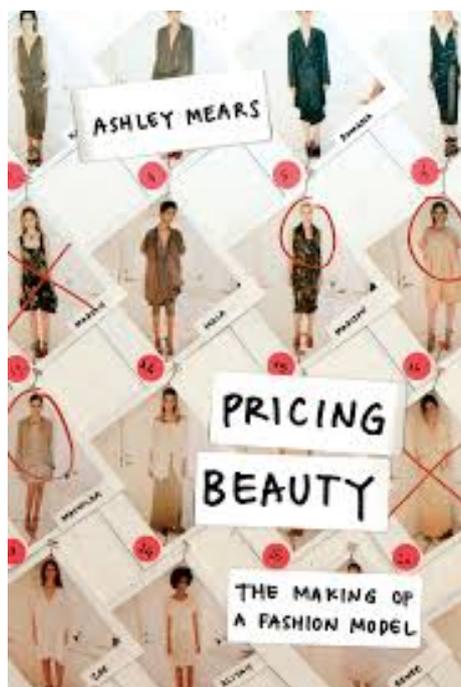


## Book review: Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model by Ashley Mears

By Aimee Nazroo (@aimee\_solange)

Mears, A. (2011). *Pricing beauty: The making of a fashion model*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



Source: California University Press

*Pricing Beauty* is a compendium of rich ethnographic knowledge about what it means and what it feels like to be a fashion model today, demonstrating the value of a sociological perspective on such tricky, unfamiliar terrain. Due to lofty and idiosyncratic representations in the media, one imagines that the fashion industry and its respective labour market is insular to wider socio-economic rhythms. As a full time model and sociology graduate myself, it is a revelation to read a thorough account of its key players partaking in what can only be described as big business. Mears asserts her unique position as both a fashion model and a sociologist to sensitively observe her own habitus, exposing the haphazard way this multi-billion pound network constructs two main ideals of aesthetic and their corresponding financial values in a socially (un)conscious way. Despite becoming deeply embroiled with fitting into this editorial-commercial market structure, Mears mindfully considers the historic journey of her female and male counterparts, uncovering a matrix of domination in which the taste-makers hail the white, slim woman. Yet the beauty of her analysis is its concurrence with precarity. Mears reminds us that within a winner-takes-all market all workers must mitigate inequality, risk and debt on their own. 'Pricing Beauty' holds a mirror up to life and labour in major economies today by describing and comprehensively explaining these public issues through private experiences.

The book is introduced by a compelling anecdote about the author's entry into modelling work, a familiar story that thrusts readers into the world with fresh and vigilant eyes. Poached in a Starbucks in New York, 23 year old former model Ashley Mears finds herself in the hands of a scout who wants to sign her to another agency. Having just enrolled as a graduate student in the sociology department at NYU, she leaves the coffee shop with her social theory book along with his promise that she'll make it big. Mears is back in business but with a question: how and why is a look assigned value? She sets out to research this peculiar system of cultural production, using the following two and a half years of a transatlantic modelling career as 'observant participation' for her graduate project. She immerses herself in the work completely; travelling between New York and London for castings and bookings, earning considerable amounts of money and carrying out all the emotional and physical labour required to keep her agents and clients keen. Alongside, she makes observational field notes, writes diary entries, conducts interviews and collects historical data. The outcome is a rigorous empirical analysis of cultural production.

Firstly, it is important to appreciate the complexity of this research design. The wide selection of auto-ethnography informs the analysis in ways that are typically restricted by researcher boundaries and I consider it the biggest feat of the book. Mears is constructive, exploiting a unique opportunity to gain insight into a high-status social world – of course, one in which she has a personal and financial stake. This is fraught with risk. Initially, I wondered to what extent she was

lured back into the industry for what it had promised her, suspecting that the stress of subjecting herself to a career so expectant of success would impair her judgement. However, her boldness pays off. Mears manoeuvres herself into that liminal space between researcher and subject for 'observant participation' and is able to reflexively examine the way she feels and behaves: a self-education of the social world.

