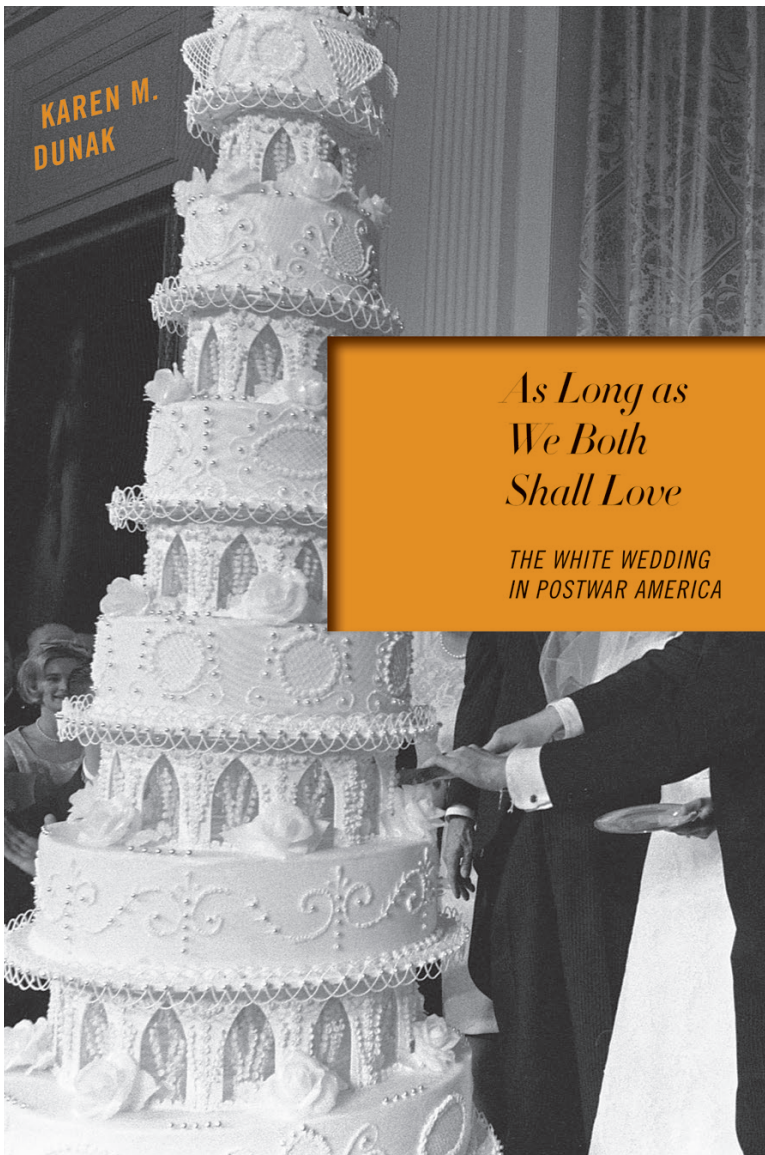


# As Long as We Both Shall Love

The White Wedding in Postwar America

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



*As Long as We Both Shall Love* explains why the American wedding has retained its cultural power, despite the many social, political, and economic changes of decades following World War II. The modern white wedding – an event marked by engagement with the marketplace, recognition of prescribed gender roles and responsibilities, declaration of religious or spiritual belonging, and self-conscious embrace of “traditions” such as formal dress, proper vows, and a post-ceremony reception – has survived, and even thrived, Karen Dunak argues, because of couples’ ability to personalize the celebration and exert individual authority over its shape.

The wedding’s ability to withstand and even absorb challenges or interpretation has helped the celebration maintain its long-standing appeal. Because accepted wedding traditions, such as an exchange of vows before a selected authority figure, the witness of the celebration by a chosen audience, or the hosting of a post-wedding reception, could be shaped to fit personal values and visions, celebrants – from sweethearts of the early postwar years to hippies of the 1960s to same-sex couples of the 2000s – maintained those traditions. While couples had long aimed to make their wedding distinctive, as the twentieth century came to a close and the twenty-first century began, adding a unique element to a wedding became an increasingly standard practice. The fact that weddings allowed for experimentation opened doors for both how and by whom weddings might be celebrated. Traditions and celebration styles provided opportunities for personal and very often explicitly political expression, thereby challenging critics’ evaluations of American wedding culture as one marked primarily by crass consumerism and mindless conformity.

