The 2009 film *Bride Wars* begins innocently enough. After a youthful sighting of a wedding celebrated at New York City’s Plaza Hotel, best friends Liv (Kate Hudson) and Emma (Anne Hathaway) are smitten. They decide their weddings will be just as grand as the one they witnessed as girls. Childhood fantasy becomes adult expertise as they memorize and categorize the best in wedding styles, themes, and professionals. When the audience meets Liv and Emma as adults, they are attending a college friend’s wedding, dissecting the celebration, point by point. Their verdict: “It ain’t June, and it ain’t the Plaza.” When the bride announces that it is time for the bouquet toss, Emma and Liv join an excited (some might say manic) throng, jumping and straining so they might catch the bouquet and be the next to wed.

While we never learn who, exactly, caught the bouquet, we soon bear witness to two very different engagements. Liv finds a Tiffany’s box amid her live-in boyfriend’s belongings and proceeds to announce to friends that she is getting married—before the actual proposal has been made. When said boyfriend fails to act as quickly as she would have liked, Liv storms into his office and demands an explanation. Instead
of being annoyed, he is charmed by his bride-to-be’s impulsivity, and the engagement is officially on. As fate would have it, Emma receives an unexpected proposal from her homebody boyfriend at approximately the same time. When she calls Liv to announce her news, the immediate response is neither joy nor jealousy. Instead, a quick string of questions about the size and quality of the diamond are top priority. After ascertaining that the stone is worthy, the two share excited squeals.

As Liv and Emma prepare for their wedding days, they meet with the best wedding planner in Manhattan, Marion St. Clair (Candice Bergen). St. Clair schools them, unnecessarily, on the importance of their impending celebrations as she states, “The wedding marks the first day of your life.” Punctuating her point, she continues, “You have been dead until now.” Improbably, both Emma and Liv are able to book June wedding dates at the Plaza. When asked if they would like to check with their grooms on the dates, the two quizzically respond in unison: “No.” With dates firmly set and St. Clair contracts signed, they have approximately three and a half months to plan their weddings. Delighted at their good fortune, they begin the requisite wedding shopping. The first stop is clearly meant to be an upscale wedding boutique. Here, Liv decides on a “perfect” gown, designed by Vera Wang. While the audience never learns a price (for the gown—or any other part of the weddings), they do learn a vital fact about wedding gowns, and Wang gowns, in particular: “You don’t alter Vera to fit you. You alter yourself to fit Vera.” Ultimately, this process of alteration will serve as a guide for all things wedding-related.

Of course, some amount of conflict is necessary to make the movie pop (the film is called Bride “Wars,” after all). St. Clair reveals that she has booked the women for the same day at the Plaza, and if they plan to be in each other’s weddings, one will need to change her date and venue. What begins as a civilized agreement to give consideration to who will alter her plans quickly escalates into an all-out cat fight, pre-wedding style. Emma endeavors to make Liv fat by sending her food bouquets. She sneaks into Liv’s salon to swap out her normal hair color for a blue hue. Liv gives as good as she gets. She spreads rumors that Emma’s is a shotgun wedding and, in another kind of salon attack, she replaces Emma’s light spray tanning colorant with a color called “Blood Orange.” Even before the full battle begins, Emma’s fiancé, Fletcher, wonders why
women get so “worked up” and “crazy” when it comes to weddings. The audience marvels not only at this level of crazy but also at the power of a wedding to destroy a friendship that had spanned decades.

Ultimately, after a cathartic wedding day wrestling match, the two best friends realize how silly they have been. Only once the months of wedding preparation are over does Emma see that Fletcher is not the right man for her, and she cancels her wedding. Conveniently, this allows her to attend her once-again best friend’s nuptials. In a rapid-fire sequence of events, Emma and Liv’s brother, Nate, get together, and when the two friends meet a year later, after Emma and Nate’s destination wedding, they reveal to one another that they are pregnant and due on the same day. The end.

