



One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding

By Emily Wilson, AlterNet

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Rebecca Mead hopes her audience will respond to her book, "One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding" the way she did to the wedding industry -- with a mixture of amusement and horror.

Marketing is replacing organized religion and extended family in people's lives, Mead writes, and as wedding ceremonies become more and more elaborate, there is plenty of humor -- and plenty to turn your stomach -- in the business of pledging undying love.

Weddings are such big business that they now have celebrity planners who are famous in their own right and serve the fabulously wealthy. Colin Cowrie, a celebrity wedding planner, is so in demand that Mead had a hard time catching up with him. Cowrie's packed planner included commitments with Oprah's Million Dollar Wedding Giveaway and the royal family of Qatar.

Mead calls him refreshingly cynical (when she asks about the success rate of people he's helped to marry, his response is, "Sweetheart, I really don't care. I just get 'em down the aisle."), but found his ideas about how to help the bride rather peculiar. Cowrie, who went into business with JC Penney to sell products for the wedding and the home, says he empowers women by helping them choose what products to register for and then teaching the bride-to-be how to use them.

"Selling somebody products is not usually about empowering them," Mead said. "Usually we don't think of choosing your sheets as being empowering."

Empowering or not, the wedding industry rakes in \$161 billion a year -- about five times the amount that the cosmetic industry makes -- and it doesn't do that just by selling sheets. Rather, it uses people like Cowrie to sell brides a whole new image.

"You are selling dreams and you can charge anything," Gerard Monaghan, cofounder of the Association of Bridal Consultants, told a seminar of novice wedding planners in Connecticut. Monaghan's other tips to the would-be wedding consultants include making the bride feel that hiring them is a necessity rather than a luxury, and scaring the brides with how much work it will be to plan their wedding.

Mead thinks many of the women in Monaghan's class would have found it unthinkable not long ago to hire a professional to plan their wedding. She says the shift has something to do with our fascination with celebrity. Americans have come to believe we all can live like the celebrities we see in magazines -- or at least throw parties like them -- under what Mead calls "this new democracy of extravagance."

The idea that we can all be extravagant is catching on. According to Mead, the average commercial wedding costs about \$28,000, involves 43 professionals, and has 165 guests in attendance. The average bride's dress costs \$1,025. Last year American brides and grooms registered for over \$9 billion worth of gifts, and 96 percent of engaged couples plan to register.

But planning an extravagant wedding is about more than aspiring to live like celebrities. For some of the brides Mead talked to, there was a kind of magical thinking guiding their decisions to place so much importance -- and spend so much money -- on the wedding. Some brides feel the more elaborate the wedding, the more secure the marriage will be. That line of thinking makes them the perfect consumer to the wedding industry.

This is the first book for Mead, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, who has written about everything from human egg-trading for infertile women to the Christian diet movement. Whether her subject is childbearing, religion or love, Mead gravitates toward the same theme in her work: people making money off things that seem like they should be outside of the commercial sphere.

Mead became interested in investigating the wedding industry after she wrote a piece for the *New Yorker* in 2003 about David's Bridal, a discount wedding dress chain, that now dresses one in four American brides. Mead says the chain threatens independent wedding dress stores in much the same way Barnes and Nobles threatens small bookstores, and the more she got into the story, the more it seemed there was to find about practices in the wedding industry and what that says about the commercialization of culture.

"It felt like there was so much more, like it was opening up to me," she said about the story. "It seemed like a very ripe subject that nobody else was doing."

While researching the book, Mead went to a wedding dress factory in China where she found seamstresses making \$6 a day to sew \$1000 dresses. Her research also took her to Disney World Wedding Pavillion, where couples can rent Cinderella's coach, to the beaches in Aruba where a third of the weddings are for tourists, to wedding planner conventions and wedding dress retailer seminars.

"It's the same technique for selling a car," Mead said. "But it's a special thing that's being sold."

Mead writes about how professionals in the wedding industry play on the fears and insecurities of the bride, pressuring her to make the day perfect. She cites an article from *Vows*, a magazine for wedding dress retailers, which reminds readers, "Just when the bride thinks she'll have to spend no more, it's your job to remind her that her bridal image looks incomplete." Wedding dress retailers are advised to capitalize on what is called the "Oh, Mommy" moment -- when the bride falls in love with a dress -- and pressure them to buy it immediately, regardless of the cost. And videographers appeal to a bride's emotions by telling her that her wedding day will literally be "lost" if she doesn't preserve it on videotape.

Mead points out that this is all a relatively new phenomenon. The industry markets certain things as traditional, but many, such as diamond engagement rings, are from

the last few decades and are not traditions our grandmothers would recognize. Pre-World War II a third of couples skipped the wedding reception and honeymoon, and 16 percent got married in clothes they already owned. Mead thinks that as religious and familial ties have eroded in the last several decades, marketing has come in to take its place. She also believes that as marriages no longer signify significant changes for many couples -- the first time leaving the family home, their first sexual relationship -- more and more importance is put on the wedding itself to show that something is different and something has changed. People want to feel that something big has happened when they get married, Mead said.

"We're yearning for something spiritual and profound," she added. "We want our weddings to be meaningful. And who do we turn to for meaning? Often we find it in the commercial."

Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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