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## Introduction

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**SUMMARY**

*As Long As We Both Shall Love* begins with a discussion of the 2009 film *Bride Wars*. Playing to critics' expectations of over-the-top wedding consumerism and poor bridal behavior, *Bride Wars* did little to improve upon the tattered reputation of American wedding culture. Critics skewered the film for its assertion that otherwise smart, savvy, sane women became unhinged by the prospect of a turn as a wedding day "fairy tale princess." Audiences, who could get their fix of crazy brides at home, via WE TV's *Bridezilla*, generally ignored the film, which ranked 56th of all 2009 releases. The film reflected a cultural trend – as seen in popular media, academic scholarship, and shared wedding anecdotes – toward critique of wedding culture and its celebrants for their selfishness, excess, and conformity. But Dunak argues that such critique ignores the possibility weddings have offered their celebrants for thoughtful consideration and articulation about the meaning of their individual unions and about the significance and evolution of American marriage more broadly. Rather than a ritual marked by rigidity and conformity, the wedding, across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, presented brides and grooms a location where they might make public their views on a host of issues. As they celebrated from the late 1940s through the 2010s, couples challenged expectations of mainstream American culture when it came to questions of familial and communal authority, gender roles and performance, and access to the rights and privileges of citizenship. While deeply rooted in an investigation of cultural representations of the wedding, at the heart of Dunak's argument is the importance of individual wedding celebrants, whose views she chronicles through oral histories, letters, and personal reminiscences. While media and the marketplace shaped ideas about what a wedding should be and do, how brides and grooms should behave and what they should value in their celebration and each other, media and market influence was not static. The nature of advice and suggestion changed over time as the wedding industry responded to social, cultural, and economic changes that reflected the evolving values of the American people. Brides and grooms did not follow prescription blindly, but rather picked and choose elements of wedding culture that appealed to them and laid elements that did not to the wayside.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- How is *Bride Wars* representative of broader cultural critiques of the white wedding?
- How would you describe the reputation of the white wedding during the early years of the twenty-first century?

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- How does Dunak's argument differ from popular conceptions of the wedding?
- Why is World War II such a pivotal point for investigation of American wedding culture?
- What does Dunak suggest about the relationship between individual wedding celebrants and the broader wedding culture of market and media?
- What role has individual authority played in celebrants' understanding of their weddings?

## Chapter 1: “Linking the Past with the Future”: Origins of the Postwar White Wedding

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### SUMMARY

When Kay Banks prepared to marry Buckley Dunstan, she engaged in a battle of the wills with her parents, Ellie and Stanley, as they determined the guest list. Kay, who wanted a small wedding and imagined the day as her own, faced opposition from her parents, who believed it necessary to invite friends, family, coworkers, and members of community standing. Recognizing the difference between his own wedding and that of his daughter, Stanley Banks, the title character of Edward Streeter’s *Father of the Bride*, lamented the time, cost, and consternation required of putting on a modern wedding. A best-selling book and a box office smash, *Father of the Bride* spoke to many of the changes marking American wedding culture during the years following World War II. While those looking back to the early postwar period would describe Kay Banks’s wedding as “traditional,” the celebration was a marked departure from many of the celebrations with which Americans were familiar. Weddings of the first half of the twentieth century, in fact, were marked more by their variety than by their adherence to a standard form. Region, ethnicity, race, and class determined the shape of a wedding celebration as couples followed diverse practices handed down by family or community members. A white wedding celebration style existed, to be sure, but such a celebration was celebrated primarily among the elite and upper-middle classes. In the aftermath of World War II, the expansion of the middle class and democratization of American consumer culture created an environment in which the white wedding style could – and did – thrive. Popular memory of the 1950s looks to the era as a time of contentment and conformity, but the development of the postwar white wedding points to the tremendous changes – the growing focus on the personal rather than the communal, increased participation in an expanded consumer economy, and the rising authority of peer culture over family culture – that marked 1950s culture as anything but staid or predictable. During the postwar years, the white wedding provided a safe, and in some ways natural, vehicle for experimenting with the many social and cultural changes on the horizon. The language of tradition – so celebrated in the marketplace – masked many of the challenges being waged through the newly standardized style of American wedding celebration.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did *Father of the Bride* reflect generational tensions about how a wedding should be celebrated?
- What accounted for the diversity of wedding celebration styles in the years before World War II?

