

THE

Bride

FACTORY

Mass Media Portrayals of Women and Weddings

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1. *Introduction*

YOU CAN FIND THEM AT ANY SUPERMARKET, NEWSSTAND, OR BOOKSTORE. You see them more and more on television, on both broadcast and cable networks, and on the Internet. They are everywhere, and they offer the promise of a dream come true, the pinnacle of female existence, romantic perfection, and happily ever after. “They” are bridal magazines, web sites, and television shows, and they comprise an ever-growing segment of the mass media industry.

One need only scan the covers of bridal magazines, watch movies and television programs that include weddings in their story lines, or come across variations on the same theme in reality television programs to see over and over again the prototype of the white wedding: bride dressed in white and bridegroom in suit or tuxedo repeating vows in front of a group of family, friends, and acquaintances, and then celebrating their newly consecrated marriage with a party consisting of a layered cake, music, and dancing.

The white wedding has become the standard for the ritual of marriage, and increased in popularity as the 20th century progressed. This book examines its portrayal as an unquestioned, common sense aspect of everyday American life. The evidence for the popularity of the white wedding comes from the commonality of its depictions in mass media and documentation in news coverage of the profits it generates as an industry totaling in the billions of dollars annually. The media side of the wedding industry has given us an ever-increasing array of manuals for creating the perfect wedding: *Brides*, *Modern Bride*, *Elegant Bride*, *Southern Living Bride*, *Bridal Guide*, *Martha Stewart Weddings*, and *The Knot* all serve as guidebooks for the female Holy Grail—the meticu-

lously planned big, white wedding. Their Internet counterparts, such as *TheKnot.com*, encourage brides-to-be to shop for all their wedding accessories and create their wedding registries online. Box-office hits of the 1990s, such as *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Runaway Bride*, and the 2002 box-office success *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, offered nearly uniform portrayals of wedding pageantry.

Such fictional displays often belie the quality of the love relationship between bride and groom, as demonstrated in the glamorous wedding depicted in the 1994 film *Muriel's Wedding*, in which Muriel fulfills her lifelong dream of becoming a bride, even as she enters into a sham marriage that ultimately fails. In a sense, the "true" story of Muriel Heslop's wedding allows movie-goers perhaps a more honest depiction of weddings than reality television versions by showing that shaky relationships remain so despite having the validation associated with wedding spectacles. One can see fictional wedding stories such as *Muriel's Wedding* as offering at least some hint of life after the wedding, something reality television weddings that purport to show us "real life" do not.

Wedding-related television series and specials have dotted the television programming landscape in recent years as well. These include the Fox network's series *The Wedding Bells*, and its past reality offerings *Surprise Wedding* and *Married by America*, as well as NBC's *Race to the Altar*, ABC's *In Style Celebrity Weddings*, and A&E's *The American Wedding*. The Learning Channel's *A Wedding Story*, Oxygen's *Real Weddings from The Knot*, FitTV's *Buff Brides*, and WE tv's *Bridezillas* give viewers a look at the backstage goings-on of one of the most revered front stage performances of a woman's life. In 2010, the E! Entertainment Television reality series *Bridalplasty* became the object of criticism by other media organizations. As a new low in the reality competition show subgenre, it promised its female contestants the prize of plastic surgery and a dream body along with a dream wedding (Hutchison, 2010). Indeed, this program illustrated just how divorced from marriage weddings had become: even though she was already married and had a baby, one contestant felt she deserved her special day because her actual wedding did not live up to her dream.

"Dream" weddings serve as the ultimate goal of bridal-themed media. Big and white, set in large churches with massive guest lists, the white weddings depicted in the ever-expanding array of bridal media cultivate a stereotype of the wedding wherein traditions rooted in archaic gender roles have become the norm. All involve numerous bridesmaids and ushers, expensive receptions, and traditional, gendered rituals, such as the giving away of the bride (usually by a male). Rather than serving as the beginning of married life, current mass media present the wedding as the denouement of romantic relationships.

