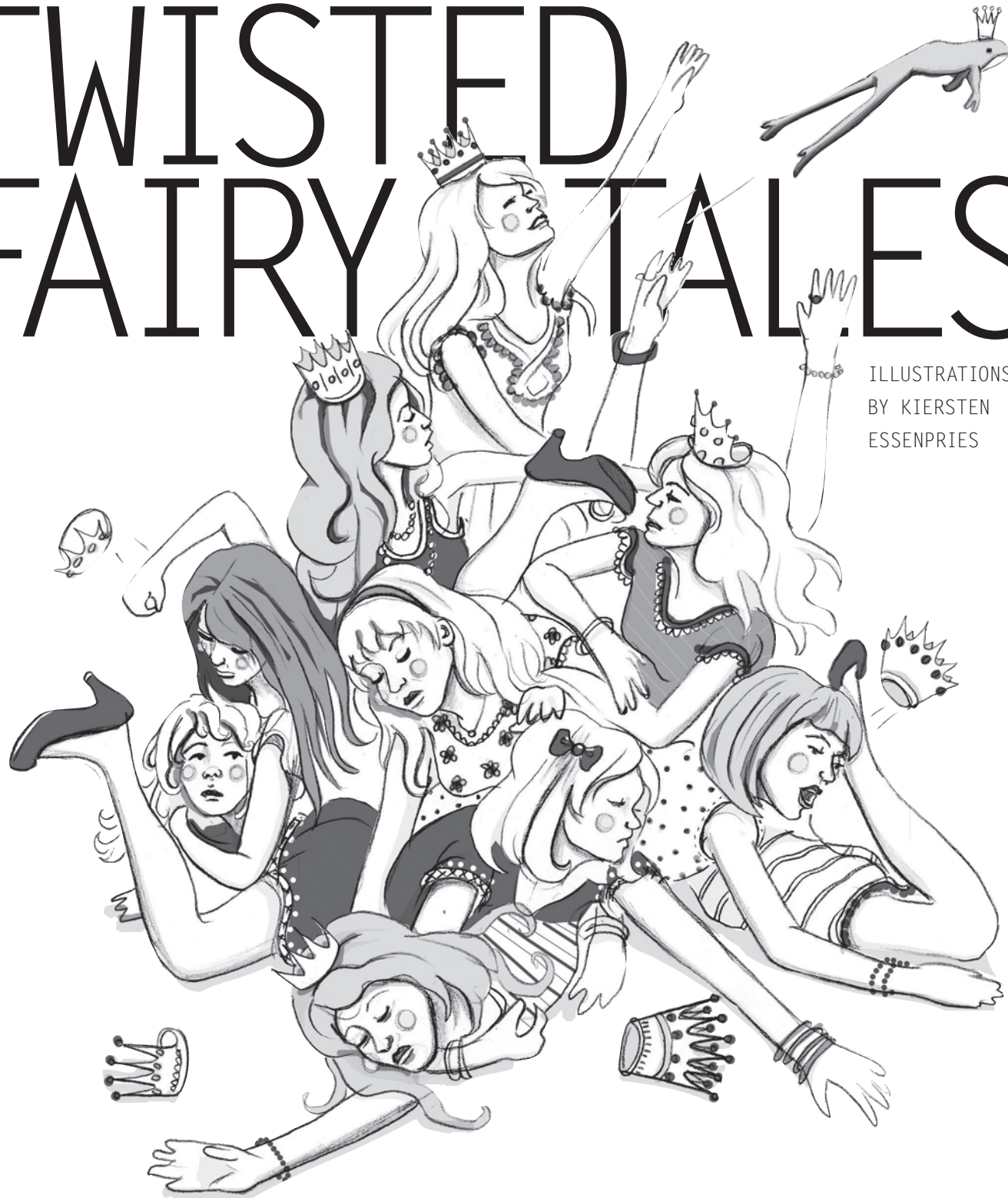


UNRAVELING REALITY TV'S TWISTED FAIRY TALES



ILLUSTRATIONS
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IN AN EXCERPT FROM HER BOOK
REALITY BITES BACK,
JENNIFER L. POZNER LOOKS AT
THE TRUTH BEHIND THE TIARAS

You know that old cliché about flies, vinegar, and honey? Well, so do reality-TV producers. As practiced storytellers, they know they can lure more viewers with the promise of possibility—romantic, economic, or otherwise—than by throwing undiluted misogyny right out there on the surface. That’s why they package their parade of sexist stereotypes as the embodiment of the “perfect fairy tale.”

