



Prettiest Doll

Gina Willner-Pardo

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“It’s good to be pretty. I’m really lucky.” So begins the story of thirteen-year-old Olivia, or Liv, who started winning beauty pageants at age three. Lately she’s been wondering, however, if that’s all she is. She gets a chance to find out when she meets a runaway named Dan and they embark on a trip to Chicago, each determined to uncover family secrets. This story of two teens from very different backgrounds making their way in a world preoccupied with physical appearance sparkles with wry humor, romance, and a revealing behind-the-scenes glimpse at the world of beauty pageants.

Prettiest Doll Details

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From Reader Review Prettiest Doll for online ebook

Sps says

Wins the award for Most Cusses in a Book With Pink Ruffles on the Cover, no contest. Asshole! Bitch! Shit! And not just once but multiple times, almost as if this is a book for teens.

But of course it isn't. It's got a folksy small-town Missouri (contrasted with big-city Chicago) setting, it's got beloved sympathetic nonparental adults and a dead parent, and it's got a nicely encapsulated moral delivered in speech form after misadventures, small triumphs, and personal growth, so you know it's a middle-grade novel from way back.

A hoot of a middle-grade novel, though. It starts strong with a protagonist wonderfully occupying the overlap between vapid and completely, perfectly grasping social fucked-up-ness. Echoes of George Saunders and I'm not even kidding. "Then I remember about my hair" will be in my head for a long, long time.

The middle sags, as the whole heroic journey didn't do much for me, and I thought Danny was a bit unnecessary and two-dimensional. The best details unfortunately didn't seem like something a sheltered thirteen-year-old would notice, which makes me wonder whether Willner-Pardo would do better writing for and about adults.

But then the last bit at the final pageant is pretty good, with the observant details better integrated. Personally I wanted there to be a lot more about pageants, though I guess most people have TVs for that now.

Kate Lowrie says

Just so sad as the reality is that many girls go through this and can't break free to be seen as more than just pretty.

Isabelle says

[to do it and deliberately sing badly (hide spoiler)]

Barbara says

There's hardly a doubt that eventually thirteen-year-old Olivia Jane Tatum is going to kick herself free from the constant stress of the beauty pageant circuit that her mother's had her on since she was three. The only questions that remain are how and when her revolution will come, and after she's no longer defining herself

through her looks, how will she know who she actually is? The author does a good job of describing the small town world of Luthers Bridge, Missouri, and Olivia who has been told how lucky she is to have been born pretty since it opens doors that she has just about forgotten who she is beneath all that pageantry finery, makeup, hairstyle, and smiles. As she prepares for the Prettiest Doll pageant, she is sure there's little point to singing since she is such a poor singer. A chance meeting with Danny, a fifteen-year-old runaway on his way to Chicago because he doesn't want to give in to his own mother's pressure to take growth hormone shots so he can grow taller leads her to accompany him to Chicago in order to set some of her own demons to rest. As much as she enjoys the reactions others have to her looks, she also longs to be seen for what's inside of her, something more than her beauty. I enjoyed following Olivia on her personal journey and her realization that being true to herself and doing what matters to her rather than following her mother's dreams are what make her a winner in the end. There are some awkward passages concerning Danny, Chicago law enforcement, family dynamics and her Uncle Fred who lives in Chicago, but I was willing to overlook them because I liked Olivia so much. Middle grade readers will enjoy getting a glimpse into the life of someone for whom her appearance has been a ticket to success--or has it?

Anne Slater says

So here I am, 70 years old, my own prettiest dolls in their mid-40s, reading a girl book, Gina Willner-Pardo's Prettiest Doll. Complete opposite to the kind of YA book I am usually drawn to, but.... I was curious about what she had to say

I was drawn in easily with the opening paragraphs which make clear to the reader that Olivia is not happy with what is being thrust upon her. She recognizes the extra work and self-denial that her mother takes on for her daughter's sake (or, sez I, is it for her own sake? Or to give her, the mother, something that makes HER special??). The one selflessly sympathetic person in Olivia's life, Uncle "Bread", has evaporated for reasons that seem plausible to Olivia in light of her mother's suggestive explanations of his departure from their home town. He will reappear to save the day.

