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

Sarah Banet-Weiser

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The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity Sarah Banet-Weiser 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.

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