

Brides, Inc.: American Weddings and the Business of Tradition. *By Vicki Howard.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 306 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 0-8122-3945-8.

Reviewed by Katherine Jellison

Vicki Howard's long anticipated study of the American wedding industry was worth the wait. Scholars familiar with the important research she presented in her 2000 University of Texas dissertation will appreciate the time and effort Howard invested in reorganizing the material and refining her arguments for *Brides, Inc.* Despite the first word of its title, however, the book is not primarily about brides. As Howard acknowledges in the introduction, she is more interested in the producers, marketers, and retailers of wedding products and how they created a business that by the early twenty-first century was worth seventy billion dollars. Centering on the wedding industry's formative years between 1920 and 1960, Howard builds on Eric Hobsbawm's arguments in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). She demonstrates that the emerging wedding industry successfully sold new products by invoking the notion of "tradition" and connecting commercial products and services to the family- and community-centered customs of earlier generations.

As Howard notes in her first chapter, Americans shunned lavish weddings throughout most of the nation's history. Cost was only one factor discouraging the practice. Ideology also played a role. Prior to the twentieth century, tastemakers and moral advisors counseled against elaborate weddings because they detracted from the occasion's real purpose: the joining of compatible partners in holy matrimony. By the 1920s, however, the growth of an urban, consumer-oriented middle class prompted entrepreneurs to recast the American wedding as an occasion for significant spending. Following her discussion of the nation's pre-1920 aversion to showy weddings, Howard devotes each subsequent chapter to examination of an enterprise that arose to challenge the old order: engagement and wedding-ring sales; bridal-magazine publishing; department-store wedding services; bridal consulting and the sale of wedding fashions; and reception catering.

In a culture that from the 1920s through the 1960s characterized marriage as women's most important accomplishment and viewed women as the appropriate organizers of family-oriented social events, the wedding industry logically attracted women as both the chief purchasers and the primary sellers of wedding goods and services. Employing trade journals, etiquette manuals, bridal magazines, ad-agency and department-store records, early and mid-twentieth-century novels, and interviews with industry leaders such as Priscilla Kidder (better known as wedding-gown manufacturer "Priscilla of Boston"), Howard unsurprisingly finds that wedding businesses exploited and reconfirmed traditional notions of femininity. To sell gowns, women who headed bridal-apparel firms portrayed themselves in one of two stereotyped roles: the sophisticated glamour girl or the caring mother. Bridal consultants who helped customers select their gowns and coordinate other wedding purchases presented themselves as sisterly or motherly advisors who extended their natural nurturing skills to a department-store setting. Wedding magazines emphasized the female-centered nature of the wedding business by devoting their covers to smiling brides who posed alone, rather than alongside grooms. Even those enterprises that men initially dominated, such as catering, eventually welcomed widespread female participation as all aspects of the wedding business came to be understood as appropriate women's work.

Notions of masculinity as well as femininity shaped the wedding industry. In her most original chapter, Howard examines how gender ideology influenced the marketing of engagement and wedding rings. She argues that women's engagement rings were highly popular items by the mid-twentieth century because giving and receiving them reinforced prevailing ideas about male activity and female passivity: "Men proposed, women got engaged" (p. 48). The groom's purchase of a diamond ring for his fiancée symbolized male initiative and prerogative and proved that he earned enough money to be a good provider. In contrast, an engagement ring for men was an invented tradition that survived only briefly after its introduction in the mid-1920s. It had no connection to existing social customs or gender roles and could not plausibly be marketed as an homage to any previous wedding practice. After all, a woman's ability to purchase an engagement ring for her fiancé lacked significance in a society that never expected her to demonstrate earning power as a prerequisite for marriage. Jewelers made greater inroads,

however, with another 1920s innovation—the wedding ring for men. This was an invented tradition that became more popular as the twentieth century progressed. The idea that wedding bands were acceptable for husbands as well as wives gained its greatest momentum in the years following World War II. Matching his-and-her rings symbolized and strengthened the notion of family togetherness in this period that romanticized domesticity. Double-ring ceremonies honored the long-held belief that marriage ideally yoked partners who complemented one another.

Howard successfully demonstrates that wedding “traditions” adapt and conform to the changing needs and values of American society. Howard ends her study with a brief epilogue that addresses innovations today, including bridal-gown discount stores, same-sex weddings, and shopping on the Internet. This richly illustrated and exhaustively researched study provides systematic and long overdue analysis of the evolution of wedding-industry products and marketing. Howard leaves it to others to provide in-depth treatment of the motives, desires, and behavior of wedding-business customers. One hopes scholars will soon investigate the consumers’ side of the story with the same diligence Howard devotes to wedding-industry producers.

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