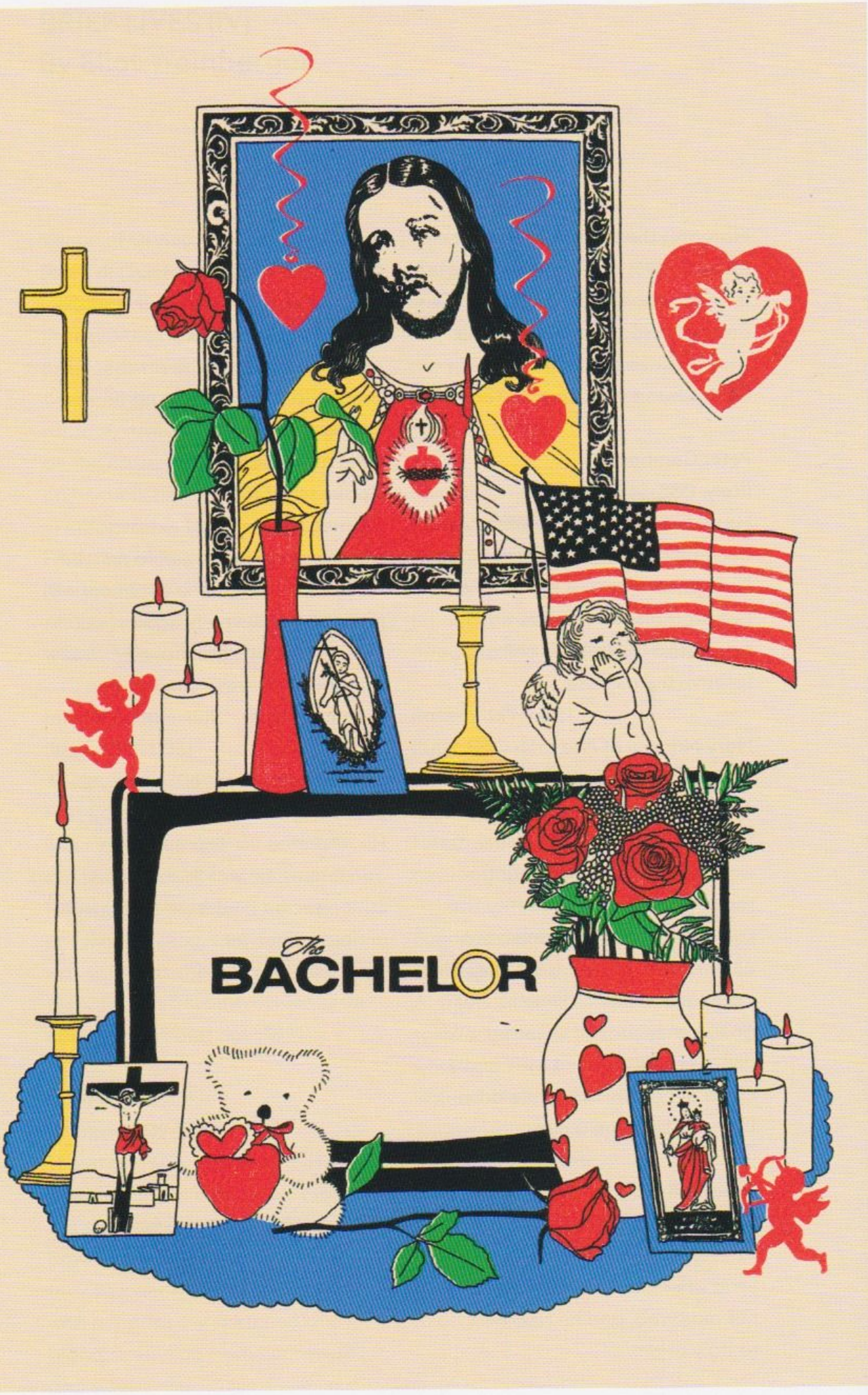

Lia Kantrowitz

M.H. Miller

Bachelor Nation

Coping with the reality TV version of reality

SALVO

The pitch, which mercifully for my sense of self-preservation, was not unsolicited, began like this: "Will you accept a piece about the reality TV franchise *The Bachelor*?" This phrasing was, I imagine unbeknownst to my editor, a riff on the question that has been asked during almost every episode of each season of the popular ABC reality dating show for nearly two decades. The man or woman who has been anointed to the titular role—the show jumps back and forth between what the producers, contestants, and many of the viewers likely believe are the only two possible genders, so that every other season it becomes *The Bachelorette*—gradually whittles down a group of roughly thirty heteronormative contestants, vying for the love of this central figure, over the course of as much as two months of filming, until there are only two left, one of whom is proposed to while the other is left heartbroken, by way of offering the

question: "Will you accept this rose?" ("Yes," he responded to me, though on the show this rejoinder is usually "of course" or "absolutely," and it has never been exchanged between two men, but here we are.)