They reinforce and endorse the idea that romantic relationships should and must lead to marriage, which requires a public display—the wedding. At the same time, these media forward cultural meanings and values about women and the way they should play the role of bride on their wedding day.

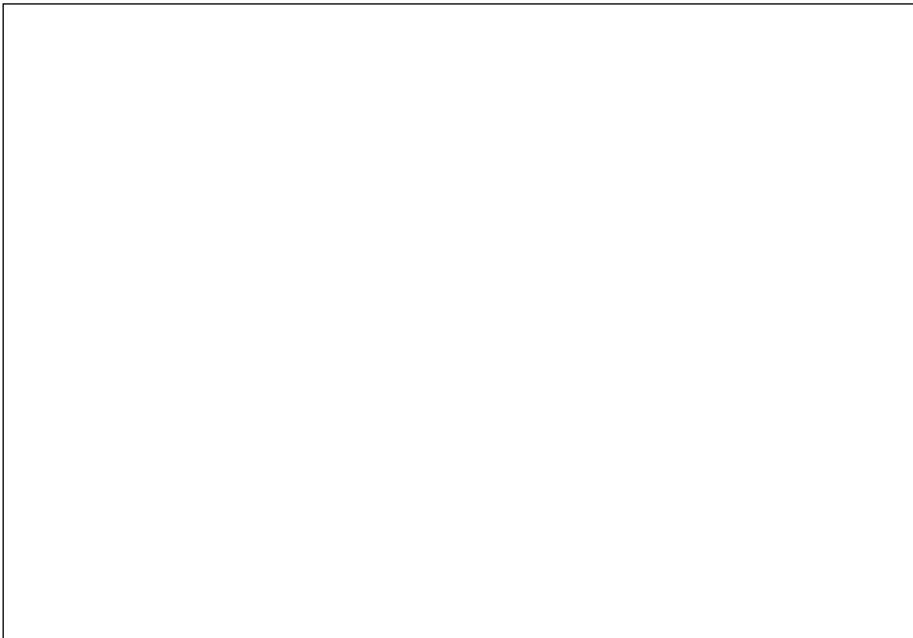


FIGURE 1.1. *Muriel's Wedding*

The comedy *Muriel's Wedding* featured social reject Muriel's (Toni Collette) lavish, dream wedding set to the pop tunes of ABBA. Her sham marriage to a South African swimmer (Daniel Lapaine) ended shortly after the nuptials. At least this fictional wedding story gives viewers a look at married life after the big wedding Muriel dreamed of and saw as her life's goal (Copyright Miramax Films, 1995).

The wedding industry is big business, but, contrary to what has become “tradition,” weddings did not always involve the amount of time and money stipulated by social etiquette and rules enforced today by bridal magazines and planning guides. In the case of the so-called “middle class” wedding in the United States, for example, weddings prior to the 1830s were “simple affairs, usually conducted in the home, unmarked by stereotypical costumes, and often planned as little as a week beforehand” (Freeman, 2002, p. 25). Church weddings were rare, and Thanksgiving was a favorite time for weddings because it served as a ready-made family gathering (Cole, 1893). The wedding process has been subject to revision and transformation since the 1830s and

1840s (Penner, 2004), with weddings modeled after those of elites during the Victorian era providing the model for the commercialized version familiar in the 20th century (Howard, 2006). By the late 1930s, research on wedding expenditures, such as that by Timmons (1939), who reported a mean average wedding cost of \$400 for his sample of family and acquaintances of his students, reflected the burgeoning list of accoutrements needed for the proper wedding.¹

By the start of the 21st century, the bridal business had come to be termed “recession-proof,” generating some \$50 billion a year (Penner, 2004). As Schley (2006) reported in “Invitation to the Wedding Business: Oxygen Campaign Revolves Around Nuptials,” by 2006 the Association for Wedding Professionals had estimated it at \$80 billion a year. In 2007, the average American wedding cost \$28,730; by 2009, that average fell to \$19,580, a reflection of the economic downturn (“Avg. Wedding Cost 1945–2010,” 2011).² Even with a decrease in the average price of weddings—which in 2009 still ranged between the cost of a new car or substantial down payment on a home—weddings remained a highly lucrative business. Indeed, by 2010, wedding spending had gone up again, with the average wedding cost climbing back up by 22.9% from the previous year to \$24,066, according to The Wedding Report, a research company that follows wedding industry trends and spending (“Average Cost of a Wedding Increases 23%,” 2011).