Mears recalls a TV commercial casting where she was asked to dance in tiny shorts next to visibly younger models. She was quietly asked to leave before the others entered the next round of auditions, writing in her diary, 'feeling too old for this, wanting to quit. Almost there'. Mears allows herself to be intimately affected by situations that are frequently coarse, harsh and inevitably personal and is able to observe her emotional responses. From a reader's perspective, it is interesting how retrospectively her feelings seem to instigate a kind of feedback loop. Why does she feel old? Why is her look not given value sometimes? It is clear that Mears wants readers to recognise forces of socialisation within the modelling industry, specifically the ways in which models are directly and inadvertently taught how to become valuable assets to different markets. This is commendable. Now more than ever, it is crucial that academia can talk frankly about the treatment of bodies, namely the proliferation of size-zero editorial "girls" and "Instagram" stars, to reveal what goes on *behind the scenes* and the powerful constructions of femininity and masculinity which are evident there.

Mears heavily emphasises that these powerful gender and sexual stereotypes are reinforced through the psychological means of the labourers themselves. This is a post-modern concept Barardi describes as a new condition of alienation, one which muddies the binary struggle between workers and their respective management. The path to self-actualisation becomes more narrowly defined as workers *voluntarily* give their body and soul over to the unending pressures of labour. The struggle for balance, quality of life and happiness now lies within – a constant state of cognitive dissonance. This is visible in 'Pricing Beauty' which artfully depicts how models wilfully submit themselves to the industry, finding their experiences mostly enjoyable (even ostensibly glamorous) and gritting their teeth when they aren't. The rub? Models hold out for their big break because the truly committed amongst them believe it will make their hardships worthwhile. It's less '1984', more 'The Devil Wears Prada'. Of course, the actual narrative isn't as clean cut but paved in the small, partial choices models make everyday. An example of this process is from an article by Hari Nef who wrote about the president of IMG, Ivan Bart, signing her explicitly as their first transgender model:

"IMG has met with transgender models in the past, but it seemed to us that they did not want to be transgender models. They wanted to be models — model-models — and weren't too keen on going up for jobs that brought attention to their gender identity. How do you feel about —"

"Give me all those jobs."

I laughed when I said it, and my eyes sparkled like I was telling a dirty secret. I couldn't remember when I'd stopped willing to be trans and started wanting to be trans. If there were a difference, I'd forgotten it; words shot out of me. IMG was powerful (Gisele, Gigi, Kate), which scared, excited, and prompted me to speak.

"I want to work," I said.

"And you will," he said. "You've got a good look for fashion." He paused, then chose: "Very Saint Laurent." '

Here, Nef reflects honestly upon her private feelings towards her labour and begins to understand her own capacity for personal and political autonomy. Is her gender identity entirely her own to keep, change and enjoy? Does her employment become a mere token of the transgender community, or somehow help it? 'Pricing Beauty' explains that however consensual and fashion-oriented these sorts of transactions appear to be, feelings of resistance to the industry point to the

countless physical and mental adjustments that models of different backgrounds must make to secure work. In order to understand how a look is given value, we must investigate the model market from the inside out and uncover the hidden and often insidious dual processes through which it is structured. This means getting to know a diverse workforce of black, white, male, female and trans models one-on-one. This is one of the only methods that has any clear revolutionary potential. The book's anecdotal style reminds me of McLuhan's phrase 'the medium is the message' because it reveals how models are differentially appropriated to fashion. Perhaps it would take equally partial and concentrated efforts to reverse and reform it. My only qualm is that it does not explore the industry's future but since it reads beautifully as a stand-alone critique, I consider it a minor one. Mears serves the grounds for intersectional analysis on every page: it is merely the next step.

