

Wedding Bells... & Bills

Bride-to-be **Stacey Anyan** recounts the thrills and spills of planning a modern wedding – with a nod to ABBA.

Ring Ring

After a surprise proposal on our favourite beach, my man and I begin to frequent jewellery stores. There's new lingo to learn: cut, colour, clarity, carat. I was never in it for the diamonds, but once there's one sparkling away on my finger, I'm actually quite smitten.

This is 2009, so it's only fair the man gets an engagement present too. He opts for a flat-screen telly. Ironic, given that his excessive TV-watching is occasionally a source of tension. But once in the store, it's me who argues for upsizing. As far as I'm concerned, this telly has to last the next 20 years, so we may as well get a big one.

It's only as we stagger back to the car with it that I realise the telly cost more than the ring. Bugger.

Knowing Me, Knowing You

As far as couples go, my guy and I are pretty average. Statistics-wise, that is.

The date is set for March; along with January and February, it's one of the most popular months to get married. There's a growing trend to get married on a weekday, generally to avoid peak rates for venues and services, but Saturday still gets the popular vote at 60 per cent.

Like our statistically average peers, we're

significantly older than our parents were when they got married. In 1971, the median age of first marriage was 23 for men and 20 for women; it's now nearly 30 for men and 28 for women. Truth be told, I'm old enough to consider Botox but I figure a 34-year-old house owner "living in sin" isn't about to kid anyone that she's a blushing virgin bride.

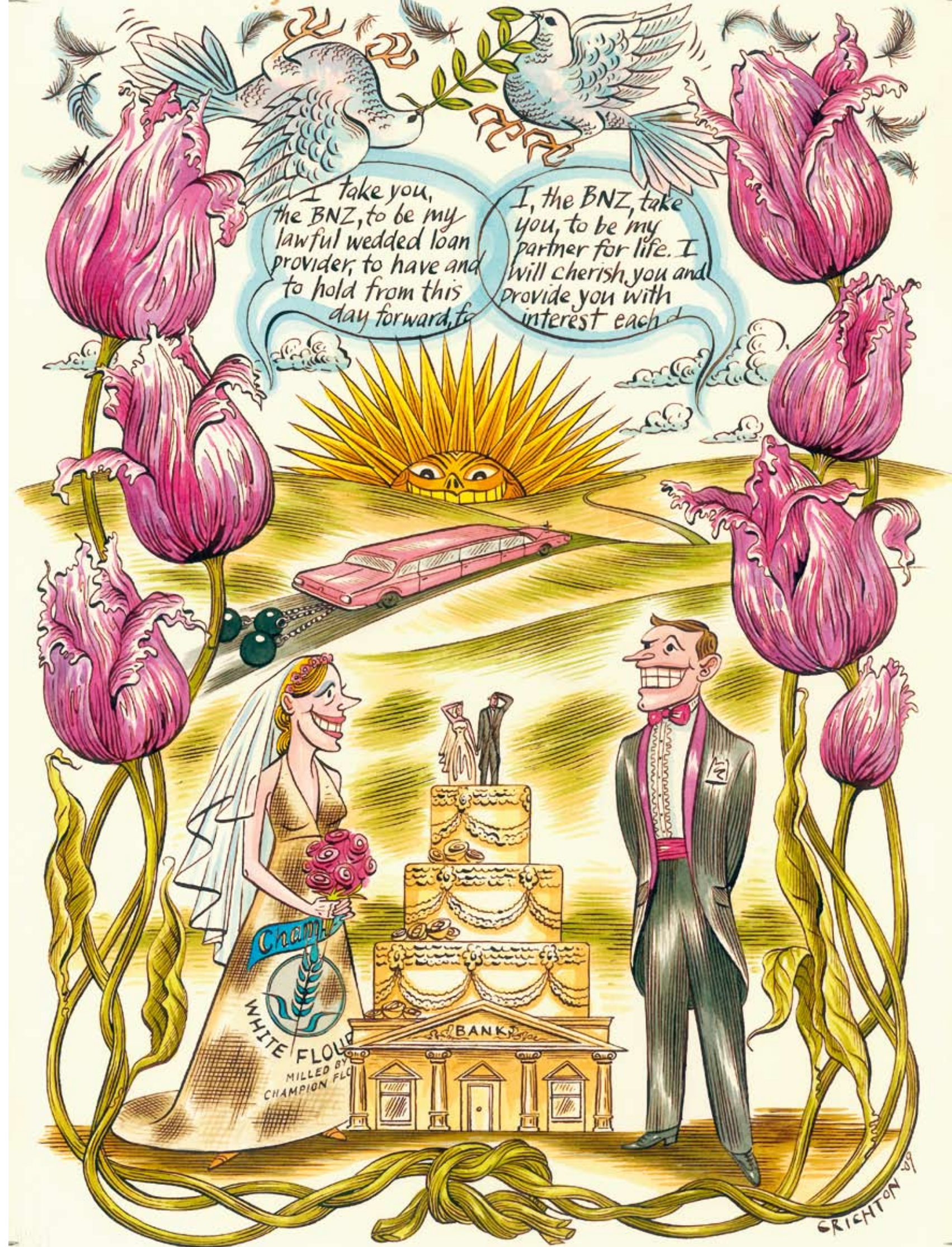
We've eschewed eloping to Fiji, a medieval theme, or saying "I do" while doing a bungee. It'll be an "average" wedding in that it's an outdoor ceremony in the afternoon followed by a sit-down dinner reception. Although our parents are kindly helping to pay the bill, we're footing the lion's share. Accordingly, we get to call the shots.

