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The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity

Sarah Banet-Weiser
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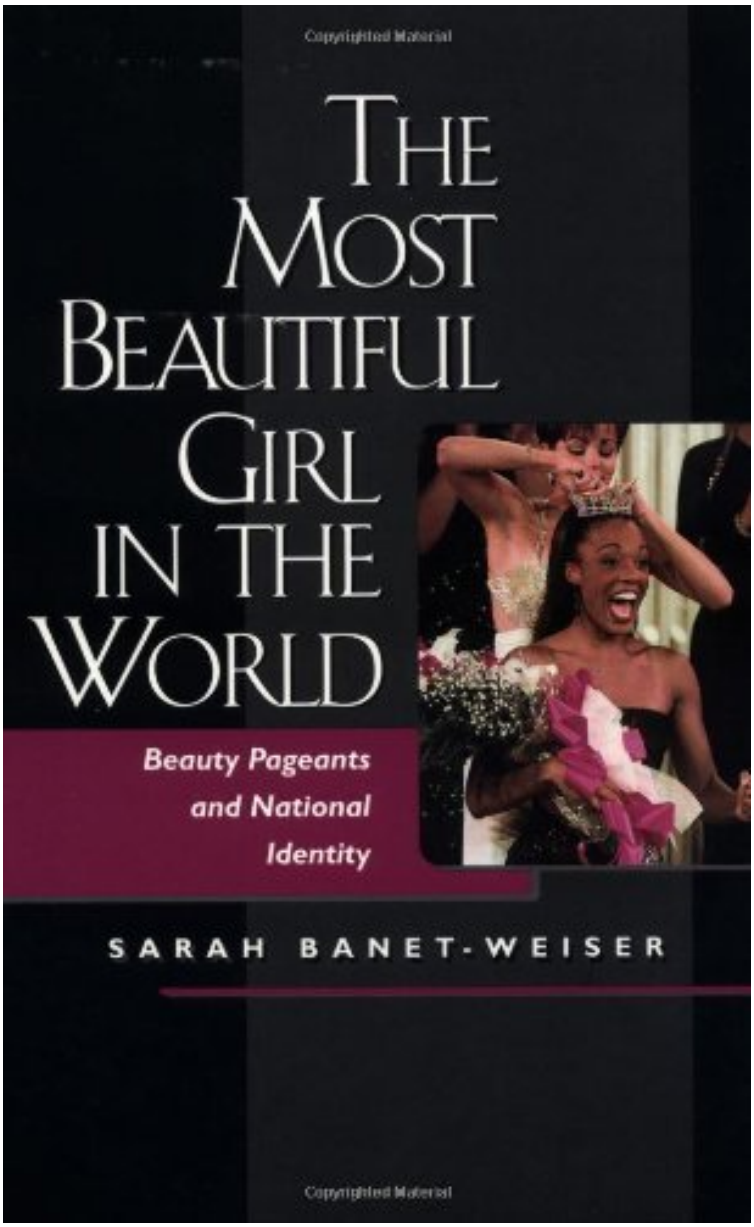

