

# Miss Manners takes wedding planners to task. Etiquette expert appalled at selfishness of brides and grooms

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For 32 years, etiquette expert Judith Martin, a.k.a. Miss Manners, has watched social mores loosen and public behavior slide. But little has appalled her more than the increasingly selfish conduct of brides and grooms-to-be.

Spurred by wedding planners, she maintains, they act as if their nuptials are not an intimate personal ceremony but a show in which they are the stars, in which no one's interests but their own are to be considered and whose tab should be footed by parents and guests alike.

So it should surprise no one that she has taken the white gloves off and come out swinging. Miss Manners' Guide to a Surprisingly Dignified Wedding, (W.W. Norton & Co., 320 pages, \$24.95), written with her daughter, newlywed Jacobina Martin, tries to get couples back to the basics, stressing that a meaningful wedding need not be an over-the-top menagerie, put anyone in debt or require a theme.

There's already a theme, and it's marriage.

## Celebrity treatment

"People have come to believe that a proper wedding requires all of these things that the industry says they have to spend money and time on," Martin said. "They're being told these things are necessary in the name of etiquette. It's a vulgar display and unnecessary. I wanted to set the record straight."

This should come as a relief (or something to rue) for the 2.1 million American couples expected to marry in 2010.

Martin is not the first to take note of the escalating trend toward treating oneself as a celebrity. Television has made sport of it with shows such as We TV's *Bridezilla* and TLC's *Say Yes to the Dress*.

New Yorker magazine culture writer Rebecca Mead took on the wedding industry in her 2007 book, *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding*. She theorized that overblown weddings cover up a sense of emptiness in a time when religious authority is sliding; make the ritual more meaningful to people who are independent longer and marry later; and define couples by their consumer choices ("I buy, therefore I am.").

The most common question posed to Martin when she started her column in 1978 related to the white wedding dress. Today, questions revolve around money. "From the people getting married, it's: 'How can we get more money out of our families?'" she said. "From guests, it's: 'How can we avoid being exploited?'"

## **Personal interest**

As America's leading manners columnist, Martin was doubly motivated to write the book because of her daughter's experiences. Jacobina Martin, who teaches improvisational comedy at Second City in Chicago, became engaged when her mother signed the book deal.

"My daughter became engaged and started reading the wedding porn — big, thick magazines — and was horrified," Martin said.

Their book's eight chapters include "The General Principles," "The Engagement" and "Three Terrible Ideas," along with troubleshooting tips and timetables written wryly by Jacobina Martin. There are also questions posed to Martin over the years, with her oh-so-correct answers to her "Gentle Readers."

## **Martin said she is not a grouch or out of touch.**

"I would be if I were interfering with weddings that people can afford to spend the money on and that make them happy," she said. "From my mail, I know people go into great debt and try to get money out of their relatives and friends, so they can't afford it, and it does not make them happy. It's astounding to me that a very profit-able industry has managed to convey the idea that tremendous spending and showing off is the proper way to get married."

## **Consultants disagree**

Naturally, wedding consultants take umbrage at Miss Manners' broad brushstrokes.

Deborah Moody, director of the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants, an industry group that trains 100 wedding planners annually and was founded in San Jose in 1990, said Miss Manners' ire at the wedding industry is "not very nice."

"We work to try to help you stay within your budget and have your dream day as well," she said.

New trends include bridal couples chipping in with parents to pay for the wedding and older couples registering for honeymoon donations, instead of china from department stores.

Laurie Arons, a highend wedding planner in San Francisco, is, like Miss Manners, "horrified" with the practice of registering for a honeymoon. Arons suggests couples register with a charity so gifts can be donations to a nonprofit group instead.

"In the extreme, Miss Manners probably is quite accurate about some planners wanting to up-sell their clients," Arons said, "but there are still good people out there working and thinking of the guests."

## **Well-mannered bride**

Jacobina Martin's ceremony a year ago was held in the afternoon at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C. At the reception, a tea, bride and groom mingled freely with guests.

Best of all, the bride did not wait a year to send out her thank-you notes, as some without manners have been known to do.

"Their airplane left late in the afternoon and she was writing thank-you letters all along," Miss Manners said. "She was brought up by me. What did you expect?"