Like many couples who've already lived together for several years and amassed a house-load of possessions, the gift register is more likely to be contributions to the honeymoon (his wish) or a piece of art (my wish). I've attended weddings where couples requested native trees for the garden, contributions towards a new bed, and bottles of wine for the cellar.

Money, Money, Money

We suss out the perfect location for our wedding reception: a chic restaurant on the water's edge. Turns out the minimum spend is the sum we'd envisaged spending on our whole wedding.

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Similar story with the cake.

“No, no,” I say when the shop attendant gives me a quote. “Not 100 cakes. One cake for 100 people.”

Nope, she heard me right. So I decide on DIY, enrolling in a cake-decorating class through adult community education (RIP). Fifteen weeks for \$75, two hours a session, all materials supplied. Bargain.

I'm horrified to learn that many bridal boutiques charge clients \$50 simply to try on their dresses. And you'd be hard-pressed to find a decent photographer for less than a few grand – and that's not including printed snaps in an album. The archive-quality Queensberry albums used by professional photographers can cost a few grand too.

Then I get wind of the notorious “wedding tax” – the price rises allegedly slapped on services associated with the big day.

In 2008, the *Herald on Sunday* did an investigation – highly unscientific but enlightening nonetheless – comparing quotes for a wedding with quotes for a birthday party from randomly selected venues, photographers, cake makers and hairstylists. There were marked differences – sometimes several hundred dollars' worth – between the operator's quotes for each occasion, which they were given the opportunity to explain.

The venue operators said they charged more for weddings because they gave exclusive use of the venue and provided co-ordinators to help with every aspect of the day. The photographers said the discrepancy reflected that weddings required more creativity and post-production work.

The cake makers said wedding cakes involved more detail and work. The hair-dressers said bridal parties needed extra time and care.

Regardless of whether the wedding tax exists or not, if you add it up – the dress, the jewellery, the hair and makeup, the photographs, the venue hire, the band, the cake, the sit-down dinner and booze for 100 guests – it's easy to see how the average wedding spend in New Zealand is \$20,000 to \$30,000.

Given that \$30,000 is close to the average Kiwi's annual salary, it's no wonder nearly 200 couples were prepared to conduct their nuptials naked with radio station The Edge last September in order to win a wedding package worth \$50,000.

I Have a Dream

It's not called an industry for nothing, and the 80-odd exhibitors at Auckland's Premier Wedding Expo, held at the ASB Show-

grounds in September, are all after a slice of the wedding pie.

The gleaming limos parked outside are large enough to conduct a ceremony in. Upon entry, I receive complimentary bubbles, a goodie bag stuffed with advertising and a bright pink sticker which shouts, “Be Nice to Me, I'm Getting MARRIED!”

My man surprises me by asking to accompany me to the expo. I'm further surprised to discover he's not the only man there – though perhaps not all are there of their own volition. He's disappointed there's only one suit-hire stand, and the company is based in Hamilton.

But expo director Lisa Booth has done a pretty good job in getting the whole shindig together in the past 10 weeks (plus shows in Nelson and Christchurch) since taking over the business. She plans to double the number of exhibitors within two years, and host shows in Hamilton and Rotorua.

Interestingly, the expo's survey of wedding

“Not 100 cakes. One cake for 100 people.”

budgets reveals big-city brides plan to spend significantly more on their weddings than their provincial counterparts.