Critics savaged the film. From its negative female stereotyping to its blatant and excessive materialism to its near erasure of the groom’s import, reviewers agreed: the film highlighted the worst of American wedding culture. Manohla Dargis of the New York Times zeroed in on the flatness of the main characters. They are, she wrote, “deeply unreasonable because they are female stereotypes: unreasonableness is built into their character arcs.” Elizabeth Weitzman of the New York Daily News went even further, suggesting the film indicated that women (not just Liv and Emma) are “‘obnoxious,’ ‘overbearing,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘pathetic,’ ‘bitchy,’ and ‘basket cases.’” Dargis identified the character inconsistencies brought on by Liv and Emma’s weddings. Trading their identities as “putatively sharp, savvy, seemingly capable modern women” for a turn as “fairy tale princesses,” the women allowed the wedding to distract them from their careers, their friendships, their fiancés, and, one might add, reality. The very selection of the Plaza as wedding venue, particularly for a New York City public school teacher (like Emma), rankled those with a sense of fiscal realism. The material assumptions of Bride Wars—the use of an exclusive wedding planner and the self-conscious references to Tiffany and Vera Wang—gave the film, particularly in the midst of an economic recession, a “sense of upper-middle-class privilege,” wrote the Chicago Tribune’s Michael Phillips, that “feels smug.” The grooms, Weitzman observed, wedding day props of little importance, “hover on the sidelines, fully aware of their own insignificance.” Audiences likewise were unimpressed—or, perhaps, more accurately, they were uninterested. The film grossed $58,715,510, ranking 56th of all 2009 releases.
From *Runaway Bride* to cable television channel TLC’s *A Wedding Story* to the celebrity celebrations featured in *InStyle Weddings*, weddings saturated American culture during the 1990s and early 2000s. But somewhere along the way, the celebration got a bad rap. The critiques waged against *Bride Wars* mirrored critiques made about real weddings and wedding celebrants. Rather than a day of meaning, commitment, and partnership, the wedding had become the province of the selfish, the catty, the overindulgent. Eye-rolling and whispers over wedding excess were as typical as misty-eyed sentiment. Complaining about weddings became as common as weddings themselves. Friends shared anecdotal tales about brides who had gone over the edge, or couples who had taken their demands too far. Guests increasingly were directed to several expensive registries, invited to an array of showers, and expected to attend a wedding “weekend” at a destination far from home. Television shows such as MTV’s *My Big Friggin’ Wedding* or WE TV’s *Bridezillas* delighted in the bad behavior of wedding participants (especially the brides, who, like Liv and Emma, typically had lost any semblance of sanity). Indeed, tales about brides who made bridesmaids sign contracts, vowing they would not gain weight or get pregnant before the wedding, cemented what everyone knew: weddings were out of control.

At a time of heightened prosperity (real or imagined), celebrity veneration (and imitation), and unabashed willingness to accumulate consumer debt, the wedding became a site of justifiable overspending. In a 2007 examination of “20 Most Expensive Celebrity Weddings,” Forbes.com described the celebrity wedding, “the Super Bowl of event planning” and declared budgets to be a “non-issue.” The excess of spending and the seeming joy this excess brought to spenders marked the wedding as another site where Americans had gone horribly astray. By 2005, Americans spent $125 billion a year on weddings, an estimated average of just under $27,000 each, even as public perception held that 50 percent of marriages ended in divorce. Everyone, it seemed, knew someone who had spent a small fortune on a wedding, only to be divorced before they could celebrate their fifth (and sometimes, first) anniversary. If couples focused more on their marriages and less on their weddings, many believed, the state of American marriage surely would improve.
Intellectual investigations of the wedding echoed the messages of popular media and the experiences of so many wedding attendees. Critiques of the consumerist impulse associated with weddings suggested they were nothing more than extended shopping sprees or wasteful indulgences. Feminist texts charged that in their acceptance of wedding excess, couples not only participated in consumer overindulgence, but strengthening the patriarchal nature of the existing heterosexist culture. Blindly following the path laid before them, grooms and, even more, brides bowed to convention and kowtowed to conformity as they unquestioningly engaged with the rules of the vilified wedding industry. Some texts targeted “alternative” brides, with essays and anecdotes from women who had consciously negotiated wedding territory, uncomfortable with the expected path. These sources, while seeing the possibility of what weddings might be, marked themselves as guides for those who were the exception rather than the norm. Conservative and conventional, the white wedding seemed to perpetuate and highlight the worst characteristics of the American people and the worst elements of American culture.  

