

Who's Frying Baloney?

**The Joy of Writing About Sucky
Experiences**

**"Poor North Dakota," New Nonfiction (published in
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**POOR NORTH DAKOTA:
ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM
GEEK TO GEEKY BEAUTY QUEEN**



by Ellen Weisberg and Kelly Gousios

As I wrapped the unopened "Mrs. United States Pageant" DVD in a second envelope and scribbled my mother's name and address on the front of it, I knew I was making a grave mistake.

Yes, she had begged me to order it.

Yes, she had begged me to order it more than once.

Actually, more than twice.

And yes, I had made her wait no less than nine full months after the live event

before I finally mustered the motivation to mail in the order form and the accompanying check.

But it was still a grave mistake on my part.

Why?

Because it would only be a matter of time after her sweaty fingers eagerly wrapped around the DVD and pried the case open.

Only a matter of time after her anticipatory eyes took in the vivid colors of the bathing suits and the elegant sway of the flowing gowns, and her ears heard the declarations of the delegates, proudly stating their names and

those of their represented states.

Only a matter of time before I would be subjected to face down the answer to the big question:

Did I look like a schmuck on stage?

And only a matter of time before I would be subjected to face down the answer to an even bigger question:

Did it matter?

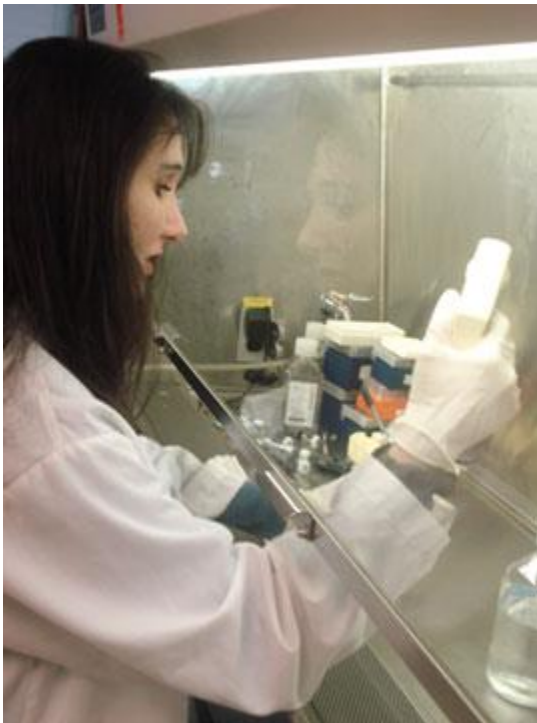
Now how exactly did I, a New England research scientist whose biggest daily fashion challenge for the past 22 years had been whether or not to continue wearing stretch pants that developed a small hole in the upper right thigh, become a state representative for North Dakota in the 2009 Mrs. United States Pageant?

Funny you should ask.

I'd been asking myself the same question months before the pageant, the hours leading up to and during the pageant, and for nine months since the pageant. And after seeing myself through the objective eyes of a camera, and the unbiased angling and focusing and zooming by some indifferent stranger behind that camera, I had started pressing myself even harder for the answer.

And the answer was not an easy one to get. Yes, I'd been a research scientist, with many years of carefully controlled and designed experiments, calculations, measurements, and precisely generated and fully analyzed data tucked away like a warm blanket fending off the bitter cold chill of ignorance with comforting awareness and elucidation. You'd think dissection of just about anything would have been easy for me. But in this case, the research scientist was the one in the petri dish being probed and examined, with assessment that was ideally to be fair and unbiased.

Alas, not an easy task.



It was much easier, at least initially, to look at the nuts and bolts behind

what drew me into the land of boldness and beauty. It all started when a pageant director had apparently, in the midst of her desperate recruiting attempts, smiled favorably upon a fairly blurry, distant and over 10 year-old profile picture of me on an Internet site that I'd been using mainly for the purpose of promoting some children's books that I co-authored for fun with my husband. When she first told me she thought I'd make a "great New Hampshire state representative" and that I should consider entering the upcoming local Northeastern pageant, my first impulse was to delete this obvious spam/scam that somehow found its way into my inbox.