The beginning is a little slow, but so are Olivia's musings about herself and her friends. She is not yet on her wild chase of freedom from her mother's dreams for her. She encounters Danny, a runaway boy, but that seems insignificant until she meets him again after her semi-traumatic experience with Mrs Drucker, the voice teacher. Suddenly, Olivia sees ONE THING that she CAN do to evade the pageant life.

At this point, there is action, planned by Olivia and Danny, and spur of the moment action (the kind that just gets you into worse trouble; there is relief and desperation, two youngsters trying to take responsibility for themselves in ways that are too immature to make for a safe outcome. Secrets are revealed, lies uncovered, personal responsibilities recognized. Olivia and Dan, no longer Danny, part necessarily, reluctantly, and with great hope for their futures.

Someone complained about profanity in the book: this grandmother read the book with rapt attention and doesn't remember where the profanities were, but believe me, 13- and 15-year-olds today know more words and behaviors that most 50-year-olds didn't learn until they were 40...

A sequel would be a good thing.

Christine H says

** I'd have given this book 3.5 stars if I could've! **

Prettiest Doll is a sweet story about a 13-year-old girl, trapped in the clutches of the beauty-pageant world by her mama, whose resentment over her glitzy cage manifests itself into running away. Olivia desperately wants to live a life that doesn't include stiff dresses, stiff hair, and stiff smiles—no matter how many people tell her she's beautiful. So when a stranger comes to her small corner of Missouri, in the form of 15-year-old Danny, who's also dealing with the trappings of his own cage, Olivia finds her ticket out of town.

There are a few things that I really enjoyed about this book that you might like as well. First, I like that Olivia is not whiny. It would've been very easy to write a character who complains about anything and everything under the sun, especially since Olivia does have something to complain about. But I very much appreciated that despite her complaints, she doesn't seem bratty or annoying. She has genuine concerns about how her participation in pageants might affect the rest of her life.

Second, I liked having a bit of a backstage pass to view the life of a beauty queen between contests. I wonder if Willner-Pardo ever participated in any pageants herself or if she knows someone who does. I think, Squinks, what you'll like is the fact that she tackles the "uncommon" situation of someone who's good at something but who doesn't actually want to participate in it. We never think of that happening. I mean, usually, if you're good at gym, for example, teachers assume that you actually enjoy gym class. I liked the fleshing out of Olivia's character by giving her so many layers. She wants to please her mom, knowing she easily could, but she doesn't enjoy it and, instead, dares to think differently and deeply about her future.

The third thing I really enjoyed was the dynamic between Olivia and Danny. Willner-Pardo nicely juxtaposes Olivia's obstacles with Danny's dilemmas to showcase the fact that despite being relatively similar in age, kids can have radically distinct—though somewhat related—problems. And in talking about their lives and sharing their fears and hopes, these two people who might never have known each other if not for their chance encounter over milkshake, begin a friendship that I'm sure they will cherish for the rest of their lives. I know it's hard to think about making friends and leaving them, and although Willner-Pardo doesn't indicate that Olivia and Danny will never meet again, in creating the character of Danny, the author highlights the existence of a rare and beautiful gift that sometimes we take for granted (or not even realize we have): Danny is one of those souls that walks into our lives, if but for a fleeting moment, but that nonetheless changes us forever. I liked that Olivia and Danny discover more of themselves by getting to know one another.

This is a nice story of friendship and growing up that you might like. I did find some parts of it moving a little slowly—there was a moment when I wasn't sure if I wanted to pick it up again after I was interrupted, but I was glad I did. The ending is sweet and thought-provoking. And parents, this is a great story to lead into discussions of physical appearances, expectations, and the true meaning of beauty—not to mention running away from home. That being said, the irony isn't lost on me about how I totally judged this book by its cover when I first saw it, which is the issue Olivia and Danny grapple with throughout the story. But just as with other things, there's so much more than meets the eye in this book.

A version of this review originally appeared on www.squinklebooks.wordpress.com.

Allison P says

I did not enjoy this book. The two main characters who run away didn't do anything different when they returned home, so what was the point?

I did like the way the author was able to describe everything so I was really able to picture in my head the town, the people, the weather. That part is well-written- just not the plot.

Jody says

2.5 stars

Liv is a pageant girl who is getting tired of it. She recognizes the sacrifices her mom makes and wants to please her, but also wants to be seen as more than just pretty. Liv's reflections on what beauty is and its importance are pretty well said.

The trip to Chicago with Dan just kind of lost me. I don't know. It felt kind of like the author wanted to write two different books and just mashed them together.

