

★ **Like Vanessa**

Tami Charles

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From the very first page, *Like Vanessa* conveys the hopes and fears of a girl who wishes for a different life. Nussy Martin is fourteen years old and living in Newark with her alcoholic grandfather, her mostly absent father, and her older cousin. Her mother left when she was just four years old, and Nussy has never understood why.

The book takes place in the 1980s, just as Vanessa Williams becomes the first black woman to be crowned Miss America. Nussy dreams of being crowned herself, hoping that she can somehow win her mother's approval. Though it scares her, she is convinced to enter a beauty pageant at her middle school, and in the process of preparing for the competition, she learns a great deal about herself and about the meaning of true beauty.

Nussy's descriptions of the local gang, the bodegas, and the music she hears drifting into her window at night bring her urban setting to life. Her understandings of her family members—a grandfather trying to forget, a cousin struggling with the safety of his differences—paint vivid portraits.

Nussy's desires and dreams of wealth and glamour are relatable, as is her lack of self-esteem. As, for the first time, her friends and family help her see the strong, talented, and beautiful young woman that she is, young adult audiences may be helped to similarly embrace how they, too, are worthwhile.

Like Vanessa is an emotionally potent, engaging young adult story with a heroine whom it is impossible not to root for. The life lessons that Nussy learns are relevant and worthwhile for everyone.

CATHERINE THURESON (January/February 2018)

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