## Chapter 1: “Linking the Past with the Future”: Origins of the Postwar White Wedding

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- What role did World War II play in contributing to the establishment of a standard form of wedding celebration?
- How did the concept of the wedding as the “bride’s day” mark a shift in wedding culture?
- What accounted for the diminishing influence of family and local community in wedding celebrations?
- In what ways did the white wedding of the post-World War II years reflect modern ideas about American life?

## Chapter 2: “The Same Thing That Happens to All Brides”: Luci Johnson, the American Public, and the White Wedding

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### SUMMARY

By the mid-1960s, the white wedding was a ubiquitous force in American culture, understood to be and accepted as the standard style of celebration. Despite its popularity, however, questions remained when it came to what purpose a wedding should serve and who should have a voice in determining that purpose. Public response to Luci Baines Johnson’s very public White House wedding brought many of these questions to the surface. Johnson’s desire to keep the wedding private and limit coverage of the wedding day infuriated Americans who believed they had a right to witness the wedding. Relying on ideas of the wedding as a community celebration, many American citizens wrote to the White House asking, sometimes demanding, that Johnson reconsider her decision to ban television cameras during the wedding ceremony. While Johnson was following advice of popular wedding literature in focusing on her own desires and seizing the wedding as “her day,” the public rejected this rationale and asserted the fundamental role community played in a wedding. Luci Johnson was a public figure, which put her in a unique position, but she and her White House representatives consistently referred to her as being like “any other girl.” And like any other girl, she received input from unanticipated – and often unwelcome – sources. Her wedding, while larger in size and scope, was not so different from the white weddings of many other American women. When Johnson scheduled her wedding for August 6, the anniversary of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, a new host of critics emerged, arguing that the excess of Johnson’s wedding was untoward with the United States engaged in a war in Vietnam. Protestors in opposition to the wedding revealed that not all Americans supported the elevated status the white wedding had come to enjoy. As a whole, the public nature of Johnson’s wedding and the very public response reveal the ongoing questions over and emerging critiques of the celebration often undocumented in weddings of those outside the public eye.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ What role did the wedding play in popular culture through the 1950s and 1960s?
- ➔ How was Luci Johnson’s wedding reflective of wedding culture at the time?
- ➔ Why were Americans so interested in Johnson’s wedding?
- ➔ Why did Johnson feel justified in making the decision that her wedding should be “private”?

## Chapter 2: “The Same Thing That Happens to All Brides”: Luci Johnson, the American Public, and the White Wedding

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- Why were Americans unhappy with Johnson’s desire to limit coverage of her wedding?
- Why did Americans believe they had a right to comment on Johnson’s wedding day choices?
- Why did some Americans oppose the selection of Johnson’s wedding date?
- How did Americans show their discontent with Johnson’s wedding? Consider both those who supported the wedding and those who opposed it.

## Chapter 3: “Getting married should be fun”: Hippie Weddings and Alternative Celebrations

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### SUMMARY

Following the protests that marked Luci Johnson’s wedding, continued investigation into the 1960s reveals that the white wedding’s longevity was far from assured. Brides and grooms of the late 1960s and early 1970s often dismissed the standard wedding as cookie-cutter and conformist. As a generation marked by a coming-of-age where individualism seemed increasingly natural, brides and grooms aimed to infuse their weddings with personal meaning. To do so, couples developed new celebrations: hippie weddings and alternative celebrations. The wedding became a site of practical application for one of the most lasting mantras of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: the personal is political. Countercultural values such as authenticity, honesty, and individuality informed couples’ motivation to celebrate in a unique style and became hallmarks of the weddings themselves. Couples used the public nature of the wedding to express their personal beliefs about sex, gender, and marriage. Changes to vows and alterations of the ceremonial form allowed couples to communicate their political perspectives through a familiar ritual. Where couples highly prized guest participation and friends’ contributions to their celebrations, brides and grooms showed little concern for familial or societal expectations. While hippie or alternative weddings never replaced the white wedding entirely, they did alter the shape of the standard wedding and created limitless possibilities for personalization. These alternative celebrations contributed directly to the wedding’s continued cultural significance by allowing brides and grooms of any social or political predilection to shape the wedding to their personal preference. As such, these celebrations made both the wedding and marriage more appealing to those who might otherwise have found the institutions too confining.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did wedding celebrants of the 1960s and 1970s feel the need to amend the white wedding style?
- How did media contribute to the notion that “hippie weddings” had become standard wedding celebration style?
- What motivated “new wedding” celebrants to amend their weddings in the way they did?
- What elements of 1960s politics and culture informed amendments to wedding style of the time?
- How did weddings of the late 1960s and early 1970s differ from the weddings