Despite a decline in marriage rates among U.S. adults aged 25 to 54 between the years 2000 and 2009, reflected by a larger proportion of never-married adults in this age group (Dougherty, 2010; Mather & Lavery, 2010), one need only monitor the number and variations of wedding-themed media products to see that weddings themselves remain highly popular as celebratory events that promote the desirability of marriage. As cultural products of symbolic meaning, bridal-themed media offer a means by which we can discover the narrative of the modern woman within American society. Indeed, bridal media offer what Boden (2003) called “the pleasure of ultimate femininity” (p. 61).

Bridal media also reveal what mass communication in general says about women and men as they shape 21st century society. To the uncritical viewer, bridal media, in the form of wedding-related magazines, television shows, and movies, provide entertainment, yes, and even admiration for the pretty clothing, the fancy settings, and the overall glamour that big, white weddings provide. However, only by closely examining the underlying messages forwarded in such stylized depictions can we understand how the wedding serves as a metaphor for society as a whole, reflective of commonly accepted cultural practices, meanings, and values.

This book examines portrayals of gender within the world of bridal media. I use the term “bridal media” to refer primarily to nonfictional, informational

mass communication, namely, magazines, Internet web sites, and reality television programs that use the wedding as their central content. Though aimed at females planning to marry in some type of formal wedding, the target audience realistically can consist of anyone, regardless of relationship status or gender or even sexual orientation. Bridal magazines and their Internet counterparts offer a mercantile-related purpose by showing their audiences specific items available for purchase, whether as part of their editorial or advertising content.

Reality television wedding programs purport to offer their viewers a slice-of-life perspective of real women preparing for their real weddings. More so than fictional versions of brides in films and television dramas and sitcoms, reality television versions of weddings include actual persons. The portrayal of these real women serves as my focus, as I seek to discover the commonalities and differences between various wedding-focused programs in the reality television genre. In this manner, this book serves as an examination of actual wedding practices as depicted in popular culture, specifically in nonfictional accounts of weddings in news stories, bridal magazines, and reality television programming.

The portrayal of women in bridal media reaffirms the assumed identity that “society” expects women to take: that of the beautiful, ecstatic bride. The allure of what Wolf (2003) called “Brideland”—the “world of lush feminine fantasy eerily devoid of men” except as “shadow figures”—allows women, even those identifying as feminist and decidedly financially independent, to leave behind feminist consciousness and allow their inner Cinderella to reveal herself in her “true aristocratic radiance” (p. 61). The problem with Brideland lies in its power to obscure and distract; the relationship being validated by the wedding becomes secondary, with Brideland serving as a transient utopia in which class mobility becomes attainable, if only for just one day.

Unlike the nature and history of marriage, only recently have scholars seriously examined the wedding as an important cultural artifact and practice. For example, Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) examined weddings in her ethnographic study of the bricolage of the rituals incorporated in cross-cultural weddings. Research on brides in particular includes Goldstein-Gidoni’s (1997) participant-observation study of Japanese wedding parlors in *Packaged Japaneseness: Weddings, Business, and Brides*, and Boden’s (2003) examination of wedding industry portrayals of the bridal role in Great Britain in *Consumerism, Romance and the Wedding Experience*. Boden described how British bridal magazines have created the “superbride,” a role which allows women to control every aspect of their weddings while still immersing themselves in the feminine pleasures of the fairy-tale wedding in which they play the role of “star.” This concept of superbride serves as one of the themes analyzed later in this book.