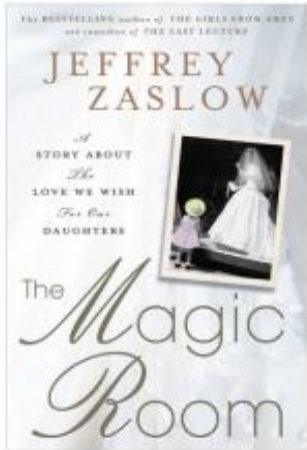


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# The Magic Room: A Story About the Love We Wish for Our Daughters

by Jeffrey Zaslow

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## About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling journalist and author of **The Girls from Ames**, Jeffrey Zaslow, takes us to a multi-generational family owned small-town bridal shop to explore the emotional lives of women in the 21st century.

You may not have heard of Fowler, Michigan, much less Becker's Bridal. But for the thousands of women who have stepped inside, Becker's is the site of some of the most important moments of their lives—moments that speak to us all. Housed in a former bank, the boutique owners transformed the vault into a "magic room," with soft church lighting, a circular pedestal, and mirrors that make lifelong dreams come true.

Illuminating the poignant aspects of a woman's journey to the altar, **The Magic Room** tells the stories of memorable women on the brink of commitment. Run by the same family for years, Becker's has witnessed transformations in how America views the institution of marriage; some of the shop's clientele are becoming stepmothers, or starting married life for a second time. In **The Girls from Ames**, beloved author Jeffrey Zaslow used friendships to explore the emotional lives of women. In **The Magic Room**, he turns his perceptive eye to weddings and weaves together secrets, memories and family tales to explore the hopes and dreams we have for our daughters.

## An Introduction to *The Magic Room: A Story About the Love We Wish for Our Daughters*, by Jeffrey Zaslow

In 1934, Eva Becker sold her first wedding dress to her first bride. It was "a highnecked, pure white satin number with leg-o'-mutton sleeves" (p. 37). A fiercely unsentimental German Catholic housewife-turned-businesswoman, Eva would go on to sell tens of thousands more dresses, outfitting women throughout the region on one of the most important days of their lives.

More than seventy years later, Becker's Bridal --- now run by Eva's granddaughter, Shelley Becker Mueller --- is still

doing business in small-town Fowler, Michigan. The divorced mother of three, Shelley bought the business from her parents, Clark and Sharon Becker, who, in turn, bought it from Clark's parents, Eva and Frank. Each generation put its own imprint on Becker's, but it was Shelley who created the Magic Room.

Housed in a former bank, the store's old vault lay cluttered with racks and dresses until Shelley transformed it into the ultimate staging area: a quiet, softly lit dressing room away from the chatter of the sales floor. "You want mirrors everywhere, taking every bride into infinity". [because] remember, it's still very much the "money room" (p. 191).

And for Shelley, clinching the sale has become more critical than ever. Whereas during Eva's reign, a woman might try on two or three dresses before making her selection, now, "the search for the gown has become a weeks-long quest" (p. 54) involving multiple stores, a gaggle of friends, and sometimes ending with the bride buying her gown on the Internet for less money.

Everything about the wedding --- especially the brides --- has changed dramatically over the years. "About a third of brides today are divorced, buying a dress for a second or third wedding" (p. 19), while "25 percent of first-time brides already have children" (p. 23). Yet, each bride-to-be still arrives at Becker's with a heart full of fears and hopes about life after her walk up the aisle.

Today, there is no such thing as a "typical" bride. Women like thirty-nine-year old Meredith Maitner are embarking on first-time marriages later in life after successful careers trumped lackluster romances. Others, like Ashley Brandenburg, meet their future husbands on the Internet, or, like Jennifer Otto, wed after having a child with someone besides the bridegroom.

"On any given weekend, an average of fifty-four Becker's brides find their way down the aisles" (p. 257), and while many of those marriages won't last, several relationships have already overcome challenging obstacles. Megan Pardo lost part of her fingers on her right hand in a car accident shortly after buying her dress at Becker's.