This book does not continue in that thread. Instead, it argues for an alternative investigation of the American wedding and its evolution in the years since World War II. While many elements of the wedding, from the symbolic meanings behind its “traditional” components to the way it is marketed, deserve questioning and critique, too many evaluations have ignored the possibilities the wedding offered its celebrants. Re-evaluating the modern American wedding’s postwar progression reveals a far more complex and even contested history than first imagined. Brides and grooms have not and did not merely follow a well-trodden path. During the second half of the twentieth century, many couples embraced the familiarity of the wedding celebration and then used the seemingly safe and staid location of a wedding to challenge expected cultural norms and behaviors. Many couples approached their weddings with thoughtfulness and care. The wedding is an ideal site for historical inquiry because its actual evolution differs from what many people, confident because of their assumed knowledge of the celebration, imagine its historical development to have been.  

Admittedly, the wedding is rooted in a patriarchal history in which women were “given” from one man to the next and vowed to “obey”
their husbands, but for many years, many celebrants have rejected or amended these elements of the celebration to reflect a more egalitarian view of their impending marriages. Rejections and amendments of this kind marked multiple components of the ceremony and celebration—as seen most obviously, perhaps, in the increasingly widespread celebration of same-sex weddings. Over the last several decades, participants have reclaimed the celebration, and, in the process, have used the wedding to challenge traditional expectations of men and women, masculinity and femininity, and marriage and commitment. Rather than forcing people into cookie-cutter sameness, the celebration has provided couples with the possibility of individual expression, personal authority, and cultural reinterpretation, all hallmarks of the cultural shift that occurred in the decades following World War II. While this book is a history of the wedding and its celebrants, it is also a book about the nature of post–World War II American culture, its changed understandings of individuality, its complicated blend of public and private life, and its shifting notions of American civic participation and belonging.

Certainly, men’s and women’s personal expression and cultural negotiation occurred through varying degrees of participation in the marketplace, thereby demonstrating the continued power of the consumer economy. The fact that the marketplace influenced and continues to influence the wedding has been established. But the relationship between couples and the market is not that of one-sided influence. Critics bemoaned the commercialization of American holidays and celebrations long before the marketplace exerted the cultural influence it has in the years since World War II. Historian Vicki Howard has uncovered the history of the wedding industry, demonstrating how celebrants alternately led and were led to various trends, how the business allowed women an outlet in professional life, and how the changing shape of American consumerism indelibly influenced the shape of the American wedding. Contemporary observers, those who wish the wedding could be simple, or be “as it used to be,” Howard proves, rely on a mythic past, which never truly existed. Since the nineteenth century, for better or worse, a version of a wedding market has shaped and has been shaped by wedding participants.

More than the wedding industry or wedding consumption, this book is interested in the personal motivations of the celebrants who have
contributed to the wedding’s continued cultural power. What has driven generations of brides and grooms to celebrate in the familiar style that has been criticized as outdated, rehearsed, and seemingly incapable of distinction or true personal meaning? If it were only about spending, men and women could find other sites, likely with more lasting returns, in which to invest their consumer and cultural capital. If the celebration were so unyielding to social and cultural change, most modern women (and many men) would pause before submitting to the wedding’s gendered roles and regulations. If the wedding allowed no possibility of uniqueness or personal expression, in an American culture that so values the individual, it would have fallen out of favor years ago.

