you right now as you speak about

this? You sound angry but there is a bitterness here behind the sarcasm. What does it feel like to be waiting for her, feeling that she does not care how long you wait or may not come at all?" I have pushed the down elevator button. After a long silence, he answers.

"It is bitter," Sal admits. That's the word. So I turn it into straight anger. But what does it feel like to be waiting?" And suddenly his face crumples. "It's agonizing, that is what it is." He covers his eyes with his hand. "And I can't handle feeling that way."

Kerrie moves her head back in surprise. She furrows her brow in disbelief. In a soft voice, I ask Sal to help me understand the word "agonizing." As he starts to speak, all traces of Sal, the terror of the courtroom, fade away. "It seems to me that I am always on the edge of Kerrie's life," he says. "I don't feel important to her at all. She fits me in the cracks in her busy schedule. We used to always be close before going to sleep. But now when she doesn't come to bed for hours, I just end up feeling pushed aside. If I try and talk about it, I just get dismissed. Lying in bed by myself, I go into feeling so unimportant. I don't know what happened here. It wasn't always like this. It feels like I am all by myself here."

I pick up on the words "by myself" and "pushed aside" and his sense of loss. I remember listening to him talk in the first session about his lonely childhood, mostly spent in expensive boarding schools, while his diplomat parents traveled the world. I remembered him telling me that Kerrie is the only person he has ever felt close to or trusted and that finding her had opened a whole new world for him. As I reflect these thoughts and his own words back to him, I legitimize his pain. Then I ask how it feels right now to talk about these difficult feelings of being pushed aside. He continues, "It feels sad and kind of hopeless."

I ask, "Is it like some part of you says that you have lost your place with her? You aren't sure how important you are to Kerrie anymore?" "Yes," Sal's voice is very quiet. "I don't know what to do, so I get mad and make lots of noise. That's what I did last night." I comment, "You are trying to get Kerrie's attention. But you feel hopeless. It is scary for most of us when we are unsure

of our connection, when we cannot get the person we love to respond to us." "I don't want to feel this way," Sal adds. "But you are right. It is scary. And it's sad. Like last night, I lay there in the dark and my mind said, 'She is busy. She can take her time.' And here I am, I feel like some kind of pathetic fool." As he says this, his eyes fill with tears.

And this time when I look at Kerrie, her eyes are wide open. She has leaned forward towards her husband. I ask her how she is reacting to the things her husband is sharing. "I am really confused here," she says, and turning to Sal, she asks, "Are you serious? You are. You get mad at me because you don't feel important to me! You feel alone? I have never ever seen that in you. I have never imagined..." Her voice trails off for a few seconds. "I just see this belligerent man out to get me."

We talk about how strange it is for her to hear about how her being less accessible impacts him and that he now lives in a world where he misses her and is scared that he has lost his place with her. "I really understand that you would see me that way," Sal goes on. "I do try to stay away from these feelings. It's easier to just get angry or sarcastic, so that is what you see."

Kerrie looks like she is struggling here. Her husband is not the man she thought he was. I cannot resist pointing out that Sal's anger pushes Kerrie away and as she distances they both step into a spiral of insecurity and isolation.

"I really didn't know you felt that way," says Kerrie. "I didn't know that my staying apart, trying to avoid all the angry exchanges...I never knew you were waiting for me and feeling so hurt. I didn't know how painful that was for you. That it mattered to you so much that I come to bed. When we fight it sounds like it is all about how you want more sex." Now her face and her voice have softened. Then in an amazed whisper she says, "I didn't know I mattered that much to you? I just thought you wanted to be in control."

I asked her if she could see that her distancing to avoid Sal's anger switched on his attachment fears, touched him on a raw spot and triggered his anger, pulling him into the spiral of

distress.

"Yes, I see that." She acknowledges. "I guess that is why he can't just decide to stop being so angry, even when we have discussed it and how I don't like it. I guess I'm hearing how my staying distant and busy sparks all those feelings in him. And then his anger is too much for me and I run away more. And then we are stuck." She turns to Sal. "But I...I never knew you were waiting alone in the dark for me. I never got that I had that impact on you. I just didn't see that. That you might be feeling alone in the dark."

Kerrie and Sal are really beginning to see the power they have over each other on an emotional attachment level. They can begin to grasp how each of them triggers the other's fears and keeps their Protest Polka going. He protests her distance. She protests his aggressive ways of trying to connect with her. Sal and Kerrie start to see, in a concrete way, how they hook each other into their negative pattern.

Source: www.holdmetight.net.

Book available on amazon.com