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of the early postwar period?

➤ In what way did the “new weddings” of the late 1960s and 1970s maintain traditional elements of the white wedding?

# CHAPTER 3

## Chapter 4: “Lots of young people today are doing this”: The New White Wedding

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### SUMMARY

As Anna Quindlen prepared to be wed, she navigated a fine line between a wedding that reflected both her feminist principles and her little girl dreams of hosting a wedding where she wore the white dress of her childhood dreams. She, like many women of her generation ultimately believed, she could shape the wedding to reflect the seemingly contradictory worlds of feminist empowerment and wedding culture. As alternative weddings became standard media fare, many social critics declared that the “traditional” wedding would soon be extinct, but such declarations ignored the appeal of the wedding for people like Quindlen. Rather than nearing extinction, the white wedding remained extremely popular among many brides and grooms of the 1970s, particularly those who might identify as members of the increasingly vocal Silent Majority. Indeed, the majority of young Americans marked their marriages with the style of celebration that had become standard. But the alternative wedding influenced even these less politically active or conservatively-inclined brides and grooms as a “new wedding” style came into vogue. By declaring their commitment to tradition, mainstream brides and grooms accepted the wedding to be a site where the personal and the political intertwined. Expectation of personal expression had become mainstream, articulated by very public brides like Tricia Nixon and within wedding periodicals such as *Bride’s* magazine. The malleability of the wedding celebration allowed a population increasingly willing to accept and celebrate their diversity to project their vision of themselves and their place within their community, both local and national. The flexibility of the ritual – and brides and grooms’ willingness to take advantage of this flexibility – assured the enduring power of the wedding ceremony. The white wedding survived because the ceremony lent itself to fluidity and improvisation. As the 1970s came to a close and the 1980s declared tradition newly chic, couples embraced a wedding ceremony that looked incredibly similar to the weddings of the 1950s. But this similarity belied the political element of personal expression that now played a more explicit role in the wedding. This acceptance of individualism would open doors for new styles of celebration – and the celebration of new relationships – in the years to follow.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did Anna Quindlen’s wedding planning experience reveal the tension between modern political views and the appeal of the “traditional” wedding style?
- Why did people assume the white wedding was on the path to extinction?
- What was the “new wedding”? Why did brides and grooms wish to celebrate

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in this way?

- How did *Bride’s* magazine attempt to appeal to a new generation of brides as the 1970s began?
- How was Tricia Nixon and Edward Cox’s celebration representation of 1970s wedding trends?
- In what ways did the broader wedding industry evolve to appeal to “new wedding” brides and grooms?
- How did “traditional” weddings of the 1980s differ from the 1950s weddings they seemed to resemble?

