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Life of the Mind

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Reckoning with *Wannabe*: Understanding How to Evaluate Pop Culture

In *Wannabe*, Aisha Harris reflects on her experience growing up as a Black millennial woman through the lens of pop culture and its influence on her psyche. In 9 essays on topics ranging from intergenerational trauma and motherhood to the black best friend and her experiences at a primarily white school, Harris examines the media related to these topics, helping the reader understand how they shaped her life. Through the memoir, Harris gives the reader the tools to use to critically analyze their own media environment, allowing the reader to contemplate the impact of media on their own life. While Harris's memoir highlights her lived experiences as a minority millennial woman, I believe that the episodes of life that she shares contain wisdom relevant to any one trying to understand how media can shape life's experiences. Furthermore, learning about Harris's experiences can help those from outside her community better understand her unique struggles.

Wannabe received plenty of critical acclaim from a variety of sources, such as on the New York Times Book Review's list of Best Reads of 2023. In the New York Times, Elamin Abdelmahmoud wrote that *Wannabe*, "...is especially effective when its author leans on her personal experience," (Abdelmahmoud). On the other hand, Abdelmahmoud goes on to write that *Wannabe*, "...contains occasions that demand more rigorous engagement," when discussing the references Harris makes to very recent developments in pop culture (Abdelmahmoud). Abdelmahmoud concludes the piece by writing that *Wannabe* is, "For readers already inclined to

read culture to understand themselves...,” highlighting the fact that *Wannabe* requires a reader with a deep knowledge of different media pieces to truly understand the references and themes Harris uses in the book (Abdelmahmoud). In a review on BookPage, Rachel Hoge writes that *Wannabe* helps readers, “...go beyond the consumption of media for entertainment’s sake...,” since the book examines different themes represented in media from a socially conscious perspective (Hoge). Hoge ends the article with the glowing praise that *Wannabe* is, “the best pop culture guide of all time!” (Hoge). Other critics of the piece echo the same sentiments on the value of the book for understanding the impact of pop culture on society from Harris’s perspective.

For the most part, I agree with the published reviews of the book. *Wannabe* is certainly an important book to read to better understand the impact of pop culture on society and how society impacts pop culture. On the other hand, the book can feel disjointed when Harris transitions between topics, since each chapter is less one part of a whole and more of a standalone essay. I think that the book would be more digestible for readers if that was explained in the introduction, since it definitely isn’t a book that you should read in one sitting. Moreover, I especially agree with the criticism about the number of references in the book. While a more pop culturally savvy reader might pick up on the nuances of each reference, as someone who watches two television shows a year and sticks mostly to non-fiction entertainment, many of the references simply went over my head. I could understand the basic premises and messages of the book, but a more knowledgeable reader could probably learn much more from reading the book. As the reviews highlight, the book also makes reference to very recent pop culture phenomena, some of which requires being involved in certain online communities and will likely be forgotten, since it takes a piece of media with truly great impact to stand the test of time. Overall, the reviews make it

clear that readers with deep knowledge of pop culture and a willingness to engage in the complexities of social commentary will derive the greatest enjoyment from *Wannabe*.

As described in the introduction, Harris takes on a wide variety of topics in *Wannabe*. She uses pop culture references to highlight the themes she wants to discuss and contrasts different pieces of media in order to make a point. In the introduction, “Thank You, Rebecca Bunch,” Harris highlights that the idea for the book comes from, “a thrill in engaging on a deep level until I’ve made some sense of it all,” (Harris 5). She goes on to examine the origin of her name in the context of song lyrics, along with a myriad of other topics. In *Wannabe*, Aisha Harris takes the reader through her process of examining popular culture, giving the reader permission and enabling them to critically examine the media that they have experienced.

In the chapter, “This Is IP That Never Ends,” Harris discusses the new (and old) trend of remaking and reviving old properties in an attempt to squeeze more money out of a once popular idea (Harris 159). I think that readers of this review will resonate with this chapter because of the seemingly constant recycling of intellectual property that we see in our shows these days. While Harris does examine how IP recycling began in the silent era of films, she makes it clear that the current era is a new level of recycling, saying, “we may actually be running out of past,” (Harris 184). Harris reflects on the origin of nostalgia as a disease, likening it to our own modern era, in which audiences keep rewatching the same shows and movies in remembrance of time that once was, even if they hadn’t actually been alive for the first premier of a piece of media. I believe that this chapter sheds light on our modern consumption habits, unwilling or unable to try new varieties of shows. “This Is IP That Never Ends,” helps audiences reflect on the shows they enjoy watching, subtly encouraging them to let their favorite pieces of media go and move on to new ideas in order to have a fuller understanding of entertainment (Harris 187).

Another chapter that I want to highlight is, “On the Procreation Expectation,” in which Harris discusses the idea of parenthood and explains her decision to not have kids (Harris 189). In this chapter, Harris uses statistics, her own personal experience, and pieces of media to examine the gap between how parents are portrayed on screen and the struggles of parents in the real world. Some of the most powerful writing in the book comes at the end of the chapter, in which Harris recounts asking her mother whether or not she would become a mom if she had a second chance, to which her mother replies, “...probably not,” (Harris 214). Harris is relieved with her mother’s answer, feeling as though it lends credence to her decision to not make the same choice. While readers of this review may still be too young to make concrete decisions about their future, I believe that this chapter could help people better understand the pros and cons of parenthood. As Harris writes in the chapter, there are just some people who shouldn’t become or don’t want to be parents, but may feel coerced into it by the attitude of the times (Harris 214). Harris’s writing is at its best when she uses examples from pop culture to explain messages and lessons that she has learned to the audience, helping them relate to her and understand her choices in life.

Wannabe is a book by Aisha Harris and on its surface seems written for people like Aisha Harris. However, I believe that younger readers that might come from different backgrounds and have different identities can still learn just as much about the pop culture ecosystem and how they should assess different types of media in order to understand the choices that artists make and the impact that these choices have on society at large. Overall, *Wannabe* gives readers the permission and tools to critically examine their media diet, promoting more diverse, deep, and deliberate choices.

Works Cited

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