“This show really is kind of a reality version of Cinderella,” Ken Mok, executive producer of *America’s Next Top Model*, told E!’s *True Hollywood Story*, describing a series that regularly tells gorgeous, insecure young women that they’re too fat, too flawed, and—in the case of girls of color —too “ghetto” to make it as an advertiser’s muse. This formula pops up wherever women are pivotal to a series: On Fox’s *The Swan*, for example, pitting emotionally unstable plastic-surgery patients against one another in a bizarro-world beauty pageant was portrayed as a modern-day Cinderella story, rather than prime-time exploitation of women whose psyches needed more tweaking than their physiques.

Nevertheless, “I felt like a princess!” has been a constant refrain from female reality stars, starting with Adrienne Curry, the first *America’s Next Top Model* winner, and echoed by future competitors. It doesn’t take much to prompt this proclamation. Sometimes we hear it from bona fide stars, as when actress Debra Messing giddily described feeling “like a princess” on the red carpet after being styled for an awards show on Bravo’s *The Rachel Zoe Project*. Other times, it’s a favorite phrase of star-fuckers: for one of the fame-seekers on *Paris Hilton’s My New BFF* (MTV, natch), getting her hair cut according to the heiress’s specifications made her “feel like a princess.”

Really? Being bossed around by Paris Hilton is akin to getting the Cinderella treatment?

Well, yes...in the unreal world of “reality television,” where virtually anything that happens to any woman—no matter how crass, vindictive, or fleeting—can be presented as an idealized fairy tale, so long as it is something done to a woman and not something she actively pursues for herself.

On dating shows like ABC’s *The Bachelor*, prospective princesses sit on their aimless asses, fend off fellow ladies-in-waiting, and hope to be whisked away by a network-approved knight in shining Armani. Stay-at-home moms, waitresses, and crime-scene investigators depressed about their appearances are physically transformed by scalpels and silicone on programs like ABC’s *Extreme Makeover* and Fox’s *The Swan*. But these much-vaunted “journeys of self-discovery” rarely involve much activity on their part. Their self-esteem is induced by surgeons, hairstylists, and makeup artists, not the psychological heavy lifting of ther-

apy; their weight loss is the result of liposuction, rather than lifestyle-changing diet and exercise. Fashionistas on less physically-intrusive makeover series such as TLC’s *What Not to Wear* instruct mom jeans-wearing women that beauty comes from product-placement cosmetics and clothing, not from within—which is why each participant’s overhauled “personal style” ends up reflecting producers’ and advertisers’ choices instead of their own tastes.

In real life, situations in which women have such little agency would be seen as pitiable, not enviable—yet in reality tv, we’re prompted to believe that this is the stuff dreams are made of. This is never in such stark relief as when series are centered on (the flimsiest approximations of) love.

PRINCES FOR HIRE, PRINCESSES FOR SALE: CONSTRUCTING THE FAIRY TALE

Just as in those classic stories from Disney to the Brothers Grimm, romance and finance are inextricably linked in dating, mating, and marriage shows, in which a bevy of doormat-y “gorgeous girls” is invariably paired with one “rich, successful” single man, as in this typical, scene-setting montage from ABC’s *Bachelor* franchise:

“Aaron, a successful 28-year-old bank vice-president, was introduced to 25 beautiful bachelorettes, in hopes that one of them would become his wife. [Voiceover clip from Aaron:] ‘I just had 25 supermodels walk by me—what do you say?... They’re all beautiful, they all have so much going for them. I can’t find a flaw in any of them. They’re all into me, which is wonderful. I never thought I would



Left: Tyra Banks gives a Top Model hopeful her best, “Bitch, please” face. Above: a bevy of post-op Swans smile for the camera.

be so lucky.”

Yep, they're all supermodels, and they're all “into him,” whoever “him” happens to be, even if he's more wart-covered frog than dreamy prince. That, of course, is what princesses are expected to be: available, pretty, eager... and easily impressed.

“I understand each one of you is in love with him,” *Bachelor* host Chris Harrison says in mock-somber tone to a room of angsty bachelorettes on the show's fourth installment. True to Grimms' form, we're never really shown why these irrationally attached lasses have gone all googly-eyed over relative strangers—the men rarely expend any real effort to win their hearts. (Not that they need to: these men are almost afterthoughts, there to fulfill the role of symbolic Everyman without whom Everywoman's life is supposedly incomplete.)

