

Watching *The Bachelorette*: Seriously Frivolous – Frivolously Serious?

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“Alabama Hannah” Brown, former pageant queen and self-proclaimed “hot mess express,” is approaching the end of her “journey to find love,” as TV parlance goes. Followed by more than five million viewers each week, the lead of ABC’s hit reality dating show *The Bachelorette* will soon exclaim an excited “yes!” when her final suitor goes down on one knee and crowns the produced fairy tale with a sponsored engagement ring worth the down-payment on a house. Yet viewers will already suspect that the final rose will fade quickly: the blogger RealitySteve has reported that the engagement is off^[1]—and the reason for the break-up, i.e., the fiancé’s former girlfriend, has already answered many a media query.^[2]

Much ado about nothing? Certainly. Watching *The Bachelorette* is one of those guilty pleasures that we do not list in our CV—unless we end up writing a scholarly article about it, as I did for the recent issue of the *Canadian Review of American Studies*. Yes, reality TV shows are frivolous, often formulaic, and yet we cannot completely disregard them. Millions of people tune into these shows, including many a student, as political scientist David R. Dreyer observed: “Regardless of how many academic books and journal articles are assigned in an undergraduate class in a given semester, some students will likely spend more time watching reality television than reading.”^[3]

Moreover, shows like *The Bachelorette* give us fascinating insights into American culture and society, particularly if we look at all the noise surrounding “Bachelor Nation.” Several podcasts and recaps discuss the show each week, from the upbeat

Juliet Litman's "Bachelor Party" [4] to the feminist HuffPost podcast "Here to Make Friends." [5] These allow us to eavesdrop on a more casual and therefore more frank conversation on the state of the nation, with people openly admitting to regional prejudices and other breaks of protocol. In the bubble of the Bachelor world, questions on political views, faith, and credit history take a backseat to attempts at "opening up" and sharing obligatory testaments of past torments. From time to time, though, the bubble bursts and produced reality is disturbed by political realities. Season 13 with the first-ever black *Bachelorette* showed this in an unprecedentedly harsh manner, as I discuss in my article: the allegedly color-blind show sensationalized race and racism. But even the story of Southern belle Hannah Brown reveals the struggles of reconciling different visions of America.

Every season of *The Bachelorette* requires a villain, and Hannah's is no exception: Luke P., an import-export manager from Georgia, keeps alienating viewers and co-contestants—and has unwittingly inspired conversations about a rift in US society. When he decided to take Hannah to his Sunday Bible class in the episode featuring hometown visits, he invited the TV audience into a world unknown to many of them. The discussion about faith and politics may be very vivid in academia and critical media, but the realities behind it seem to elude many a viewer. Podcasters and recappers shared how strange they found the religious study group and the kind of confessions they asked for; others marveled whether it was truly a sin for an observant Christian to engage in premarital sex. Apparently, the beliefs and practices of millions of Evangelicals, a key group of the US electorate, feel rather alien to many fellow Americans. *The Bachelorette* may not give them a deeper understanding of the issue—but it may alert them to the fact that they are missing important pieces to understanding the "Other" America.

And we are in for the next seriously frivolous, but also frivolously serious discussion: who will be the next *Bachelor*, a role usually filled by a contestant in the running season of *The Bachelorette*? Is America ready for its first black *Bachelor*? Stay tuned!



Video – FIRST LOOK: Who Will Hannah Choose? | The Bachelorette US

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Notes

[1] <http://realitysteve.com/2019/07/02/the-bachelorette-hannah-spoilers-whats-happening-now-paradise-spoilers/2/>

[2] <https://www.eonline.com/news/1050844/the-bachelorette-s-jed-wyatt-s-ex-girlfriend-reveals-why-she-came-forward-with-cheating-claim>

[3] <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511000254>

[4] <https://www.theringer.com/bachelor-party>

[5] <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/the-huffington-post/here-to-make-friends>