But something stopped me. Call it ... a gnawing curiosity.

What if this was for real?

I had a sudden and clawing need for spontaneity and adventure. A need to be impulsive. Whimsical. Wacky. *Dangerous*.

I looked into it, and it was legitimate. It was when this woman told me that a pageant could help one promote an idea or a business that the bells and whistles went off in my head and I realized that it could be an effective way to promote the *children's books*. And so, I went for it.

And then it went for me.

I was the only one to show up on the day of the preliminary pageant without flesh-tone colored shoes for my bathing suit (I honestly thought black heels would look kind of cool with a Speedo), and I was also the only one there without a sarong for the swimsuit (I really didn't even know what a sarong was- It had to be explained to me). The women there were luckily pitying, gracious and helpful, and scrambled to find extras of whatever they brought with them that'd get me through the evening. I must admit that without intending to, I accidentally packed up and stole one brunette woman's nude-colored heels that she had let me borrow. I would have returned them by mail had I known the woman's name, or had I even been able to pick her out from among all the other brunette women that in false eyelashes and layers of makeup looked identical to one another.

I also accidentally stole a sarong.

The pageant actually went fairly smoothly, or at least I thought so at the time. I didn't care for the excess makeup that was layered on me, or the false eyelashes that I had been intimidated by others into wearing, as I wholeheartedly believed it made me look like some kind of twisted version of a transvestite: a woman trying to look like a man trying to look like a woman. But I went with it, and tried to believe what everyone kept telling me, which was that when you're on stage the excess makeup looks good.

My main concern throughout the show was tripping in my stolen heels, which I thankfully did not do.

What I apparently DID do was a really crappy job.

When it was award time at the end of the evening, I stood between the only two other contestants that were competing for the title of "Mrs. New Hampshire." The woman to the right of me received so many awards honoring her photogenic potential and physical fitness and contributions to society that she didn't have enough hands to hold all of them. The woman to the left of me received one award, the "Director's Choice" award, which was decided by the same woman who had originally wooed me into the pageant with the line, "I think you'd make a great state representative." Then there was the woman in the middle who received absolutely nothing and was left to go home with her soon-to-be-stolen flesh-colored shoes and sarong, and to ponder the current and future status of her trodden self-esteem.

North Dakota

Ellen Weisberg, Ph.D.
Mrs. North Dakota United States 2009

Ellen Weisberg is married to her sweet and supportive husband, Ken, and is the mother of precious three-year old Emily. A researcher, she has helped to develop two promising anti-leukemia drugs, one of which was recently FDA-approved.

Ellen enjoys illustrating and writing as creative escape, and has authored and published a short story, poetry, articles, and four children's books. Personal proceeds for her books are going toward meaningful causes, including heart disease and breast cancer research. She has donated several thousand copies of her books to schools and libraries throughout the U.S. and Canada.

In the past several years, Ellen witnessed a number of losses, including loss of health, loss of life, and at times- loss of hope. She learned to try to turn losses into gains, and cherishes the opportunity to let others know that you can find some light in the darkness if you look hard enough.

A month or so later, I received a phone call from a pageant affiliate, who informed me that I had been selected “at large” from a pool of applications and photos to represent North Dakota, which had no state delegates as it had no pageant director, in the upcoming national pageant to be held that summer in Las Vegas. She asked me if I’d be interested.

Whoa.

Is she kidding?

Me? The only one of three contestants for the New Hampshire title who received not even the smallest consolation prize and who also stole a pair of shoes and a sarong?

And ... North Dakota? What did I know about North Dakota other than there were roaming bison and ice fishing? And the fact that Steve Buscemi did a great job in the movie that was based in, and named after, the state’s largest city?