There's a reason the male heroes of these shows don't get all that emotionally invested: They're not meant to. For the most part, a desire to fall in love and settle down isn't among the criteria producers look for when casting Prince Charming. Evan Marriott got his gig as the titular faux-bigwig of *Joe Millionaire*, he explained to *Entertainment Weekly*, because “They needed a guy that was in construction but didn't have kids, hadn't been in jail, wasn't on drugs. And basically I fit the bill. They said they would pay me \$50,000, and I said, ‘Where do I sign?’ I wasn't looking for the love of my life.... We got back to America and I've never seen the [show's ‘winner,’ Zora] since, except for the reunion show.”

That, then, was *Joe's* biggest lie of all. Viewers were told from the outset that Marriott would be duping 20 women about his income bracket to determine whether they were “in it for true love” or just “greedy gold diggers.” Yet the show's deeper deception was that he ever had any intention of finding a wife, or a girlfriend—or even anything more than a paycheck—from the program. And Marriott was hardly alone in his disinterest in commitment. Dating-show dudes tend to ooze insincerity while spouting platitudes about finding “the right girl for me,” like every Abercrombie-looking, line-throwing player at every bar on any given night.

Deviations from this script are rare: It wasn't until the current season (13!) that *Bachelor* producers chose a star (single dad and *Bachelorette* castoff Jason Mesnick) who seemed to honestly want to find a wife. In contrast, dating shows emphasize women's matrimonial motivations, with a nearly endless stream of marriage-minded femmes professing the belief that being the “last girl standing” at a network altar—even though they'd be standing there with a virtual stranger—“will make all my dreams come true.”

IF TACORI WANTS TO “SYMBOLIZE FOREVER,” THE COMPANY SHOULD RECONSIDER BRANDING ITSELF AS THE BLING OF CHOICE FOR A TV SERIES THAT'S 0-FOR-12 WHERE ACTUAL WEDDINGS ARE CONCERNED.

While they don't genuinely offer their hearts, what reality-tv men do is play the proud provider. It hardly matters that what they provide is not their own to give; they are simply handsome skills (for products as well as ideas) from whom all acts of courtship are actually well-orchestrated infomercials. “This Tacori diamond ring symbolizes forever for me. I just hope that she will accept it,” snowboarder Jesse Csincsak said on *The Bachelorette's* fourth-season finale. He chose the 2.3 carat platinum and diamond engagement band for his potential paramour, DeAnna Pappas, with the help of a spokesperson for Tacori, which provides jewelry for *The Bachelor* franchise. (Pappas did accept the costly rock, but “forever” translated to roughly four months: She and Csincsak split shortly after their “we've set a date!” announcement on a reunion episode—and far before most couples would have finished paying off the ring. If Tacori wants to “symbolize forever,” the company should reconsider branding itself as the bling of choice for a series that's 0-for-12 where actual weddings are concerned. So far, no Bachelor has ever married the woman he chose, and only one of four Bachelorettes has wed.) But while *The Bachelor*, *Joe Millionaire*, and others of their ilk don't tend to reward participants with true “happily ever after” endings, these shows definitely deliver fairy tale windfalls for advertisers who love free PR.

During their “romantic journeys,” these bachelors

hand over many a prettily wrapped box containing various items advertisers have paid (or provided free in exchange for publicity) to position as fairy-tale linchpins. Starry-eyed future brides are dolled up in Badgley Mischka and Nicole Miller gowns, festooned with millions of dollars' worth of Tacori, Harry Winston, and Chopard diamonds, chauffeured in \$600,000 Saleen S7 Twin Turbos and \$100,000 Maseratis, and swept off to book-your-spa-stay-now resorts by beaux who use Marquis Jet cards.

MISTAKING THE TRAPPINGS FOR LOVE

When they're not marketing jewelry, clothing, or dental veneers, reality TV shows advertise traditional fairy-tale ideology that presents women as poor damsels who can't take care of themselves, and men as all-powerful studs ever-ready to rescue us.

There's something truly ridiculous about watching grown women masquerade as would-be princesses, abdicating all choices to a guy they hardly know and hoping their passivity will help them snag some suburban Prince Charming. This infantilization is especially ludicrous when the "girls" languishing in husband-hunting harems are mothers in their 40s with mortgages, careers, and kids in college, as they've been on *Who Wants to Marry My Dad?* and *Age of Love*.

These messages aren't exactly subtle. *Joe Millionaire* began with Marriott galloping toward his admiring throng on a stallion, looking like Gaston, the muscle-bound, animated hunk from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. As for Joe's lovely suitors, we first encountered them squealing "Ohmigawd! It's a castle!" as they arrived at the mansion.