She also says that blokes will be better catered for next year with a “groom zone”. Her partner – “a real Kiwi bloke who's not interested in going to wedding shows” – had inspired her to install a bar and a racing car simulator to keep men occupied at this year's expo.

The expo's exhibitors range from the big and established (hotels and conference centres, travel agents, gyms, dress shops, slimming products) to medium-sized businesses (beauty spas, bars, photographer collectives) to small-fry start-ups (wedding venue decorators, a party-band locator website, a service which crafts photos into DVD mini-movies).

A spokesperson for the Decorative Lighting



Company, which specialises in landscaping and building exteriors (they lit the magnificent 2008 Telecom Christmas Tree in Auckland's Victoria Park), says it recently cottoned on to the potential of the wedding market. It now offers reception-decoration packages involving strings of fairy lights swathed with sheer organza drapes. Overseas wedding trends such as photo booths and dove releases have reached our shores. Christians are in on the act too: the Family Life organisation stand promotes Weekend to Remember marriage conferences.

I'm curious to see if budget-conscious couples will embrace the realistic-looking fake cakes and artificial floral arrangements created by Bonbons and Blooms, a new Tauranga-based business which delivers nationwide.

A four-tiered polystyrene “cake” iced and festooned with ribbon and fake roses costs

\$85; they even have a discreet slot for the big cake-cutting moment. For \$595, you can order a colour-themed package including cake, bridal bouquets and 12 floral arrangements. Entrepreneurial 24-year-old Susanna Blair got the idea while trying to help a friend cut wedding costs (“The cake usually costs around \$500 and hardly anyone eats it anyway”) and after her sister's disastrous experience of stumping up \$750 for bridal bouquets only for them to arrive in a different colour to the one she'd ordered.

I move on to the fashion show, where around 500 people have gathered to gasp and coo at models who actually smile as they grace the runway in ivory-and-cream creations.

Outfits for the mother of the bride are modelled too. One is so stunning the MC declares that if she were the bride and her mother wore it, she'd ask her to put a jacket

on so as not to outdo her. A young woman in front of me simply barks to the older woman beside her, “You're not allowed to wear that, Mum!”

Waterloo

Lord knows it's a battlefield in the overcrowded magazine market, and ever more so for wedding titles, with their transient target audience. On a recent trip to Whitcoulls, I counted at least a dozen wedding titles on the shelves.

Wedding magazines tend to be a bit too advertorial for my tastes, but they're a good source of services and products, real-life tips and free online checklist planning sheets.

A new title, *My Wedding*, was launched at the Premier Wedding Expo in partnership with the magazine's publishers.

This expo-magazine combination has been



a winning formula for *Bride & Groom*, the longest running and best read of our few home-grown, quarterly wedding magazines. Their circulation is currently 13,400 per issue – not bad when you consider about 21,000 couples get married in New Zealand annually.

Lesley Walker, *Bride & Groom*'s editor and publisher, founded the magazine in 1986 when weddings were “quite standardised” and the wedding scene was “dated”.

“I wanted modern garments and fun and fantasy. We also wanted to write articles directed at the couple rather than just the bride.”

Walker's seen the wedding industry become “more sophisticated”, and themes go from non-existent to compulsory.

“Themes don't have to be extreme, like wacky dress-ups, but something simple like a colour, a logo, a season – something that ties the whole event together from the invitations to the reception décor,” she says. “Tea-party themes have become popular recently – and, of course, beach themes are big in New Zealand.”

IDO, IDO, IDO, IDO, IDO

It was easy enough to choose a celebrant. There was only one operating in the small town where we're getting married.

Auckland celebrant Sheryl Mungall, a foundation member and executive officer of the Celebrants Association of New Zealand, was wary of my laissez-faire approach. She's also concerned about couples using price – which she says ranges from \$200 to \$1000 – as their main criteria. You need to be able to relate to your celebrant, she says.

She'd also prefer that couples contacted her by telephone rather than email so they hear her voice.

Nevertheless, she has invested in a presentable website, recognising that today's tech-savvy couples primarily use the internet for research. Bridal discussion forums are also very popular; tips are traded on everything from the cost of corkage to saucy games to play at the hens' do.

Mungall's cousin was the first independent celebrant to be appointed in 1977. Today, according to *The Big Day: A Guide to Getting*

Married in New Zealand, written by Mungall's friends and colleagues Kerril Cooper and Denise Irvine, the majority of marriage ceremonies registered in New Zealand each year are conducted by the 1699 independent celebrants, rather than the 7812 church or organisational celebrants.