Due to this affirmative response, what you'll now get is a straight white man in 2019 ruminating on perhaps the most asinine product ever produced by straight white men in at least the last hundred or so years. (With apologies to subprime mortgages, the atom bomb and, if we stretch the definition of "straight" a bit, Nazism.) Why do I like this show, but more importantly why would I want to admit publicly that I've watched it for almost ten years? I've often justified this time lost by telling myself that the stupidest achievements of a culture say just as much about that culture as their greatest accomplishments. In this regard, *The Bachelor* is the moon landing of trash, the *Ulysses* for the absolute lowest common denominator, but I'm also no longer sure if this answer is quite enough. How did I even come to watch this show in the first place? Like a deeply ingrained collective knowledge of the Kardashian family and the women of the Real Housewives of etc., the show had become so soaked up by the popular imagination by the time I discovered it that, the way I remember it, *The Bachelor* just showed up one day at my door, a banal and inoffensive intruder, and then never exited because I didn't have the energy to ask it to leave. I'm deflecting responsibility here, but what I mean is that I didn't seek the show out, nor did anyone ever tell me to watch it. Instead, it was just there. Like a lone can of chili on the empty shelf of a bodega, it was there and it existed merely as a defiant question to submit to and—to paraphrase a rival network—watch what happened.

This was early winter 2011, and I didn't have cable or even own a television. I watched *The Bachelor* on a coughing, whirring old laptop that I held to my chest like a small animal, and the only thing it cost me was precious time and a small amount of dignity. The bachelor that season was an Austin, Texas–based bar owner named Brad Womack, who—in a first for the show—had previously been the bachelor three-and-a-half years earlier, but had failed to propose to any of the competitors. The entire point of the series is to produce an engagement, even a very short-lived one, as is often the case, and in the mythos of the show (at least according to the people on the show itself), this was very controversial. Brad had a kind of Paleolithic simplicity—a man who seemed to have recently discovered fire and whose search for a wife merely indicated a primal urge to procreate. ("I'm gonna make a damn good father," he says repeatedly, with a little too much enthusiasm for my comfort.) He would make a point of showing how sincere he was by punctuating his speech with phrases like, "I want you to listen really clearly to me" or "I can honestly say that." On his back he had an enormous and—I don't know how else to describe it—kind of slutty-looking tattoo of a crucifix, above which was the word *prosapia*, which I'll just assume is the Latin word for "daddy issues" and move on.

The first episode I watched was in the middle of the season, after the crew had traveled to Costa Rica—on a trip furnished by the Costa Rican tourism board—for the ostensible reason of helping Brad fall in love. (Most seasons of the show begin in an Agoura Hills, California, mansion—the only discernible feature of the house is that its exterior appears to be perpetually wet for some reason, especially its winding driveway—but at the halfway point, filming moves to various locations around the world, which is supposed to be romantic, as travel often is, but also serves as an advertorial about the likelihood of white people

further gentrifying certain far-flung locales, including in Brad's case, in addition to Costa Rica, the South African bush.) The first date of the episode took place between Brad and a woman named Chantal O. (one of honestly multiple Chantals from this season, hence the use of her surname's initial). It began with Chantal O. saying to the camera, "I'm not going to let anyone stop me from falling in love with Brad." Okay, Chantal O.! Then they take a ride on "apparently the longest zipline in the world," as Brad describes it, through the wilds of the rainforest, because this date is about, also according to the poetry of Brad, "taking our relationship to new heights." Then they go to a private catered dinner near a riverfront, which leads Chantal O. to announce in a voiceover, "One minute we're ziplining with monkeys and then we're going and having this beautiful picnic by the river!" But just as they sit down to eat, there is a sudden downpour, and they race to Brad's hotel room for shelter, and Chantal O. says, "Things come your way, the rain comes your way and you make the most of it and that's what relationships are like." And then they start kissing in the hotel room and Brad tells her, "*This* could happen every night."