While postwar American weddings followed a fairly standard format—some degree of reliance on the marketplace, adherence to prescriptions of gender, declaration of religious belonging, and self-conscious embrace of “traditions” such as formal dress, proper vows, and a post-ceremony reception—the truth is that each wedding could be as unique as the celebrating couple wished. At the heart of the wedding’s longevity was its basic flexibility. “Tradition” may have been the keyword for weddings, but like other American traditions, those associated with the wedding proved malleable. Men and women could embrace the traditions that fit with their image of the ideal celebration and ignore the rest. They could share community ties with brides and grooms who had wed before them, but still feel confident in their celebration’s distinctiveness. The flexibility of the wedding guaranteed its survival in a nation marked by social and cultural diversity. As a creation of the late nineteenth century, limited visions of an American population that was distinctly raced, classed, and sexed initially shaped the white wedding. White, middle-class, heterosexual celebrants were the expected and targeted population (and this book focuses primarily on their story), but those outside the imagined group likewise celebrated weddings that demonstrated their visions of both public and private life.

In the decades since the end of World War II, the American population found that the promised postwar standard of living allowed for a greater focus on individual expression and personal fulfillment. The wedding, with its emphasis on romantic love, provided brides and grooms with an avenue for such expression and fulfillment. As the rise in personal authority challenged more traditional political, religious,
communal, and familial influences, men and women exerted greater authority over their private relationships and romantic partnerships—and, by extension, the ways they wed. Couples shaped their weddings to reflect their values and beliefs. While they relied on a standard format, they discovered they could vary the standard just enough to satisfy personal desires while fulfilling public expectations.  

This blend of public and private has been a hallmark of postwar culture—and of postwar wedding celebrations. In the years after World War II, understandings and demonstrations of citizenship increasingly intertwined with private life and rewards. Citizens expected access to a home, a decent standard of living, and family membership as fundamental rights. Facing the massive size and bureaucracy of modern American government and politics, individual efforts to find personal fulfillment and demonstrate citizenship often took a more cultural and less traditionally political cast. Organization of home life and personal relationships helped Americans negotiate and define their place in a rapidly changing nation. As personal and political life became increasingly intertwined, the wedding served as a site where the interchangeability and overlap of the two could be tried and tested.  

Even before World War II, the U.S. government historically promoted marriage among its population as a means of social organization and stability. Various rights and privileges of American citizenship were (and continue to be) extended through marriage, seemingly the most private of personal relationships. And yet, state intervention and promotion of the institution marked this private relationship as a public concern. The wedding, as the starting point of the majority of American marriages, was thus tied to the interpretation and articulation of citizenship. As a public celebration of private life, the wedding blurred the boundaries between the two realms. Men and women expressed expectations of their independent, individual relationship while joining a broader community of those who likewise had celebrated in a similar fashion and were partnered in relationships that, on a surface level, were similar to their own. Beneath the surface, of course, no marriage was quite the same. This, too, factored into the shape of American weddings. Across the postwar decades, this distinctiveness and, even more, the recognition and celebration of this distinctiveness became a celebrated part of the American wedding.
In the face of familial pressure, communal expectation, and marketplace suggestion, the couple decided the shape of the celebration. The various interpretations of modern weddings revealed the ways men and women used their weddings to respond to larger social, economic, and political trends. Seeing their celebrations as representations of themselves and their relationships, modern brides and grooms infused their weddings with personal sentiment, be it a commitment to postwar consensus, the counterculture, or efforts to achieve full civic equality. Putting personal views into practice made brides and grooms instrumental to the development of social, cultural, and political trends as they lived their ideals via their weddings.¹⁷

Certainly, women took the lead in the celebration, particularly in the first two decades following World War II, when the view of the wedding as “the bride’s day” prevailed. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, reflecting amended understandings of gender, men increasingly played a role—of their own desire or as a conscious demonstration of expected marital partnership. Even if grooms joined in wedding planning only incrementally, expectations of male participation became more common as ideas and understandings of romantic relationships increasingly focused on marriage as a shared partnership.¹⁸ As same-sex couples embraced the wedding, the division of labor, of course, was less determined by sex. Indeed, same-sex unions highlighted how commonly wedding responsibilities were navigated on a couple-by-couple basis rather than under an umbrella of universal expectations.