The ceremony is the heart of the day, Mungall says, and her aim is to provide a relaxed environment for the bride and groom: “A professional knows how to alleviate stress and be organised so the couple turns up and has a great time.”

Mungall, who has conducted 560 weddings in her 14 years as a celebrant, believes in equality. “The groom should make his own entrance with his parents and groomsmen five minutes before the bride.”

She prefers to stand to the side of the couple, and for the couple to embrace and kiss before beginning the ceremony. “It connects them; besides, it wouldn't be natural for this beautiful woman to make an entrance and then they just eyeball each other.”

She personalises the ceremony by recounting the couple's love story, and encourages couples to pay tribute to their parents. “Every parent wants to see their kids get married. The wedding's often as big a deal for them as it is for the couple.”

Kiwi guys will express their emotions if you give them permission, she says. “Last weekend, the groom had tears streaming down his cheeks.”

include them in the ceremony so they feel part of the new family, Mungall says. “One couple bought their young daughter a ring with a purple stone for the occasion. Her mum's ring was gold with diamonds. When her parents were about to exchange rings, their daughter called out loudly, “No, Mummy and Daddy, you've given me the wrong one – I wanted the gold one!”

The Name of the Game

“Hey, has anyone ever called you... ‘onion?’” Funnily enough, yes – pretty much every time someone learns my surname is Anyan. I've even had the nonsensical and particularly unflattering “Stacey Anyan onion ana, the oversized banana” chanted at me in my primary school days, but I digress.

Getting married presents the opportunity to assume a brand new surname without going to the trouble, and expense, of legally changing it.

But despite the teasing and the constant spelling out, I'm loath to change: our surname is in danger of extinction due to a lack of sons; I'm extremely close to the Anyan clan; it's been my identity for 34 years.

These are also the reasons several recently married female friends cite for keeping their maiden names. One adds her mother “very determinedly” kept her maiden name and the expectation was for her to do the same. One who resisted her husband's request to change her name agreed that if it became an

absence of legal requirement to register your name change after marriage).

It seems that most young women today – even those who might describe themselves as feminists – happily choose to take on their husbands' names.

Friends who've adopted their husband's name tell me there's no longer a chip on the shoulder or a point to prove (even in the feminist-fuelled 1970s it was still quite daring for a woman to keep her maiden name after marriage).

Many say they enjoy the symmetry of sharing a family name with their children. Most of those who do keep their own name decide their children should take on their husband's surname: “I couldn't bear the idea of saddling my children with a ridiculous, pompous-sounding hyphenated mouthful of a surname,” says one.

Then there are some who flit between two identities, maintaining their maiden name for their career.

One friend uses her maiden name as her middle name, “but it has caused no end of confusion, especially in the hospital when I had my baby. They couldn't find my details because they assumed I had a double-barrelled name and had left out the hyphen in error.”

Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!

Having nearly torn out my hair in frustration during my quest to find a bargain dress, I amused myself by devising these top tips for advertising bridal gowns on Trade Me:

1. Learn how to spell the following: veil, train, beading, pear-shaped, couture, Swarovski.
2. Type words out in full. It's an advertisement, not a text message.
3. “Only worn once” is not a licence to set your reserve and/or buy-now price at 95 per cent of the original price of your gown. It's still second-hand – sell it for half-price or less.
4. Describing the dress as “beautiful” won't disguise the fact that it is an eighties puffed-sleeve shocker. Same goes for a “must-see”.
5. “I received many comments from guests at my wedding about how beautiful my dress was.” Of course you did. They're obliged to in exchange for a free feed.
6. Are you a coat hanger? No? Then don't use one to model your dress.
7. If the photo “doesn't do it justice” then bloody well take one that does.

The Winner Takes It All

According to Statistics New Zealand, one-third of Kiwi marriages end in divorce. Best sign that pre-nup then. +

“The wedding's often as big a deal for the parents as it is for the couple.”

And while she believes Kiwi weddings are generally relaxed “because we're a relaxed society”, she also believes they should be a dignified occasion. “When I hear about Las Vegas drive-through weddings, I cringe.”

Couples who already have children – either through their de facto union or previous relationships – often want to

issue, she would make the change. “But it's never been a problem to date and as my surname is shorter and easier to pronounce than his, he often uses mine to make restaurant bookings and the like.”

Anecdotally though, name keepers are in the minority (we'll never know the hard-and-fast stats because of the aforementioned