So what exactly happens behind the scenes? Mears explains that a model's value is socially constructed between agents, photographers, designers and companies. These key players network with each other to get a sense of which models stand out as uniquely valuable: agents monitor feedback from existing clients and "talk up" certain models. A select few begin to book more jobs and build a "name". Then, a top model is championed by notable clientele which sets off a chain of success, particularly in the editorial circuit where there is no aesthetic blueprint to follow. Meanwhile, the network's handiwork is disguised and the models success is made to appear natural. We only have to look to Victoria's Secret Angel press to see vast swathes of girls prepare their bodies and get cast with a finely-toothed comb, only for the latest winner to be adorned with a 'girl-next-door plucked from obscurity' backstory. The industry is ripe for parody, at the very least cynicism, but this book is better than that. Mears takes a pragmatic view of the industry as a commodified labour market in which the 'collective misrecognition of a look requires a collaborative misrecognition of its production as though the look existed independently all along'. Models do not have inherent trading value: the winners are not different from their peers in any distinctive way apart from being valued in the right place at the right time. Their successes are not the result of luck or beauty but processes of social interaction: namely, the relations of cultural production determine the possibilities of cultural consumption.

I find this imagination of the industry unendingly useful as a model of eight years, which is twice as long as most stints last. Despite the prospects of my insecure, so-called "career" delicately hanging in the balance, it is comforting to mentally locate myself within the framework of a labour market (albeit a haphazard concept of one) for the first time ever. As I read *Pricing Beauty*, I began to truly understand the differential achievements and struggles of my peers, even those I hadn't spoken to. I have witnessed the intricacies of this matrix of domination almost everyday; being explicitly told to get thinner to be the cookie-cutter white English editorial girl with 34 inch hips, feeling pressured to put on weight for commercial clients who want more of a girl-next-door and watching black models become routinely exoticised in editorial images and made erotic tokens of the Other. All the while, we both get paid substantially more than our male counterparts. This kind of insight feels like political leverage to girls like me because solidarity is so hard to come by: we remember faces over names whilst close friends are routinely our own competitors. It would only be human nature to assume that everyone is doing better than you. Then, to understand that the industry's ever-changing demands are often above our capacity to meet them is the first step we can take towards acceptance of these terms of production or refusal and even reform.

Having read this book, the idea of modelling work being a countercultural, feminist pursuit is something I would deeply dispute. Mears touched on this in relation to the pay discrepancy between women and men in modelling versus other lines of work. She outlined that whilst women are paid almost double a man's fee, the distribution of work between all models is incredibly uneven, many don't work for months and when they do, it is at the behest of a client's total control of their image. This helped me realise how the modelling world is not distinct from other creative, cultural and informational industries because these relations of production are mimetic of changes in wider society today. For so many of us, estrangement goes hand-in-hand with autonomy. Our self-actualisation relies on a committed and focused life of self-employment and improvement that tethers us to work-related practices all the time, whether you're a model, a banker or a journalist. Since *Pricing Beauty* was published in 2011, it would be interesting to know what Mears thinks

about the self-promotion of models, a task so central to our work that social media stats are often asked about before measurements or age. This is a huge economy in which clients book a model with a huge following essentially for their media space, a priceless platform that can neatly align a brand with a figure's personal and aesthetic interests and you guessed it: a primed audience. Whilst my job has compelled me to grow up and gain some financial independence from my family home, I can't help feeling that its development is transactional. As the line between public and private diminishes, so does our autonomy and self-expression.

Mears has written an important book that clearly outlines the minute mechanics of an ever-changing, complex network of creative industry. It systematically uncovers the processes (or transactions) that make modelling a "bad" but vaguely cohesive job in ways every models was familiar with but unable to explain. Had it been written more recently, Pricing Beauty could have even more to fight for. For the purposes of this review, I have attempted to reinforce a few salient points; that models are a labour market within a complex network of cultural production, that they are differentially appropriated to fashion within an editorial-commercial market and that this incurs a set of problems for the workers that although individually felt, echo the ongoing struggle of people in wider society today. We are all in this together, on our own.

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***About the author:*** *Aimee has been a fashion model working in London for eight years. She also has a degree in Sociology with Social Psychology from the University of York.*

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