Convention had its place, and prescriptive literature proliferated throughout the postwar years. But the messages of the prescription did not remain static. Even tried and true rules of etiquette and good taste could be shaped to fit alternative visions presented by brides and grooms. The familiar format of American weddings reveals the pressures of cultural expectation. Still, those pressures only held so much sway. If wedding “experts” rejected an emergent style or trend, a new wedding guide could be (and often was) added to the ranks. Celebrants shaped the market even when they were no longer its target audience. Critics of consumerism might charge the market with co-opting and de-radicalizing transformative ideas, but an alternative view might highlight the power of men and women to shape not only the market but also broader cultural trends.
Couples’ decisions obviously affected the experience of their personal celebrations. But even more, their willingness to engage with or reject the pressures of wider social influences determined the form the “white wedding” as institution took. A focus on personal expression and a commitment to individual desire pushed men and women to embrace wedding day authority as their own. Shaped as it was by average men and women, the wedding revealed the power and practice of postwar cultural change. Through their celebrations, participants revealed the shift from the privileging of community and familial expectations to the emphasis on the desire for and increased legitimization of self-expression and personal fulfillment. In this capacity, interpretations of the wedding as conformist, staid, or conventional are misplaced.

This book traces the emergence, acceptance, and evolution of the white wedding as it became the celebration so familiar to so many today. Chapter 1 evaluates the shift from a variety of wedding forms, shaped by the diversity of the American population, to a single, recognizable celebration style in the years following World War II. Demonstrating the growing importance of the national market, media, and peer influence, the white wedding, despite industry claims of “tradition,” reflected a modern turn. Rather than bowing to the authority of their extended families and local communities, postwar brides and grooms followed a national wedding model and thereby demonstrated their commitment to modern visions of married life and civic belonging. Chapter 2 examines the white wedding at the pinnacle of its popularity when First Daughter Luci Johnson’s 1966 wedding illustrated not only the dominance of the celebration style but also ongoing public concerns about the power of individuality, community, and cultural authority in American life. Chapters 3 and 4 evaluate the white wedding at its most vulnerable time, when observers believed it might fade from prominence: the 1960s and 1970s. Reluctant to follow a standard path and critical of previous generations’ seeming conformity, couples of and aligning with the counterculture changed American wedding culture as they built upon the fluidity allowed by assumed wedding traditions. Even as a relatively small population celebrated with alternative weddings, media coverage of unconventional celebrations, with their focus on individual expression and personalization, attracted even the more conservative members of the population and shaped the ways in
which the wedding industry pitched its product. By the late 1970s and 1980s, as style makers declared a “return to tradition,” couples found they could shape their weddings to communicate any number of personal or political perspectives. The white wedding, assumed to be on its last leg at the start of the 1970s, was reinvigorated by celebrants who infused the event with individual significance. Chapter 5 demonstrates how same-sex couples built upon and embraced the political potential of the wedding in their battle for marriage equality. Just as celebrants in the 1960s and 1970s used the wedding to communicate alternative viewpoints of love and marriage, queer couples embraced the familiar language and performance of the wedding to stake their claim to equal rights of citizenship and national belonging. Building on the flexibility of postwar wedding tradition, same-sex couples used their weddings both as public celebrations of private life and as political demonstrations against civic inequality.

Throughout the postwar years, the importance placed on the wedding celebration communicated the forethought and sensitivity with which couples approached married life. When critics pushed for a focus on marriage rather than on the wedding, they overlooked the fact that many couples used their weddings as a time to think about what their marriage would mean to them and what marriage meant more broadly. Whether it was based on the couple’s dedication to a newly accessible nuclear family model, their faith, or political persuasion, the wedding consistently said something about the couple being wed and their expectations of their union. In the process of shaping their weddings, couples contributed to the evolution of Americans’ expectations of intimate relationships, understandings of sex and gender, and relationships to public and political life.