This all happens in the span of about ten minutes—each episode is an ass-numbing hour-and-a-half long, minus commercials—and I'd never seen anything so ridiculous, something that so frantically attempted to prove its sincerity, and in doing so only became more melodramatic and contrived. I would soon discover this was the central dilemma the series posed and continues to pose to this day, which is: "Are you here for the right reasons?" Again and again, that's how the show phrases this question, but a better way of asking it is, do you really want to fall in love and get married, or are you only interested in being on television? The question itself is absurd; its two poles cancel one another out. Even if we set everything aside, suspend all disbelief, and assume that a person did authentically want to become engaged to a stranger after spending six weeks in a battle royale with twenty-nine other women, she is still on a heavily doctored television show and subject to the whims of the producers, which are stronger than the right reasons anyway.

Still, I now think of this introduction to *The Bachelor* as an indoctrination. There is something cult-like about the series. It has its own language and seems to exist in a world of its own making. The primary referent of the show is the show itself and all of the most basic tasks involved in being a person in the world (having a job, paying the rent, feeding and clothing oneself) can be wholly discarded in favor of the priorities of the show, which are, and I'm quoting here: to embark upon a journey to end up engaged, and in love.

You Must Believe in This

Let me take a moment to define the central terms relevant to *The Bachelor* franchise, not because they are difficult to understand—they are, in fact, cloyingly obvious—but because this will give some idea of how completely the show constructs its own reality. There is the "first impression rose," which is given out by the bachelor or bachelorette on the first night of taping to whomever he or she is confident they want to keep around for another week. The first episode is never enjoyable, but it is certainly a technical feat, an all-night marathon in which thirty women or men arrive at the mansion in limos to individually introduce themselves to the bachelor or bachelorette, who is standing at the front door to greet them, and which includes interactions like the following:

"Very nice to meet you. Aren't you a tall drink of water?"

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from North Carolina. Are you nervous?"

"I am so nervous."

"I'm not gonna hate on you. Let me give you a big kiss. So I'm your girl."

"We can talk inside I hope."

"I hope so, so I can flirt with you some more."

It doesn't even matter who's talking here, just believe me when I say this is one of the less excruciating exchanges. It takes forever to watch all of this and the episode isn't even halfway over, because then the cast has to engage in another of the show's signatures, "the cocktail party," in which all thirty contestants try to corner the bachelor or bachelorette's attention. There seems to be an official rule, unspoken to the audience but understood by the participants, that if a contestant interrupts another contestant's conversation with the bachelor or bachelorette and asks, "Can I steal you away for a second?" then the bachelor or bachelorette has to consent, which of course causes all kinds of problems and someone inevitably gets too drunk and many contestants spend the evening talking existentially to one another about how concerned they are that they "haven't gotten any time." This culminates in the "rose ceremony," when the bachelor or bachelorette asks the women or the men he or she wants to stay if they'll accept a rose, leaving the rejected standing rose-less and a little dumbstruck before they walk out of the house, get back in the limo, give a short but emotional speech that serves as an audition tape for one of the show's future iterations, and return to actual reality.

Again, this is only the first episode. Starting in episode two, there are dates, in numerous configurations. The dates are introduced via the "date card," which usually has some tedious phrase written on it like "the road to love is a wild ride." A "one-on-one" is a coveted solo date between just the bachelor or bachelorette and a single contestant (and, uh, the whole production crew), whereas the less appealing "group date" can involve upwards of fifteen contestants. On a group date, one stand-out man or woman is given a rose, and is safe for another week without having to go through a rose ceremony. The same is true of a one-on-one, but if a man or woman on a solo date doesn't get a rose, he or she is sent home immediately.

The Bachelor is the moon landing of trash, the _Ulysses_ for the absolute lowest common denominator.

There is a hierarchy of emotions as the show progresses that is more or less fixed across seasons and is used to justify the fast pace of a budding relationship. During the third week of filming, but not before, it is appropriate for a contestant to say to the bachelor or bachelorette, "I'm genuinely starting to fall in love with you," and on the fourth week that phrase usually turns into "I'm honestly falling in love with you." By the fifth week—but no sooner—one can announce, "I am in love with you," by which time there are only four contestants left, and the bachelor or bachelorette visits each of the cities in which they live, in an episode known by the shorthand "hometowns." To any expression of love, the bachelor or bachelorette is not allowed to say anything beyond "thank you" or "that makes me so happy," because to reveal more might ruin the suspense over who will be proposed to at the end of the season.

Often, a bachelor or bachelorette's positive appraisal of a contestant will comprise some variation of "she's what I'm looking for in a wife" or "he has all the qualities I'm looking for in a husband."