A *Joe Millionaire* reunion special even began with a montage captioned "The Fairy Tale" in wedding invitation-style calligraphy, followed by out-of-context clips from 16 "gold diggers" dishing about their Cinderella fantasies.

Where Fox partially passed this off as tongue-in-cheek,



All the ladies in the house say hey: lining up for an audience with the Bachelor...whoever he is.

ABC's packaging of *The Bachelor* has always been disingenuously earnest. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, despite failing to actually produce long-term pairings, their pretense is "absolutely irony-free." On one "where are they now?" clip show, host Harrison reminded the audience that a sweet-natured bridal castoff named Gwen had "watched her journey on season two of *The Bachelor* unfold like a fairy tale, complete with horse-drawn carriage." No shit—they actually roll tape of this babe riding off in a buggy decorated with Christmas lights to resemble a fairy godmother-procured pumpkin carriage. "I do feel like Cinderella," Gwen says in her poofy princess ball gown, adding, "It feels great."

The faux-sincerity embedded in the structure of reality TV's flagship dating show is insulting to its audience, who are lied to as baldly as are contestants. During season 11, for example, producers knew full well the twist hidden from viewers until the finale: For the first time in series history, the bachelor rejected each and every bachelorette, preferring to walk away single. Despite his full house of broken hearts, the first episode opened with the narrator proclaiming that "In the end, only one woman will become Mrs. Brad Womack," followed by edited

audio snippets of the show's star pledging, "I'm here to find true love. I will find my wife."

All these princess-for-a-day primpings work manipulative magic on contestants. Sequestered from the outside world during weeks and sometimes months of filming, their responses are as predictable as sunrise. When Billie Jeanne Houle, a sexually exuberant, free-spirited bartender, was seduced on *Married by America*, she thought her TV-arranged fiancé won her heart. In reality, producers simply seized on her eagerness to fall in love in order to manipulate her into believing she was living a real-life fairy tale.

Here's the formula: first, take a naive beauty who longs to get married, and offer her a gorgeous guy who says he

shares that wish. Next, send her to a series of bridal-gown fittings, let her select a wedding ring, and eventually have her write vows with the other half of this arranged marriage equation. Throw in a healthy heaping of liquor-lubricated sex scenes and, voilà: “love,” reality TV-style. “When we got to the show it just happened to be that we clicked. You got gourmet chefs, you got Jacuzzis, you got all the alcohol you could want. I really fell for the whole experience,” Houle told *Entertainment Weekly*.

Time and time again, this is how it’s done.

From a limo on the way to a date on a luxury yacht, a bubbly *Bachelor* brunette gushed, “I have the dress, I have a million dollars’ worth of jewelry on me, I have the prince, and I am feeling like Cinderella at the ball,” mistaking these trappings for love. And how could she not feel fireworks when fourth-season *Bachelor* Bob Guiney kissed her, considering how producers *literally shot fireworks over their heads*?

Such attempts at posthypnotic suggestion provoke Pavlovian responses in the women of reality TV (drape with diamonds, sprinkle fireworks, commence swooning), essentially telling female viewers that the measure of a man’s love can only be found in the gift receipts in his wallet. Not only should we not expect mental, emotional, or political rapport with our boyfriends, we’re told—we shouldn’t even want such a connection. Just as troubling, reality television teaches boys and men that without an array of posh and cheesily metaphoric props, most bachelors have nothing genuine to offer women.

Which brings us to the tenth season of *The Bachelor*, when an ingénue named Tessa Horst expressed doubts about remaining on the show. She liked Naval Lieutenant Andy Baldwin just fine when they were alone, but “When I’m back home and wondering about group dates that I’m not on, I get fed up with it,” she vented. Andy was increasingly aware that Tessa was getting ready to opt out of CrazyTown if she didn’t feel “a real connection” with him soon.

So, how would our Bachelor boy win her over? Would he seduce her with laughter? Attempt to bond over mutual shared interests, politics, or family backstories? Offer her new insights into his dreams, his worldview, his character?

Er... No.

Remember, a man’s character is considered irrelevant in the *Bachelorverse* (as are humor, intelligence, and fidelity). So when Andy needed to “give his all,” he resorted to the only tools producers put at his disposal: “the fairy-tale date.”