## Chapter 5: “It matters not who we love, only that we love”: Same-Sex Weddings

Pages 134–168

**SUMMARY**

During the 1987 March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, activists joined together in front of the Internal Revenue Service’s building and participated in “The Wedding,” the mass marriage of nearly 2,000 same-sex couples. Embracing elements of the standard wedding celebration – an officiant oversaw the event, couples exchanged vows, many participants wore special dress, and a supportive community witnessed the event – “The Wedding” publicly challenged discriminatory practices and policy that limited marriage to union between a man and a woman. Given the debates over same-sex marriage, gay and lesbian couples’ embrace of the white wedding was a conscious political action and demonstrated the symbolic appeal of the wedding. While some members of the queer community rejected marriage as a patriarchal relationship, other gay men and lesbians desired the rights and benefits of marriage – as well as the public and legal sanction of the relationship. As a result same-sex wedding celebrations, in media and popular culture as well as real life, became increasingly common during the 1990s and 2000s. Beyond marriage, the wedding, the public announcement of personal commitment, was important to same-sex couples. Celebrants’ motivations ranged from the need to throw off the cloak of secrecy and reject a shared history marked by shame to the realization of childhood dreams of an elaborate wedding to the desire to have family and friends witness the celebration. The wedding provided a point of familiarity for those unfamiliar – and sometimes even unsupportive – of same-sex marriage. Homosexual relationships might be foreign, but a wedding was universal. Rejecting the notion that they merely aped heterosexual relationships or patriarchal celebrations, lesbians and gay men embraced the flexibility of the wedding celebration, using the event to communicate personal views and critique uneven political privileges. Given the fluctuating legality of queer marriage, celebrating a gay or lesbian wedding automatically served a political act. Queer weddings allowed for expression of distinction and belonging, a long-standing duality in American wedding celebrations, but in this context, one with a more direct political objective. The possibility of individual inflection in weddings and wedding traditions not only contributed to the celebration’s appeal, it also allowed the celebration, too often dismissed as frivolous and conventional, to serve relevant personal and political purposes.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- Why would activists use a wedding in their March on Washington?
- Why did some members of the queer community reject marriage as a goal?

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- How did the demand for marriage equality emerge?
- What has been the overall stance of the wedding industry in regard to same-sex weddings?
- What unique challenges did gay men and lesbians face as they planned their weddings?
- What did same-sex and opposite-sex weddings have in common?
- What was the importance of hosting a wedding even when the marriage celebrated would not be legally recognized?
- How did gay men and lesbians hope that wedding celebrations would affect those ambivalent or unsupportive of same-sex marriage?

## Conclusion

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### SUMMARY

In 2011, media presented two very public weddings to the American public: the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton and the star-studded union of reality phenom Kim Kardashian and professional basketball player Kris Humphries. While television, print media, and the web intensely chronicled the planning, celebration, and aftermath of the weddings, surveys and popular response revealed that while Americans paid attention, they ultimately cared very little. Coverage of the Royal Wedding, for example, far exceeded Americans proclaimed interest. As for the Kardashian celebration, many people may have watched the televised specials of her wedding and followed tabloid coverage, but for the most part, it was not motivated by a desire to emulate the celebrity. The driving impulse was more voyeuristic. People watched out of a curiosity and out of a desire to contribute to the critique of how over-the-top, how blatantly consumerist, how self-involved Kardashian was. And when she filed for divorce just months later, her wedding became the case in point about how couples dedicated too much focus to the wedding and not enough to the marriage. But the Royal Wedding and the Kardashian-Humphries celebration, with their size and scope, took attention away from an emerging trend in American wedding celebrations. Increasingly, men and women created celebrations that were far simpler, and in their views, far saner than the wedding culture that had marked the 1990s and early 2000s. Inspired by do-it-yourself trends and a desire to maintain a reasonable budget, many brides and grooms decided to personalize their weddings, a now established hallmark of wedding culture, by investing their time and energy and often that of their families and friends in their celebrations. The bride and the groom, often living far from the many communities they may have created over the course of their lives, used the wedding as an opportunity to create a dream community, if only for a day or a weekend. While some couples eschewed formalizing their unions altogether, the majority of couples still do eventually wed. But the ways they choose to mark their weddings, while still integrating elements of the white wedding, continues to be marked by individual expression and personal desire.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did the American public respond to the Royal Wedding? To the Kardashian wedding?
- How did Jenna Bush's wedding reflect a departure from the typical celebrity wedding?
- How did Jenna Bush's wedding reflect changes in contemporary wedding

## Conclusion

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culture more broadly?

- Why did some brides and grooms embrace the simple or “sane” wedding as they planned their celebrations?
- How did social media contribute to the evolution of the simple wedding?
- Why did some Americans reject weddings and marriage altogether?
- How have contemporary weddings reflected a blend of modern and traditional celebration styles?