Those feelings came over me again. The sudden and clawing need for spontaneity and adventure. A need to be impulsive. Whimsical.

Wacky. Dangerous.

And it would also be a good opportunity to promote the children’s books.

I went for it.

And then it went for me.

Again.

Las Vegas was intense, and I was convinced that I’d never— even in the week’s time I was there—be able to learn my way around the Orleans Hotel and Casino, or be able to find my way out of it ... I developed blisters like I’d never seen from the constant pressure of walking around the casino and during rehearsals in high heels, along with a blood clot under my big toe nail that was still visible after nine months. And yet again, a makeup artist that came to me on the recommendation of another contestant succeeded in making me look like a cross between a Geisha and the Joker from Batman.

But in all honesty, I found the pageant itself to be ... kind of pleasurable. And I convinced myself that with my hair professionally made up and my face under twenty plus layers of makeup, I could blend in with the others and at the very least do a respectable job and have something unique and exciting to look back on some day. It was all good. It was all positive.

And for nine months, that was how I continued to feel about it. All good. All positive.

That was, until I was subjected to actually seeing myself on a DVD that captured what I did, in fact, look like on stage, in Las Vegas, with my professional hairstyle and under the twenty-plus layers of makeup. As I sat in an armchair at my parents' villa in West Palm Beach, looking much the same as Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* in front of films about violence and pornography with his eyelids propped open and his arms in a strait-jacket, I watched Mrs. North Dakota in all her warped transvestite glory first slump across the stage in a bathing suit that somehow had gotten twisted and looked asymmetrical against her not-as-trim-as-I-had-hoped-or-thought-body. The stomach bulge I thought I had detected underneath the swimsuit was confirmed when Mrs. North Dakota slumped across the stage in a tight-fitting evening gown, flashing her portly protuberance as she slumped sideways to the audience and made her rapid exit off the stage.

There was actually one pregnant delegate in the pageant, and in retrospect all would have been forgiven had I also claimed to be with child during the event. But, in reality it was just me and my poor posture and my lack of exercise that—combined with the bright stage floodlights—highlighted the fact that the state of North Dakota was indeed screwed.

And what was up with my eyebrows? I had thought they looked normal when I last glanced at them in a mirror prior to the pageant. But on the DVD, they looked like rigor mortis caterpillars that had dropped dead in the center of my forehead. And was one of my eyebrows *higher* than the other? Now how in the hell did *that* happen? I believed that Marty Feldman would have had a better stage appearance than I did with all these freakish flaws I was making note of. Freakish flaws that were in stark contrast to the otherwise paragons of competing delegate perfection that dazzled the audience from start to finish.

And so, as it turned out, I *did* subjectively look like a schmuck on stage, and it *did* matter. Alas, I did not claim some semblance of emotional security upon seeing myself in the objective eyes of a moving camera, and alas I had quite an emotional reaction to the unveiling of what had otherwise been laying low and dormant in my imagination for nine relatively blissful months.

I shut the DVD player off and pursed my lips.

As if it wasn't enough that South Dakota gets the fame of Mount Rushmore, its poor over-shadowed northern neighbor must now tack a slumping bloated, uneven eye-browed state delegate to its list.



It was at this point that I attempted to move past the nuts and bolts of the frivolous how's, when's and where's that led me into pageant land, and instead scientifically ventured into the hardcore, deep-rooted, maternal-, paternal-, sibling-, peer-, cultural- and societal-influenced *why's*. This pageant notion had me suddenly facing questions that dated back to my gum-smacking, big feathered hair days: *Was it a lack of free time that kept me from being a cheerleader? Was it a scheduling conflict with chemistry lab that prevented me from being Home Coming Queen?*

I knew deep down that even in a class of one, I would not have been Home Coming Queen because I honestly had no interest. I had no interest because I had no one encouraging me to be anything other than the stereotyped geeky girl I had always done such a smashing job at being. I had suitably mastered the art of introversion and social awkwardness and had provided my junior high and high school classes with a token bookworm-ish nerd. Why would I- or anyone that knew me back then- have wanted to risk tainting such purposeful perfection?