Wandering Librarians says

Olivia is pretty. Everyone knows it, and she's been doing pageants since she was little. Now she's 13, and her mother has put her in the Prettiest Doll competition. But Olivia isn't feeling the same as she used to about pageants. She starting to feel afraid that pretty is the only thing people will ever see in her, that that's even all her mother sees in her. When Olivia gets a chance to take off with a teen runaway to Chicago, she takes it. But Olivia realizes that going to Chicago is only partly about running away from pageants.

I'm surprised that there aren't more YA or middle grade books that revolve around the pageant world. It's quite the hot topic, with that pageant show on TV. I have never watched it, but the kids and parents are always on the talk shows at the gym defending their right to dress their children in outfits from Pretty Woman.

This book took an interesting look at how people perceive you for your physical appearance. Olivia knows she's very pretty, and she likes being pretty. She doesn't wish she wasn't. But she does begin to worry that maybe that's all anyone will ever think about her. She asks her mom if she would be proud of her if she didn't do pageants, and what for, and her mom couldn't answer the question. Olivia wants to be more than just pretty, but she doesn't know how to tell her mom she doesn't want to do pageants anymore so she can have time to try other things.

Danny, the runaway she meets, has a growth hormone deficiency. He's 17 but looks more like ten. He's run away because he doesn't want to do the growth hormone shots his mom really wants him to take. So we have a very unlikely pairing of kids, and when Danny leaves town, Olivia takes her opportunity to free herself from her mother and pageants. She doesn't think it out very well, just knows that her uncle lives in Chicago and she'll go to him.

I was totally horrified the way the adults in this story let a 13-year-old wander the streets of Chicago. It's not that it was Chicago, I would be horrified that a kid was wondering around in any strange city. So not a good idea. But it's a story and it served its purpose.

Both Danny and Olivia realize that their running away only partly had to do with pageants or growth hormone shots. They were both seeking out someone who'd left them, and whom they secretly thought would help make everything OK. They realize that this is not the case, and if they want to change things for themselves, they need to make their own decisions and stand by them.

I enjoyed the story and I liked Olivia's growth over the course of the book.

Prettiest Doll comes out November 6, 2012.

Merrilyn Tucker says

This sweet book will be enjoyed by girls in grades 5-7. Olivia has been entering and winning beauty pageants for the last 10 of her 13 years and wonders if this is truly the life she wants to continue. It's nice to be born pretty, but is that all there is? The beauty pageant scene leaves her cold. Olivia meets Dan, who has run away from home, and decides to go with him to search for his father. The conversations on their trip and the non-focus on Olivia's appearance make statements about both characters. They are growing up on this trip and are finding out answers to their own questions. My only complaint (and it is not a big one) is that the running away and being found again are a bit pat. In reality, there would have been much more worry and fuss. I would recommend this for girls in 5th grade because the book does touch on the subject of romance, but there is certainly nothing graphic.

Teresa says

I always like Gina Willner Pardo's way of surprising with her characters and their choices, and I wasn't disappointed this time.

Olovia Jane (Liv) is chafing under her obese mother's ambition for her to win beauty pageants: the practice time involved keeps her from other activities, she is aware of all the costs, and especially dreads having to sing at the next pageant, because she needs to "show the judges something new". Only problem: she is a truly bad singer. She doesn't really mind knowing that people think she's exceptionally pretty, but sometimes she wonders if people see anything more when they look at her. Or does she disappear when she puts on her gowns?

Then she meets Danny, a boy on the run from HIS mother's insistence that he start growth hormone shots, and suddenly her dissatisfaction crystallizes. She runs away with Danny to her uncle in Chicago, making him promise not to call her mom when she gets there. Then she and Danny have various adventures--hiding from the police in a movie theater overnight, tracking down Danny's disappointing father, sharing first kisses.

There are lots of nuances here. Liv recognizes that doing pageants has made her more confident and poised. This confidence helps her in Chicago. Liv's father died in a crash, and Liv and her mom have forged a very close bond. So even though she's pushy, she's not over the top: for example, she's careful not have Liv miss

meals when pressed for time, because she knows that can contribute to developing obesity. Danny's father wanted to take Danny when he left home, but Danny couldn't leave his mom alone, and then neither could ask the other to reconsider, because it was just too painful to keep hoping. Liv loves her uncle, but resents that he left town shortly after her dad died and spends so much time with his disadvantaged students.