So . . . a lot like regular dating, am I right? That all of this is taking place on television does not go unmentioned by competitors throughout these proceedings, but it comes up only in oblique ways, like the occasional voiceover reminder that "this process works" or "I think that this process not only brings out people's true colors, but it brings out the crazy in them." Calling *The Bachelor* a process is like calling electroconvulsive therapy a check-up—it both downplays the intensity of the situation and legitimizes it as routine. More often, the show's meta-references are less specific, as in "you must really believe in this" or "at the end of the day this is real. This is real life." That's a lot of weight for a pronoun to carry, and it reminds me of a Cosa Nostra capo talking around a contract killing in deliberately opaque code.

The main conservator of this lexicon is Chris Harrison, the show's ageless host, who by all appearances is perpetually besuited and simply lives under the stairs of the *Bachelor* mansion, waiting to pop in whenever he's needed. He'll occasionally appear out of a darkened corner to announce that this is "the most dramatic season in *Bachelor* history" or to prepare viewers for "one of the most stunning dates gone wrong in the history of the show" or to offer a reminder that "in two weeks, it's the most emotional finale you'll never see coming." He looks like a youth pastor who plays original songs on a mid-priced acoustic guitar about how he respects Jesus. He's less a host than a cult leader whose hyperbole is more or less irresistible. His purview is greater than that of other reality TV hosts, because he is part spiritual guide, part therapist, part pimp. The final term to define is "the fantasy suite," which follows hometowns, when there are only three contestants left, and each of the three has a one-on-one with the bachelor or the bachelorette at some hotel. At the end of the date, they read a note from Harrison: "Should you choose to forgo your individual rooms, please use this key to stay as a couple in the fantasy suite. —Chris Harrison." What is strongly implied but for the most part never explicitly stated is that the bachelor or bachelorette will now have intercourse for the first time with each of his or her remaining suitors before sending one of them home, and that sex logically follows meeting someone's parents, but not a second before. (I'll only add that cameras are not allowed in the fantasy suite.) Chris Harrison, then, offers his permission to begin a sexual relationship, but mostly he's there to convince everyone of how authentic everything is, and he spends a great deal of time discussing how the bachelor or bachelorette feels, coaxing mixed emotions out of them with leading questions like: "I just want you to be extra sure and clear of what you're going to do."

Women are hollow set pieces, men are dull and controlling, all of them are primarily concerned with civility, and each week someone is asked to leave only to show up later on *Dancing With the Stars*.

Will you accept a detailed description of a group date? I believe this is my final task of explanation for the uninitiated. I've chosen one at random, from

Brad's season—for no other reason than it's the first season I watched—but I could have chosen anything, because, like a reliable romantic partner with whom you've worked yourself into a stagnant rut, the show repeats itself endlessly and indeed this is part of its comfort. The date in question is the last before hometowns, when the group is in Anguilla, and Brad—staying at a separate location from the contestants, as is always the case, because cohabitation before engagement is sacrilege, unless you are cohabiting with the competition—appears at the women's hotel at two in the morning (2:07 a.m., to be exact, because this is real life) to urgently wake up three of them and pile them into a van to an undisclosed location, which he won't offer any details about, but, as he explains in a voice-over, it's "something millions of women dream about doing." The woman are: Michele (who says to the camera, "I don't know where we're going but I'm scared"), Ashley H. (one of honestly multiple Ashleys this season, whose reaction is, "Everyone is so nervous"), and Chantal O. (whose groggy, slightly stunned silence says it all). It's still dark out when they arrive at a beach house, right on the ocean, and once they're inside, a woman emerges and says to them, "Hi ladies, I'm MJ Day, and I'm the editor for today's photo shoot." (These words receive a kind of annoyed guffaw from the exhausted women.) "Are you ready to feel sexy?" Day continues. (More guffaws.) "Because you're about to grace the pages of the legendary *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, which hits newsstands February 15th." Here Brad starts laughing in a way that can only be characterized as maniacal. The reactions to this news once again receive a range of responses.

Michele: "I'm excited, all of these huge top models are in *Sports Illustrated*."

Ashley H: "They better make me look good."

Chantal O: "I'm so not the model type and I'm scared. And I'm feeling like a fatty today."