First, Baldwin summoned Tessa to their first solo outing with a note instructing her to “Come as you are. I’ll

take care of the rest.” Next, amid the jealous glares of all her evil-stepsister competitors, he presented her with a \$2 million Chopard diamond necklace, earrings, and bracelet set to wear for the night, killing two birds with one extremely ostentatious set of stones. (Screen time for an integrated marketer? Check. Stoking female envy to convince Tessa she was special? Check again!) They sped off in the aforementioned \$600,000 sports car to a Nicole Miller boutique, where cameras lingered on the storefront’s marquee and fashionable mannequins. “I thought along with your diamonds you could use a very elegant dress,” Baldwin said, as if he had anything to do with it. But such distinctions didn’t seem to bother the formerly dubious Tessa, now giddy at the chance to model gowns in an array of colors and styles while Baldwin showered her with compliments. “This whole date I’ve wanted someone to pinch me. I think it’s every girl’s dream to, like, be brought over diamonds, and brought to a dress store, and pick out anything you want. I’m just excited!” she gushed.

So, let’s recap: To keep Tessa from walking off the show, a worried Bachelor has to “pull out all the stops” to show her “that she’s...truly special to me.” Instead of sharing more of his authentic self with her, he simply offers a parade of product placement goods and activities as a proxy for actual feelings. Nevertheless, this stream of artifice does the trick. “It’s been an amazing, amazing, amazing date, and while I still have some reservations and doubts, he’s really putting himself out there, and I think it’s pushing me to do the same thing,” the formerly frustrated beauty tells the cameras. By the end of the night she’s fully convinced, and wants him to meet her parents.

Apparently “putting yourself out there” is defined in the *Bachelorverse* as “maxing out your spending limit.”

EXCLUSIVITY, CONFORMITY...OR BANISHMENT

Fairy-tale narratives are the saccharine coating that masks the genre’s chauvinistic and regressive ideas about women and men, love and sex, marriage and money. Why? Because this genre that calls itself “unscripted” is carefully crafted to push all our culturally ingrained buttons. All the pretty-princess twaddle, absorbed unquestioningly by many viewers in early childhood, allows us to accept these anachronistic notions as palatable, even ideal. The psychological underpinnings of fairy tales provoke a strong emotional response, compelling us to keep watching.

But at what cost?

For men, as Andy and Tessa’s experience illustrates, reality TV reinforces a limiting vision of masculinity in

which they must be stoic providers of both pleasure and financial comfort. Male viewers learn relatively quickly that they should not expect (or desire) women as partners in love and in life, only as beautiful, compliant subjects in need of social, sexual, and interpersonal direction.

For women, these representations conjure our earliest memories—of the stories our parents read to us before bed, of the cartoons that danced in our imaginations, telling us what we could (and should) look forward to when we grew up. No matter how independent we are, how cynical we believe ourselves to be, or how hard we've worked to silence external cultural conditioning, decades of sheer repetition make it extremely difficult to fully purge societal standards from our psyches. Simply put, it's damn near impossible to live completely outside the culture. Producers want to awaken that internalized, conformist "Someday my prince will come" melody humming inside the heads of single, heterosexual women. This, in part, is what Mike Darnell—the svengali behind *Joe Millionaire*, *Married by America*, and *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*—was talking about when he told *Entertainment Weekly* that the secret to a successful reality tv show is a premise that is "steeped in some social belief."

If reality tv picks at emotional wounds about the loneliness, poverty, and desperation that the Grimms and Disney have told us await strong-willed women, the genre also reinforces the punitive proscriptions for "bad" girls in those classic stories. With few exceptions, fairy-tale females who stood up for themselves or who were confident, active, or powerful have been depicted as bitchy, catty, cruel, and unworthy—and were almost always punished for their sins. Only the prettiest, most passive girls without agency or voice, without ambition or individuality, were rewarded with love, financial success, and the ultimate prize: being picked by the prince.

And so it goes in reality tv, where women are portrayed as virtually interchangeable in body type and personality alike, and any who deviate from the norm in appearance or behavior are immediately banished. These prefab fairy tales are exclusive to a fault, and anyone who hopes to qualify must ascribe to a litany of regressive social mores. Why? Because producers act as gatekeepers, allowing inside only those participants who conform to the strict gender, ethnic, and sexual codes that this genre is attempting to recodify as American "reality."

