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RELATIONSHIPS

My big fat middle-aged wedding

From Jennifer Lopez and Renée Zellweger to George Osborne, fiftysomething brides and grooms are swapping vows in style. Plus, film director Martha Fiennes on marrying for the first time at 59



The wedding of Simon Finch, 67, and Martha Fiennes, 59

LUIS HOLDEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Elisabeth Perlman | Monday July 24 2023, 12.01am BST, The Times

Have you noticed it? Amid the usual summer pile-up of barbecues and weekends away, something new has appeared on the midlife summer social circuit. (Or should that be something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue?)

The wedding invitation, once the preserve of rosy-cheeked twenty and thirtysomethings, is staging an assault on the 40-plus scene. What's more, these invites aren't to witness younger relatives/godchildren/acquaintances exchange vows. No, they're to celebrate as fellow Gen Xers declare "till death do us part" in spectacular fashion — sometimes for the first time, but frequently for the second or third.

Gone are the days when a wedding later in life was limited to a demure Charles and Camilla-style affair — a few family members at a register office, say, then a smart lunch. These days, bigger is often better.



Jennifer Lopez and Renée Zellweger

Just look at JLo and Ben Affleck. Then 52 and 50 respectively, their wedding celebrations in Georgia last summer had enough glitz to outshine all their previous nuptials (four between them). Think: an enormous alfresco aisle lined by white bouquets, signs calligraphed with lines from Corinthians, rosy pink tablescaping and horses with flowers threaded through their manes. The bride wore three Ralph Lauren gowns and more than \$2 million of jewellery; the groom a white tuxedo, also by Ralph Lauren.

Then there's Renée Zellweger, 54, reported to be newly engaged to her British beau, Ant Anstead, 44. They are apparently "madly in love, and they can't wait to get hitched".

And what about George Osborne, 52? The former chancellor and Thea Rogers, 40, exchanged vows this month at the 14th-century St Mary's church in Bruton, Somerset, with a lavish reception at the nearby Hauser & Wirth gallery. Guests included Osborne's former Tory party colleagues Michael Gove, Matt Hancock and Sajid Javid, as well as his one-time opposite number from the Labour benches, Ed Balls, and his wife, the shadow home secretary Yvette Cooper.

And why not? Why let the kids have all the fun? After all, the average age of those marrying is up. Not just for first-timers (32 among women, compared with 23 in 1981; 34 compared with 25 among men) but for second, third and fourth-timers too (the average age of divorced women marrying is now 49, compared with 35 in 1981; for men it's 53 compared with 38). Then there's the fact that with age tends to come both a shedding of inhibition and a bigger budget for socialising.

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Julie Hannan, 53, a psychotherapist who specialises in helping clients to navigate the rollercoaster of midlife (and who married for the second time only recently), says: "They're quite wealthy and high-functioning; if they want to truly celebrate there's no wrong way to go about it."

Hannan, author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*, says that when it comes to a second wedding celebration, it's all about doing what's in line with your values as a couple. A midlife union is also a chance to

do things you wish you'd done differently when you married your first partner. Her second wedding was in St Ives, Cornwall, and while it was a smaller affair than her first, for her husband it was a chance to go bigger than his first-time elopement. "He really wanted his parents to be there this time."



Martha Fiennes and Simon Finch at Voewood House

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Communication is key when planning the event, to ensure that it feels right for both partners and their respective families. Hannan and her husband, Richard, discussed what a long-term partnership would look like, including how important freedom was to Hannan, and that she didn't want to live with Richard, at least in the early stages (they still live apart, three months after getting married). "I told him I might always need to get away and have some time out for myself," she says. They also discussed that their kids "always come first".

"I can't see the point of getting married again if there isn't an element of fun attached to it," she adds. For her and Richard, who are "big

motorbikers", that looks like channelling their inner Hell's Angels. The pair have embarked on adventures all over Europe, and only recently returned from the Balkans, where they did a two-week tour on their bikes, visiting six countries in six days. Their most memorable trip to date took place last year.

"In December, we visited one of my best mates who lives in Düsseldorf. So we got on the bike, got on the ferry, rode down to Düsseldorf and then back up to Bruges, which is where I asked Richard to marry me."

Truly, the time of the big fat middle-age wedding has come.

A blushing bride at 59 — and 240 guests

By *Candida Crewe*

There were so many big splashy weddings when I was in my twenties and thirties, I think of it as my *Four Weddings* era. They were practically every weekend and often no expense was spared: the locations were incredible, hundreds of guests were invited, and the food and drink was so generous we began to take it for granted.

The hoo-ha around them was always intense. However big the marquee, beautiful the bride or hilarious the speeches, melodrama invariably prevailed: Bridezillas throwing their seating plans or caterers out of the pram; grooms sleeping with the maids of honour; mothers of the bride letting it be known their future son-in-law was not good enough (too "common", too poor, too lazy, too unattractive — delete as applicable); the groom's father or some ancient relation having a heart attack into the cake.

And — alarmingly often — a large proportion of the congregation were not entirely sure the union was a good idea in the first place.

"How long do you give it?"

Don't tell me you have never heard these words whispered at a wedding, or indeed have never whispered them yourself. There are always a few cynics among the guests, and with the divorce rate in the UK at 42 per cent and apparently rising, chances are the cynics' predictions are spot on.

My own marriage, about which I am sure a few people had their doubts (I was 32, he was 25; we grew up under very different

circumstances), duly came asunder but we were lucky in as much as none of the doubters would have predicted what good friends we would remain or that, despite the outcome, we have no regrets we married in the first place.