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Sarah Banet-Weiser : The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Banet-Weiser is successful in arguing for the importance of the beauty pageant as a site for cultural workBy Tova JohnsonWith The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity, Sarah Banet-Weiser takes scholars to task for not treating beauty pageants with the intellectual attention they deserve. Beauty pageants, she argues, are far from the anachronistic, anti-feminist, vapid cultural spectacles that many scholars perceive them to be; in fact, they articulate complex notions of national identity and womanhood, mixing liberal feminist ideology with traditional norms of femininity.Banet-Weiser employs interviews with pageant contestants and officials, cultural criticism, and ethnographic research to interrogate the ways in which race, ethnicity, and disability status intersect with constructions of femininity and nationhood on the pageant stage. Pageant contestants must perform feminine respectability and ldquo;typicality,rdquo; constructs aligned with white femininity; any difference from the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, feminine norm is muted. Vanessa Williams, the first Black Miss America, who lost her crown in 1984 after nude photos of her were published in Penthouse magazine, and Heather Whitestone, the 1995 pageant winner whose deafness was downplayed on the pageant stage and circuit, support Banet-Weiserrsquo;s arguments.Although compelling, Banet-Weiserrsquo;s thesis suffers from a curious lack of attention to the evening gown portion of the Miss America pageant as she focuses almost exclusively on the swimsuit, talent, and interview segments. She also fails to adequately extend her discussion of pageants beyond the Miss America competition. As she repeatedly emphasizes how Miss America is different from other beauty pageants, she undermines any effort to generalize her arguments to beauty pageants as a whole.Despite the weaknesses in Banet-Weiserrsquo;s analysis, she is ultimately successful in arguing for the importance of the beauty pageant as a site for cultural work. She reminds us that while beauty pageants and other popular culture forms may seem simplistic on their surface, they encompass, articulate, and enact our complex notions of race, gender, class, and national identity. As such, beauty pageants are worthy of serious intellectual attention. Readers interested in cultural studies, popular culture, consumer culture, race, and womenrsquo;s and gender studies, will find this work especially appealing.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Good book.By Ferne D. SpenceFun and informative book on beauty pageants that shows another dimension to the froth of pageantry.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Is "whiteness" the new pink?By VinceThe Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity, written by Sarah Banet-Weiser, focuses on the social issues and concerns, such as race, disability, objectifying the womanrsquo;s body, and intellectual attention, involved with the American tradition of beauty pageants. After performing ethnographic research and interviews with contestants and officials, Banet-Weiser breaks down the famous Miss America pageant and gives an outstanding insight to the swimsuit, talent, and interview portions of the competition. However, her analysis is sometimes irrelevant and unreasonable when it comes to the topics of culture and ethnicity. In the chapter ldquo;If You Were a Color, What Color Would You Be?rdquo;, which discusses the importance of the interview section of the pageant, Banet-Weiser states ldquo;What is also interesting it consider is whether this question is ever asked of a black contestant.rdquo; She continues to explain how this question subliminally brings up the topic of race because it assumes ldquo;whitenessrdquo; is normal. I personally feel the analysis here is opinionated and uncalled for. Granted, the majority of Miss America participants are Caucasian, I hardly believe that in todayrsquo;s society people would consider white skin tones as the norm. As a whole, though, I found this book to be well- informed and intriguing. I am personally doing an ethnography project and choose to read Banet-Weiserrsquo;s The Most Beautiful Girl in the World for some intuition and understanding of the beauty pageant culture. This book gave me reliable and useful information that I will be able to use in further research and interviews. Other recommended works written by Banet-Weiser include, Kids Rule!:Nickelodeon and Consumer Censorship and Authentic(TM): The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture.

Sarah Banet-Weiser complicates the standard feminist take on beauty pageants in this intriguing look at a hotly contested but enduringly popular American ritual. She focuses on the Miss America pageant in particular, considering its claim to be an accurate representation of the diversity of contemporary American women. Exploring the cultural constructions and legitimations that go on during the long process of the pageant, Banet-Weiser depicts the beauty pageant stage as a place where concerns about national identity, cultural hopes and desires, and anxieties about race and gender are crystallized and condensed. The beauty pageant, she convincingly demonstrates, is a profoundly political arena deserving of serious study.Drawing on cultural criticism, ethnographic research, and interviews with pageant participants and officials, The Most Beautiful Girl in the World illustrates how contestants invent and reinvent themselves while articulating the female body as a national body. Banet-Weiser finds that most pageants are characterized by the ambivalence of contemporary "liberal" feminism, which encourages individual achievement, self-determination, and civic responsibility, while simultaneously promoting very conventional notions of beauty. The book explores the many different aspects of the Miss America pageant, including the swimsuit, the interview, and the talent competitions. It also takes a closer look at some extraordinary Miss Americas, such as Bess Myerson, the first Jewish Miss America; Vanessa Williams, the first African American Miss America; and Heather Whitestone, the first Miss America with a disability.

"A book that illuminates the beauty pageant as one of the best places to view the tensions surrounding the construction of gender. . . . A thoughful and readable book. Scholars interested in the dynamics of gender and race in popular culture will find the book especially useful."--"American Journal of SociologyFrom the Back Cover"This is work in the best tradition of cultural analysis, refashioning a seemingly banal cultural object into a newly complicated and eye-opening thing. Best of all, not only is this a theoretically astute and original treatment, but the behind-the-scenes vantage on beauty pageant culture and personalities makes this a compelling, and dare I say entertaining, read."--Laura Kipnis, author of Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in AmericaAbout the AuthorSarah Banet-Weiser is Assistant Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California.