Do you transgress these codes by daring to have a

THE PATTERN IS ALWAYS THE SAME: EVERY FETED TV COUPLE ANNOUNCES THEIR BREAKUP JUST AS SOON AS THEY ARE NO LONGER CONTRACTUALLY OBLIGATED TO CANOODLE WITH EACH OTHER IN POSTSHOW INTERVIEWS ON *THE VIEW*.



healthy relationship with food? Well, ladies, you're not allowed to visualize yourself as a princess. Neither can women of color, who are underrepresented and typically eliminated after just a couple of episodes on network reality casts. (On the other hand, women of color are very present in cable dating shows—but there, it's the fairy-tale packaging that's missing. There's not much in the way of earnestness in the framing of VH1's minstrel shows *Flavor of Love*, *I Love New York*, and *Real Chance of Love*, for example, which celebrate the exploitation of both women and men of color, each in myriad ways.)

Are you lesbian, gay, or bisexual? In the world of reality tv, Americans can see people like you—and you can see people like yourself—decorating homes (*Top Design*), designing clothing (*Project Runway*), cutting hair (*Shear Genius*), even navigating the globe (*The Amazing Race*)—but you can never seek “fairy-tale love.” Oh, you can get laid, as on the STD-chasing *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila*, but actual love? That's out of the question.

THE BASTARDIZATION OF LOVE

Part of the danger of the “hey, look over here!” misdirection of beautiful princesses and brave princes is that it dissuades us from thinking critically about the messages these shows are sending.

Structurally, reality television's sweet fairy-tale imagery coupled with its humiliating underpinnings work to convince the audience that the women we see on these shows have no self-respect. And because a central conceit in this genre is that contestants are “real people” behaving as they normally would in “real life,” the none-too-subtle implication is that women in general may not deserve any more respect than is shown to the ones on the tv set.

Worse yet, the cumulative effect of this one-part-honey, 10-parts-vinegar formula may leave female viewers with the impression that disrespect and emotional abuse are just par for the course of women's romantic experience. “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince,” the old saying goes; in reality tv's updated version, happily-ever-after only occurs when men have all the power and women do all the groveling.

Perhaps saddest of all, “true love”—that ultimate payoff promised by classic fairy tales—is wholly absent from these crass, commodified mating dances, which produce only momentary affections. In those old fables, once the heroine was whisked away by the prince, she was assured a life of happiness, adoration, and wealth...so long as she abandoned ambition, independence, and individuality. This uneven exchange doesn't serve women (or men) well. But at least Disney's and Grimms' princesses ended up with “true love” that was sure to last “forever more.” In

contrast, reality tv's revisionist fairy tales demand all the same self-sacrifice from their female protagonists—but they deny them actual love.

To understand how deeply this genre bastardizes our earliest depictions of desire, think back to when, as a child, *Snow White* was read to you at bedtime, or you watched her animated likeness on the big screen. As you imagined your perfect future fairy-tale romance, tell me: Was the Prince Charming of your fantasies some shallow, egotistical dimwit who screwed his way through a harem of insincere hotties until he reluctantly settled for you?

After all the happily-ever-after buildup, after all the pathetic pandering to be picked, nearly every single dating show hero has dumped his chosen “princess,” even those from shows with proposals at the end. (No one married anyone's dad, either.) It shouldn't come as a shock that tennis champ and *Age of Love* star Mark Phillapousis ended up with luv, not love, from the NBC series, or that Evan “\$50,000? Where do I sign?” Marriott had no interest in seeing Zora—the woman who supposedly won his heart on *Joe Millionaire*—after the show's finale, beyond one uncomfortable segment on the reunion show. Of the dozens of reality couples who've pledged to make each other happy “for the rest of our lives,” only one—Bachelorette Trista Rehn and groom Ryan Sutter—ended up married. ABC insists that season six's Bachelor, Byron Velvic, is still engaged to Mary Delgado, the fiancée they procured for him in 2004, but the couple has postponed the date for their supposed nuptials several times, and they remain unwed—perhaps because Mary was once arrested for punching him in the nose. Aside from Trista's love story and Byron's possibly abusive relationship, the pattern is always the same: Every feted tv couple announces their breakup just as soon as they are no longer contractually obligated to canoodle with one another in postshow interviews on *Access Hollywood* and *The View*.

In the end, reality tv's twisted fairy tales are terribly unromantic at their core, popularizing a trivial and depressing depiction of the concept of love itself. Real love involves a foundation of emotion, honesty, and trust, concepts missing from the pale imitations hawked to us by the folks who script “unscripted” entertainment. The equation “Fat Wallet + Skinny Chick = Love” robs us all of our humanity, and erases the possibility of true emotional connection. ●

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