I hadn't been to a wedding for years till a couple of weeks ago — it's more funerals, these days — and it was a huge, full-blown celebration, the likes of which few of us there had experienced. I'm not just talking about the beauty of the singing in the 14th-century Norfolk church, the fine country house setting and marquee, the flowers or the champagne. There were 240 guests but there was not one naysayer, not even among the blended family which included the groom's ex-wife and their son; the ex-wife's ex-partner and their son; the ex-wife's present partner; an ex-girlfriend or two of the groom; the bride's ex-partner and their three adult children; and many more connected guests besides.



Fiennes is sister to actor Ralph

LUIS HOLDEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Why no jaded doubts among any of these? The simple answer: because the first-time bride, Martha Fiennes, 59, film director and digital artist, and the groom, Simon Finch, 67, rare-book dealer and cool grandfather, are in the third trimester of life. “Till death do us part” takes on a different feel when, frankly, there isn’t a whole lifetime ahead, suggesting the vow will probably last the course.

I have been to a couple of late-life weddings — so low key I find it hard to remember much — but never an all-out, huge affair. So it was a lovely surprise when I discovered that Finch and Fiennes were arranging a “proper” one.

Fiennes wore an exquisite couture dress designed for her by Elizabeth Emanuel (of Princess Diana fame) at which everyone gasped. No banal satin slip. Instead, a romantic long dress with a bodice. “I had no hesitation about wearing long with a full-length veil,” says Fiennes, who directed *Onegin* (which starred her brother, Ralph), among other films. She describes the dress as “almost cobwebby” and jokes that she wanted to rock the Miss Havisham vibe. “There’s a strange cultural thing about women getting married. I had categorically not been ‘waiting for it all this time’. I had been leading my life — making work, pursuing projects, being a parent and the rest.”

As her daughter Mercy, 21, said: “Mum, you’ve done everything backwards.”

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“The difference between marrying young and now,” Finch says, “is that I know myself far better and what I believe marriage is about. I could make the vows with my heart and not think, ‘Oh God, I could always get out of this.’ When I was young it was more to have children. There was a power struggle over getting your own needs met. I didn’t really have self-knowledge. Now it is about profound love and understanding. It doesn’t mean we’ll never have disagreements, but it’s based on maturity and respect.”

Finch married his first wife in 1989 when he was 33. Their son Jack was born a year later but the marriage only lasted five years. Then, in 1998, he bought and devoted himself to the restoration of a magical Arts and Crafts house in Norfolk called Voewood that had been in institutional use for 100 years. It was described by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as “violently idiosyncratic”. Though

people hire it for weddings every weekend, it never occurred to him that he might one day be the groom in his own house.

“I must have bought it, without knowing it for 25 years, to marry Martha in. The effort was worth it.”

As one guest said: “It’s all about timing. Had they met 25 years ago, this might not have happened.”

They were match-made in 2020 by a friend who had invited Fiennes to stay and took her to see the house. Finch thinks he and Fiennes met years ago at one of Madonna’s parties but only has the haziest recollection. This time the attraction was instant and he invited her to lunch. “If you spot something really wonderful,” Finch told me, “you’ve got to move fast. I’ve learnt that from book dealing. I mean, there wasn’t time for a ten-year courtship.”

They could have chosen to go quietly into late-life marital waters. Certainly most second or third-time couples opt not to go as big as their first time around. Perhaps that comes from a sense of “and look where that got us! We don’t want to tempt fate”.

However, Finch describes himself and Fiennes as show ponies: “We like performance and we had the vessel — Voewood — and the energy and inclination to do it.” Their celebration was never going to be a modest affair.

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Since separating from George Tiffin, the father of her children, in 2011, Fiennes had been in other relationships, but was single for a few months before she met Finch. She and Tiffin have two sons and a daughter in their twenties, Titan Fiennes Tiffin, 27; the film star, Hero, 25; and Mercy, 21. All were at the wedding, along with a guest list featuring “friendships that went back decades”.

Fiennes’s brother Magnus gave her away and was in charge of the music. Another brother, Joseph Fiennes, currently starring as Gareth Southgate in the play *Dear England* by James Graham at the National Theatre, did a reading with Finch’s sister, Sarah Finch, from *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The caterer asked for dietary requirements and was amazed to get back just one message from one vegetarian — unheard of among

“normal” weddings of couples in their thirties. The lamb was eaten with relish.

At youthful weddings there is often an emphasis on inebriation and looking to the future. But this was the flamboyant wedding of an older couple who decided to go all out. Their guests reflected on their own lives, perhaps with nostalgia, perhaps with regret or wistfulness, but cynicism was curiously absent.

“No man has ever loved me like Simon loves Martha,” one twice-divorced famous beauty in her late fifties said. “But they have given me hope.”

Perhaps this will also be the case at the wedding of Renée Zellweger, who has just got engaged at 54. Some felt it when Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck reunited.

Certainly everyone was rooting for Fiennes and Finch, and acknowledging that due to a miraculous confluence of circumstance, luck and timing they had found love at this point in life.

A point when the church, the ceremony, the breaking bread, the drinking and dancing were all about celebration for the generous, life-affirming pair.

But also about hope for everyone, older as well as younger, whom a couple unexpectedly and happily bring together in a glorious mishmash celebrating their own and all our complicated and extraordinary lives.

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