Ultimately this is about that stage when you start to want to (or you have to) make your own decisions about your life and your future. You might end up doing what your parents want after all--or maybe not. But you'll find your own way and start to do things on your own terms.

Jennifer says

Summary:

Olivia Jane, Liv, is pretty. She knows how to smile to get people's attention. She has good posture and knows the right way to walk. Olivia's won several beauty pageants and is on her way to the Prettiest Doll pageant, where she is sure to win again. The only thing is, her mother has stated that she has to sing in this competition. Her mother suspects that the judges are bored with her cutesy dancing, and they need something different. Olivia is a terrible singer; however, this may not be the reason she doesn't want to practice and begins to push for a little more freedom. On the way to meet with her pageant coach, she meets Danny. Danny has run away from home. He's on his way to Chicago, which just happens to be where Olivia's uncle lives. Without a lot of speculation, Olivia decides that she is going to run away with Danny to Chicago. This leads to some uncovering of Olivia's true feelings, her fears about beauty and being stuck in the same box as other pretty girls, and family secrets.

My thoughts:

I feel like this is a timely book. Pageants have been brought into the spotlight again with the popularity of *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *Honey Boo Boo*. Olivia's family is poor and her mother places a lot of emphasis on beauty. It gets to the point where I'm angry with her mother for not seeing other qualities within her daughter. Even towards the end of the book, I don't think her mom ever really understands the changes in Liv. The only thing that I have a problem with is that running away is the catalyst for everything and becomes sort of the savior of the story. It's stated as a bad thing, but is more of a good adventure. I'm always nervous giving children this type of book because I don't want them to think of doing the same thing. So, as a teacher, I'm careful who I give this book to, even though I think the overall message of seeing beyond the beauty as a good thing.

Bookworm1858 says

Source: Received an ARC through Amazon Vine in exchange for an honest review.

This book grabbed my interest with its cover and blurb about beauty contests. I've never had any desire to participate in one and I don't really watch them on television but I adore "Miss Congeniality" as well as several other books about pageants. I trace this back to my love of books with lots of female characters; it's a setting that allows for many women to turn up. So although I didn't really know much about this book, I requested it and gave it a read.

My ending impression is a feeling of being dazed, for several reasons. One is that the pageant doesn't really

play that big of a role. Rather it is more of a specter hanging over the pretty Olivia who starts to wonder if there is more to her than just her looks or if that is the only reason anyone will ever value her. I was hoping for more backstage drama but am used to one aspect of a book being played up in the summary so I was okay with that. A second reason for confusion was the writing, which seemed to be in a gray area between middle-grade and young adult. Olivia is only thirteen and somewhat naive yet I thought some of the themes seemed a bit older. However I'm more familiar with MG fantasy so I may not be the best judge of categorization. Third is the plot which, as is unfortunately the case with some contemporaries lacking the epic questness of a fantasy, seemed to meander despite the relative shortness of the book.

What is the plot, you ask? It is partly Olivia rebelling against doing pageants as her mom desires and partly about her own discovery of self. This journey is contrasted with Dan, a runaway Olivia meets and joins, traveling from Missouri to Chicago where both have family to confront. Dan is fifteen but he looks ten due to a hormone growth deficiency so he has his own battles with appearance to wage. Together the two learn some lessons and begin to forge new destinies for themselves. Again, despite the short length of this book, some of their scenes really seemed to drag on. Still I liked the characters for the most part; it just lacked a punch to the gut to make me gush about this book.

Hilary says

I thought this book was pretty okay. I thought I would like it more than I did, but I was a nice story. I found it a little hard to believe that a thirteen year old and a fifteen year old who looked like he was eleven were able to travel across the country on a bus without anyone asking questions, and I was uncomfortable with the idea of the two of them falling in love or whatever. I liked how they both confronted their problems, even if they did run away from them first. I don't know if I would recommend it, but like I said, it was a nice story.

Sandy says

Olivia has been competing and winning beauty pageants for years. She's 13 years old, and her mother has decided that she's going to sing in the Prettiest Doll competition. Olivia is TERRIBLE at singing, and is really not excited about this competition. So when she meets Dan, who has run away from home, he helps her step beyond her comfort zone and look at what she really wants. She travels with him to Chicago, where she gets answers from her Uncle who left, and he confronts his father.