While Julie Wieber, a young widow, is remarrying against the wishes of her four children. These women and many others visit the Magic Room in Jeffrey Zaslow's deeply moving, eponymous book. By sharing each bride's unique story and that of Becker's Bridal itself, Zaslow offers an unforgettable glimpse into the lives of some very real modern women and --- like the Magic Room's seemingly infinite mirrors --- reflects the enduring hopes, dreams, and love that we cherish for them.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Jeffrey Zaslow's decision to explore "how all of us can best show love to our daughters" (p. xiv) by examining the world of Becker's Bridal. Do you agree that a bridal salon is the ideal setting? What are some other places that would have worked as well?
2. How do you think the idea of "love" has changed over time?

3. Zaslow researched the history of marriage in *THE MAGIC ROOM*. How has our outlook on weddings changed over time? Is it for the better?
4. Of the many women Zaslow profiles, whose story resonates with you most and why?
5. If you are married, did *THE MAGIC ROOM* reaffirm the decision you made regarding your dress? If you are unmarried, did the book affect the way you may one day approach your purchase?
6. Discuss the unusual vows that Erika and her sisters made. Do you think divorce rates would be lower if most men and women took a similar vow?
7. How did you feel about Julie's decision to remarry so soon after she became a widow?
8. Becker's Bridal is in a constant struggle for survival, in part, because some budget-conscious brides find their gowns at Becker's and then order them online for less. Has reading *THE MAGIC ROOM* made you reconsider your own shopping habits?
9. In the 1930s, wedding dresses were still expected to be multifunctional, rather than one-time-only fashion statements. A lot of women would wear their gowns at their weddings, and then months later, dye or hem them for other important occasions, or even as maternity wear? (p. 39). In our age of reduce, recycle, and reuse, should this practice be revived? What do you think of the recent trend toward "trashing the dress"?
10. Despite Eva's clear lack of a soft spot, she was a trailblazer as a woman in the workplace. She not only kept the business afloat but expanded it at a time when women were almost exclusively in the home? (p. 43). Do women today still need to be as tough as Eva in order to succeed?
11. Did Shelley make the right decision to take over Becker's Bridal? Should Alyssa follow in her footsteps?
12. Have you read *THE GIRLS FROM AMES*? How would you say the female relationships between friends and mothers/daughters differ?

## Author Bio

Jeffrey Zaslow was an American author and journalist and a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Zaslow was born in 1958 in Broomall, Pennsylvania, and attended Marple Newtown High School, where he was student council president his senior year. He wrote for the school paper and was in school plays while in junior high. After graduating from Carnegie Mellon University in 1980 with a degree in creative writing, Zaslow began his professional writing career at the *Orlando Sentinel*.

Zaslow was widely known as coauthor of best-selling books including *THE LAST LECTURE* (2008) with Randy Pausch; *HIGHEST DUTY: My Search for What Really Matters* with Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger (2009); as

well as *GABBY: A Story of Courage and Hope* (2011) with Gabrielle Giffords and her husband, astronaut Mark Kelly. He was the sole author of numerous books, including *TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT* (1990), *THE GIRLS FROM AMES* (2009), and *THE MAGIC ROOM* (2012).

He was twice named by the National Society of Newspaper Columnists as best columnist in a newspaper with more than 100,000 circulation and had received the Distinguished Column Writing Award from the New York Newspaper Publishers Association. While working at the *Sun-Times*, Zaslow received the Will Rogers Humanitarian Award. He appeared on such television programs as "The Tonight Show," "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "Larry King Live," "60 Minutes," "The Today Show" and "Good Morning America."

Zaslow died on February 10, 2012, at age 53 in a car accident while on tour for his non-fiction book *THE MAGIC ROOM*. Former co-author Chesley Sullenberger was among those who eulogized Zaslow at his funeral on February 13.

Following his death, Zaslow was the subject of a number of written tributes, including an essay by columnist Bob Greene, pieces by fellow journalists and by bloggers, posts on the *Wall Street Journal* remembrance page, and eulogies by family members on the family's remembrance page.

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