

Book Reviews

Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture

Amy Best. New York: Routledge Press, 2000.

BY CHERYL VAN DAALEN-SMITH

Best begins her compelling analysis of prom night by telling her reader that as she was researching this qualitative feminist study, a young woman gave birth in a bathroom stall at her high school prom. Compelling doesn't begin to capture how Best weaves authentic narratives from diverse youth across America telling their stories associated with their high school proms. It's a marvelous read with wonderful references: in fact it is almost like being there with a sociologist on one arm and a date on the other.

Prom Night is a socio-cultural analysis wherein Best ensures the voices of youth are central. Though once seen as trivial in a scholarly interest sense, Best convinces her readers that proms as a unit of sociological study demand our attention. As the reader we walk away from this engaging read with a true understanding of how the prom is one of the most influential rites of passage into heterosexual adulthood. Indeed, Best demonstrates that the prom is a dress rehearsal for adult life—which in the process privileges heterosexuality, whiteness and class.

Early in the text Best demonstrates how consumerism and hegemonic femininity frame and influence the phenomena of proms. Dresses are

mandatory as is jewelry, fancy hair and a date of the opposite sex. In the text, youth clearly articulate the struggle to decide on what to wear and who to bring and that the prom is a deeply conformist enterprise. In her fifth chapter, Best presents countless examples surrounding the rules associated with proms including dress, limousines, and sexual expectations in hotel rooms. In fact Best goes so far as to insist that proms are just another site of social control deeply rooted in patriarchy. Chapter Seven is interesting in that Best highlights how resistance to the rules or expectations plays out including the emergence of gay proms and all-black proms in America. The same resistance exists in many high schools in Canada as well.

Best's strengths include her attention to race, class, gender and sexual orientation. She devotes Chapter Six, entitled "The Divided Dance Floor: Race in School," to issues associated with race and white privilege. Best's most important attribute, not only in her text but also in her design of the study itself, is her clear commitment to ensuring the voices of youth are central. Countless photos and narratives paint each page and chapter with an invaluable realism that the reader will truly appreciate. Not only will readers be reminded of their own personal time, contemplating how prom night was or was not a fit for them, but they will come away with a deeper understanding of how popular culture prescribes behavior, enforces social rules and serves as a watershed for youth into patriarchal, racist, classist, and heterosexist adulthood. A must read for advocates of youth

We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Reinvention of Mass Culture

Hal Niedzviecki. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2000.

BY LIISA KELLY

In struggling to analyze the ever-changing phenomenon that is entertainment culture, few writers manage to maintain a high standard of academic credibility while projecting the passion and energy that, can engage a wider non-academic audience. While pop journalists trip over themselves to remain at the edge of what is "hot," cultural theorists often miss the mark in reaching the audience to which their work is truly relevant. Hal Niedzviecki breaks the mold in his new book, posting a fresh alternative to either side of the fence with work that is both accessible and dynamically complex.

One need not know him as the editor of *Broken Pencil* to perceive that Niedzviecki approaches the current youth culture as an insider. Though he briefs the tired "evils of consumerism" speech, Niedzviecki's real focus is on the power of the underground to uplift the so-called "TV generation" from the restraints of imposed cultural ideals, allowing us all a place to create meaning for ourselves as artistic producers. He says that art and communication are all that is left to create meaning in our lives now that we have become apathetic to family, work and religion.