



Being Miss America: Behind the Rhinestone Curtain (Discovering America)

Kate Shindle

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For nearly a hundred years, young women have competed for the title of Miss America—although what it means to wear the crown and be our "ideal" has changed dramatically over time. The Miss America Pageant began as a bathing beauty contest in 1920s Atlantic City, New Jersey, sponsored by businessmen trying to extend the tourist season beyond Labor Day. In the post–World War II years, the pageant evolved into a national coronation of an idealized "girl next door," as pretty and decorous as she was rarely likely to speak her mind on issues of substance. Since the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, the pageant has struggled to find a balance between beauty and brains as it tries to remain relevant to women who aspire to become leaders in the community, not hot babes in swimsuits.

In *Being Miss America*, Kate Shindle interweaves an engrossing, witty memoir of her year as Miss America 1998 with a fascinating and insightful history of the pageant. She explores what it means to take on the mantle of America's "ideal," especially considering the evolution of the American female identity since the pageant's inception. Shindle profiles winners and organization leaders and recounts important moments in the pageant's story, with a special focus on Miss America's iconoclasts, including Bess Myerson (1945), the only Jewish Miss America; Yolande Betbeze (1951), who crusaded against the pageant's pinup image; and Kaye Lani Rae Rafko (1987), a working-class woman from Michigan who wanted to merge her famous title with her work as an oncology nurse. Shindle's own account of her work as an AIDS activist—and finding ways to circumvent the "gown and crown" stereotypes of Miss America in order to talk honestly with high school students about safer sex—illuminates both the challenges and the opportunities that keep young women competing to become Miss America.

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