Anyway, they are on the beach as the sun is rising, and Ashley H. goes first. She's wearing a red bikini while an oddly hirsute and nameless photographer (whom I have not ruled out as being Chris Harrison in a wig and fake beard) is taking pictures of her and saying, "This would look incredible without a top on," to which Ashely H. immediately responds, "No, I'm not doing that," and Day announces, "Wait, I have an idea," and holds up two conch shells to her own breasts, to which Ashley H. immediately responds, "OK, I'll do it." When it's Chantal O.'s turn, she says, "Even though I feel, like, not Miss Confident and Sexy, I am choosing to just go out there and act like I am," which really is the spirit, because surely the best plan when a romantic partner demands you do something you find invasive and uncomfortable is to just suck it up and do it anyway. Then the hirsute photographer says, "Let's get her wet," meaning Chantal O. starts rolling around in the water, and of course Day follows this up by saying, "How do you feel about taking your top off?" And she does. Finally, Michele says, "I'm just not the type of girl that's easily persuaded into something like that," meaning taking her top off in front of strangers, but then—big surprise here—she admits to having done "a little modeling in my life" and requests to do her shoot with Brad. She proceeds to mount him and they kiss in the waves for a bit while the other two women watch. "I just think it's funny," Chantal O. says. "I'm in love with this guy and I'm having to watch him roll in the sand and having another girl kissing on him—it's absolute punishment to have to see this."

After the photo shoot, they all sip drinks in awkward silence around a pool. Some of the women occasionally break into tears as Brad cringes, and Chantal O.

at last pulls him aside and asks him if everything is okay. His response is one of the great, nonsensical monologues of all time, in which it's almost possible to physically see his brain pulling words out of his ass. In deference to the sheer wonder of this speech, I'll quote it in full:

> Everything is more than fine. It's a strange situation to be on a group date when—I'll be perfectly honest, when you're taking photos, I see it all over Michele and Ashley's face. They get upset. Vice versa. When one of them is taking photos—so it's strange. When we're on a group setting in a situation as important as this week is and hometown dates and so many emotions are involved—I find it very, very difficult to show emotion at all. Only because I know how I'm feeling. I know that's not fair. I'm not taking a cop-out here. It's just I'm very reserved in what I say or do because so many emotions are involved. I'm showing *respect*, in a very strange way. I'm being *very respectful* of everyone's situation.

Later, in a more knowing voiceover, he'll add, "I'm losing the women."

Hype Recycled

Yes sir, this is what I call good TV: awkward, a little painful, generally stupid and hard to watch but also hard to look away from. In the last decade, I've been bombarded, over and over, with the news that we're living in a "golden age of television," in which every episode of every original Netflix or Hulu series or AMC drama is "brilliant" or "inspired" or "seductive" or "resonant." I've never quite understood this eagerness to praise the entire cultural arena in language that makes Chris Harrison seem tempered. Is no one ever let down? For most of my life, television was, even at its best, mindless escapism and not important as anything other than a distraction from the misery of work and spending time with one's family. Now packages of criticism appear in the *New York Times* about the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first episode of *Friends*. I try my best to take part in this new status quo—I watched all of *Mad Men*, the first season of *Game of Thrones*, and I even recently attempted an episode of *Watchmen* on HBO, and my conclusion each time was that television is still stupid, was always stupid, and the heavy-handed praise surrounding it only makes this more obvious. Prestige TV and the copious writing about it feed one another. It gives bloggers with quotas something to post on slow news days, and it keeps the wallets of various Hollywood producers fat while allowing them to think they've contributed something important to the discourse. Naturally, most publications have devolved in the last ten years into content mills for the streaming industry, becoming little more than message boards for our shared cultural mediocrity. As just one example, here is every headline (excluding actual

It's not just that we're living in a world *The Bachelor* helped create, it's more like our world was transposed into reality as understood by *The Bachelor*.

recaps, which also exist) that *New York* magazine's *Vulture* website published about the first season of the Emmy Award–winning Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which had ten episodes:

- "Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is your must-watch Show this spring"
- "Elisabeth Moss isn't convinced *The Handmaid's Tale* is feminist"
- "Alexis Bledel as Ofglen in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the role she was born to play"
- "*The Handmaid's Tale* cast answers the question: Is it feminist?"
- "From the Handmaids to the Marthas, how each *Handmaid's Tale* costume came together"
- "Why *The Handmaid's Tale*'s voice-over works so unusually well"
- "*The Handmaid's Tale*: the biggest changes from the book"
- "A beginner's guide to the *Handmaid's Tale* universe"
- "Television's best shows are taking their cues from literature"
- "*The Handmaid's Tale*'s Joseph Fiennes on how he views the commander and those Scrabble scenes"
- "Hillary Clinton referenced *The Handmaid's Tale* in her speech at the Planned Parenthood gala"
- "From *The Handmaid's Tale* to *13 Reasons Why*, book adaptations are all over TV"
- "The Dystopia of *SNL*'s *The Handmaid's Tale* is a major bummer for the bros, too"
- "Hulu renews *The Handmaid's Tale* for a Second Season; hooray for more despair!"
- "Elisabeth Moss memorized all of Offred's voice-over in *The Handmaid's Tale*"
- "*The Handmaid's Tale*'s closing songs are slyly genius"
- "Alexis Bledel on her hardest scene to shoot for *The Handmaid's Tale*"
- "The 13 shows that defined dystopian TV before *The Handmaid's Tale*"
- "Ann Dowd was inspired by her Catholic nun teachers on *The Handmaid's Tale*"
- "Why the Female Villains on *The Handmaid's Tale* are so terrifying"
- "How *The Handmaid's Tale* picked each of its songs"
- "Madeline Brewer on *The Handmaid's Tale* finale, Janine's fate, and what the show might do next"
- "Samira Wiley on *The Handmaid's Tale*: 'Moira believes things she doesn't necessarily believe'"
- "Margaret Atwood talks cats, birds, comics and the future of the *MaddAddam* TV adaptation"
- "Yvonne Strahovski felt horrible filming that *Handmaid's Tale* car scene"
- "How *The Handmaid's Tale* Changed the Game for Hulu"
- "Alexis Bledel will return to *The Handmaid's Tale* as a series regular in season two"
- "*Atlanta*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *This Is Us* lead the TCA Awards nominations"

- "*The Handmaid's Tale* ends as it began—by amping up the anxiety"
- "In its first season, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s greatest failing is how it handles race"

What else am I supposed to say about all this? Or is the point that this discourse merely exists in the world, occupying the same half-witted space that network sitcoms used to? I've chosen this example not because there are certain similarities in the sexual politics of *The Bachelor* and Atwood's dystopian patriarchy—and there are—but rather because it is so typical of the criticism about contemporary narrative television. Notice the cycle between service ("must-watch"); minute drudgery (the costumes, the differences from the book); more removed, essayistic territory (the two separate pieces about television "taking cues from literature"); and, finally, backlash (the "greatest failing"). I could pick out any prestige television property and perform this same reading; it's all just so rote. And *The Handmaid's Tale* is fine, I guess! It has high production values and talented actors and a powerful story that speaks to the present moment. But my point is that there's no reason for a show like this not to be good, and I don't see why its goodness has to be hammered into the news cycle almost daily, as though the people arguing for this goodness are attempting to convince themselves of it. For this reason, I don't think it's a coincidence that my fondness for *The Bachelor* developed in tandem with this supposed golden age. For anyone suspicious of a hyperbolic critical consensus, the show, despite all odds, actually does seem sincere, in that it never attempts to be anything it's not. Stupid dressed up as an intellectually valuable exercise—well, I guess I'm saying that prestige TV isn't here for the right reasons. Stupid for stupid's sake is at least honest. It was possible for me to enjoy *The Bachelor* because of its unapologetic vapidity, not in spite of it.

The very language of politics has shifted from carefully chosen yet insincere to resemble something more like an off-the-cuff speech on a reality dating show.

Reality Sets In

Then, of course, something happened. In lieu of rehashing the events of November 8, 2016, I'll merely list the euphemisms, both positive and negative, I was able to find in the hour spent procrastinating from figuring out what to do with the rumors that somewhere in the vaults of Donald Trump's former reality television show, there is almost certainly B-roll of a certain president using the N-word. You know: the dumpster fire. Or would you prefer "the day that changed everything"? Here are some others: a stunning repudiation of the establishment; one of the biggest upsets in U.S. political history; a rebellion against the elites; the part where the pain comes; a historic victory; it's really happening; an American tragedy; the unthinkable; a time-bomb for racial violence; the night that put the voter projection industry out of business; a primal scream on the part of voters disenchanted with the status quo; the death of civility; the victory of the uneducated and uninformed; a complete earthquake; a night of shattered dreams. I

could go on, but what I mean is that the irony with which I used to conduct myself to get through the day and all the days a person is required to stack up in order to make a life was no longer valid. It became much harder to comically appreciate something that so earnestly believed in the patriarchy once the American people knowingly elected a man with twenty-three credible accusations of sexual misconduct, including rape. It might seem that my ability to enjoy a garbage TV show was an innocent casualty of America's latest descent into fascism, but I think it's more central to the story. It's not just that we're living in a world *The Bachelor* helped create, it's more like our world was transposed into reality as understood by *The Bachelor*. Women are hollow set pieces, men are dull and controlling, all of them are primarily concerned with civility, and each week someone is asked to leave only to show up later on *Dancing With the Stars*.