And so perhaps it wasn't such a great mystery that I should find myself, decades later, on a lighted stage in Las Vegas in a bright red cocktail dress and stolen nude heels doing a choreographed opening number to "Baby I'm a Star" by the artist formerly known as "Prince." No great mystery why this erudite poster child for geekdom attempted to infiltrate one of the top tiers of modern America's hierarchal caste system, earmarked by beauty, elegance and social eptness.

I was encouraged to do it. Plain and simple. For the first time in my life, I found myself being encouraged to be something I had never even thought about stepping outside of the box to be.

And also, this particular time in my life was technically the *middle* of my life, should I live so long as to see my eighties. Midlife crises come in all shapes and sizes. While for men it could arrive in the form of a Lexus SC 430 or a 23 year-old intern, for me it arrived in a tankini and suicide heels. It was all very breathtaking, in the sense that the combination of anxiety and apparel reduced my ability to take in air.

Alone in the dark at the back of my parents' villa, holding a cup of coffee in one hand and the DVD remote with the other, I had to admit that there was in fact no mystical late-in-life calling from the outside of the box as I

watched myself clumsily stagger across the stage. Mrs. Wyoming, Mrs. Alabama. They glided and I visibly faltered. Not in my mind, though. In my mind, I had mimicked them perfectly.

Yet even if I could have succeeded in mimicking them, I could never be them. Cold, pained, and quasi-scientific observation of the subject in the DVD showed no other viable interpretation of the data.

They were them.

I was me.

And ... I wasn't so sure, after all of the data were in and I had the chance to plot the results and construct line graphs, that there was anything really so *wrong* with that. My final data interpretation was colored by a pearl or two of wisdom a fellow pageant-goer had dropped not long after the viewing of the DVD:

“As for the pageant, I'm nowhere near perfect and I'd love to meet someone who is (lol). Really, I don't do perfect and I know I wasn't great myself, however, all that matters to me is that I did my best—and that I know I do good things for people!”



Hear, hear.

In the pageant, on that Las Vegas stage, I didn't look like a beauty queen. I looked like a scientist.

That's because in the pageant, on that Las Vegas stage, I was a scientist.

Yes, a geeky scientist. With 20 plus years of geeky science under my geeky belt, in the geeky box that has been - for all intents and purposes - my

geeky life for over 40 geeky years now. And there is not a sash or a crown or a pair of stolen heels that could change that geeky fact.

It's a fact that I've been living fairly comfortably with for a long time.

It's a fact that I'll continue to live fairly comfortably with for as long as I'm able to live.

Even after viewing the "2009 Mrs. United States Pageant" DVD.

Okay, so maybe South Dakota has Mount Rushmore. But I've seen "Fargo" three times now. And I'd like to see it again.

Ellen Weisberg is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She has authored/illustrated several books published by U.K.-based Chipmunk Publishing, including "Gathering Roses" (2007), "All Across Canada" (2008), "All Across China" (2009), "Fruit of the Vine" (2010), "All Across Europe" (in press), and "Making Emmie Smile" (in press). She published a short story and poetry in the literary periodical, PKA's Advocate. In addition, she authored and illustrated "Friends and Mates in Fifty States" (Galde Press, 2008), and has had articles published in magazines, including Natural Solutions, Many Hands, Today the Dragon Wins, NH Mirror, and Working Mother Magazine.

Kelly Gousios is a former Army Engineer Officer with a masters in Regional Planning. Later, she declared herself well into her second life time and entered Federal service as a Presidential Management Fellow. She finds her life of late happily derailed by children and the desire to write. She was tickled pink to realize that she lived next door to Mrs. North Dakota, albeit in New Hampshire.

[The Writing Disorder - More Nonfiction](#) (link to published article in The Writing Disorder.com)

[Poor North Dakota](#) (link to video on YouTube channel)