The very language of politics has shifted from carefully chosen yet insincere to something more like an off-the-cuff speech on a reality dating show. Note the similarities in rambling, inarticulate cadence and general use of exaggerated non-sequiturs between Brad—*Brad from season 11 of The Bachelor*, whom I've already quoted at length above—and Donald Trump—*the actual president of the United States*—taken from the transcript of his conversation with President Zelensky of Ukraine. I've taken this entirely out of context, but I'm only really referring to a certain scrambled, self-serving grammar anyway:

> Well, she's going to go through some things. I will have Mr. Giuliani give you a call and I am also going to have Attorney General Barr call and we will get to the bottom of it. I'm sure you will figure it out. I

heard the prosecutor was treated very badly and he was a very fair prosecutor so good luck with everything. Your economy is going to get better and better I predict. You have a lot of assets. It's a great country. I have many Ukrainian friends, their [*sic*] incredible people.

Of course, the existence of the first reality television president, of someone whose leadership style, such as it is, can only be understood through the tropes of reality TV (the childlike temper tantrums, the way his claims that the press has been "very unfair" to him sound like a competitor complaining about a bad edit, his unfiltered and unnecessary attacks on people with less power and his self-made excuses for these attacks that basically come down to "I didn't come here to make friends") has changed *The Bachelor*, too. In its most recent seasons, it has become more self-aware, in intriguing ways. The stock character that Trump most resembles is not—as would make the most metaphorical sense, since Trump was the host of *The Apprentice* (which, I'm sure much to his chagrin, was never quite as popular as *The Bachelor*)—the mild-mannered Chris Harrison, who might as well enter the 2020 presidential race because nothing matters anymore, but rather the obligatory meathead competitor. You know this guy— a man who is obsessed with his physical appearance and the physical appearance of others even though he is ridiculous-looking. He is undeservedly arrogant, almost comically unkind, and exploits religious faith in order to justify his chauvinism. For years, this figure was always treated the same way: kept around just long enough for the purposes of entertaining shit-stirring, then let loose before his presence became too much of a distraction. On the season of *The Bachelorette* featuring Emily Maynard—who won Brad Womack's season but (spoiler alert?) it didn't work out—the meathead is a former NFL football player named Ryan, who at one point confronts her about kissing one of the other men, named Ari: "To whom much is given, much is required," he says. "And I feel like you are an amazing woman. You are different. You're not just another bachelorette. Coming into this I was praying not only to myself, but I was praying to you that you would really use this opportunity to impact tons and tons of people. There's gonna be tons of young ladies who watch you, who see how you respond to men, to how you treat them, and how you treat yourself—how you hold yourself to a high standard. And we had to sit there and watch you and Ari kissing."

It became much harder to comically appreciate something that so earnestly believed in the patriarchy once the American people knowingly elected a man with twenty-three credible accusations of sexual misconduct, including rape.

Since this was pre-Trump, Emily's response is, "To have it be thrown in your face like that . . . I really apologize." She cuts Ryan loose in the next episode, but she does so gently.

In the most recent season of *The Bachelorette*, which aired in the spring of 2019, the entire framework of the show became more explicit. This season centered on a pageant queen from Alabama named Hannah Brown, who was

straightforward about her sexuality and her religion. (Christianity, like sex, was previously strongly implied on the show—see Ryan's above paraphrasing of The Gospel According to Luke in denigration of Emily's fondness for kissing—but never actually made clear.) Like Trump in American politics, the meathead in Hannah's season made it further than most people expected. His name was Luke, and he told an unironic story about the Holy Spirit coming to him in the shower—I'm not kidding—after which he decided to devote his life to Jesus. On a hometown date, he takes Hannah to his Bible study group, and the two kneel as a pastor wearing a golf shirt prays over them, asking that the Lord "help them to be your vessels for your gospel." Yikes, but this full disclosure of Christian faith also leads to an honest conversation about sex, in what Chris Harrison might call "a first in *Bachelor* history," without the ridiculous veil of the fantasy suite. Luke, who tells Hannah, "I've been studying Hebrews," and that this has led him to conclude "the marriage bed should be kept pure," says, "If you told me you were having sex or you've had sex with one or multiple of these guys, I would be wanting to go home. One hundred percent." When Hannah responds that "I'm a grown woman and I can make my own decisions and I'm not strapped to a man right now," he tries to backtrack. "If I did find that in one of these relationships that you did slip up and you did have sex, nothing changes about what I like and want with you in the future." To this, Hannah says, "I don't slip up," and continues with an assertive speech that is the closest the *Bachelor* franchise has ever come to a genuine feminist moment:

> You've not shown respect for any of the guys here, and I'm finally seeing that. And you haven't shown me respect here and especially right now. And honestly, you haven't been showing yourself respect here. You keep saying you should do this and you should do that—it's not a should it's a want. It's a desire. And it's not something that you tell me that I can do, it's what I want to do. And I know that I have given this my all. I have cried. I have struggled. I have screamed. I have made decisions that have kept me up at night. There have been so many times that I have wanted to say I am done with you. But my heart has just not allowed me to let you go. And I've prayed so much for clarity, and I feel like I've finally gotten clarity on you. And I do not want you to be my husband.

When Luke refuses to leave—*actually refuses* to enter the limo that is waiting to take him off of television—Hannah, who says with a sly grin, "I can probably get you to go in that limo," tells him, "So, like, I have had sex."

"Say wha?" Luke literally responds.

"Yeah. And Jesus still loves me."

And at that, God Boy pretty much taps out. This was what counted as a stunning admission in the ultra-conservative world of *The Bachelor*. Even more remarkable was how, later in 2019, in a spin-off of the flagship show called *Bachelor in Paradise*—in which the rejects from earlier seasons all convene on a beach in Mexico for what is mostly a deeply stressful, orgiastic free for all—the series had its first same-sex engagement when a former contestant named Demi proposed to her girlfriend Kristian. (They've since separated.) To suggest that *The Bachelor* has become progressive would be folly. For one thing, black contestants

remain not just marginalized but effectively written out of the series. There has never been a black bachelor, despite numerous opportunities, and the only attempt at a black bachelorette, Rachel Lindsay in 2017, resulted in the casting of a white contestant named Lee Garrett, who outside of the show's carefully constructed romance, had a separate (and very easy to find) life online in which he tweeted things like: "What's the difference between the NAACP and the KKK? Wait for it . . . One has the sense of shame to cover their racist ass faces" and his beliefs that Black Lives Matter is a terrorist organization.

Like Trump in American politics, the meathead in Hannah's season made it further than most people expected.

The highly suggestible moron who finds himself identifying with white supremacist movements via Youtube videos likely shares a similar temperament as someone who watches *The Bachelor* and thinks, "This is a great opportunity and I could do that." Which is to say we're a long way off from correcting the systemic racism of reality television. But progress comes in baby steps: as the *New York Times* has reported, Trump was elected with a higher percentage of the white evangelical vote than any other Republican presidential candidate has ever received, and white born-again Christians make up a sizable chunk of both *The Bachelor*'s audience and its contestant pool. The year 2019 seemed to offer at least a test run in explicitly cautioning this audience on the basic tenants of human decency: that religion is no excuse for bigotry, that gay people have as much a right to love as anyone else, that toxic masculinity is wrong. That these arguments now exist within the overwhelmingly old-fashioned framework of the show marks nothing less than a general shift in conservative American ideology. Almost twenty years in and this absolute turd of a series, something that was previously good for a judgmental laugh and nothing else, has become, in its way, valuable.

Alone Again Or

I don't believe in God, but I on some level envy religious people in the same way that I envy the ebullience of TV writers. It must be nice to believe that one's behavior in this life will lead to the reward of an eternal paradise in which you are reunited with everybody you've ever loved and nobody ever dies, just as it must be nice to think that *The Leftovers* is, and I quote, "humanely profound." I'm sure that buying into both of these things really does make all the little indignities of life easier to manage.

For however many words I write about it, *The Bachelor* will still be stupid, but it is important nonetheless, because it seems to understand that television and religion are interchangeable. The most basic, primal motivation for religion has always been about trying to feel hopeful and connected in an unforgiving world, and the same can be said about television. Even now, at what feels like the exact endpoint of history, people still go home and, at roughly the same time of night, they all watch the same thing, and then they talk about it, and feel united. The ultimate lesson of the show, somewhat predictably in the end, is that everybody wants to believe we're not all alone. ⧗