

Casting a spell

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

This otherwise dim movie year has offered some spectacular documentaries. The subjects have ranged from the wonders of nature (*Winged Migration*), the efforts of a sculptor to create an evanescent art (*Rivers and Tides*) and a quest to locate a vanished author (*Stone Reader*) to a scuttled movie project (*Lost in La Mancha*) and the disintegration of a Long Island family (*Capturing the Friedmans*). These movies have supplied the visceral excitement, emotional complexity and visual splendor that most commercial releases have lacked.

Another documentary that's more charming than any romantic comedy you're likely to see this summer and more suspenseful than any of the action blockbusters is Jeffrey Blitz's *Spellbound*, about middle-schoolers competing in the 1999 Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, held over two days in Washington, D.C. That year 249 children qualified for the bee, an annual event since 1925.

Blitz focuses on eight kids, and one of the incidental pleasures of the picture is choosing whom to root for. I had two favorites. Angela is a tall, gangly Texan with a lopsided smile whose father, a Mexican immigrant, is a sheepherder who speaks so little English that Angela's brother has to translate for him. Ashley is a black kid from the Washington projects whose all-female family celebrates her triumph in qualifying for the nationals.

But I might have cheered for Emily, the delightfully animated New Haven girl, or Ted, the boy from rural Missouri whose withdrawn, self-dependent quality grows on you as you realize it's the product not of arrogance but of loneliness. April from Ambler, Pennsylvania, is so dedicated to studying for the bee that--her mother recites with amazement--she's abandoned trips to the shopping mall with her friends. Neil from San Clemente undergoes an Olympic-like training regimen: his Indian-born parents, dedicated to the proposition that America unfailingly rewards the industrious and the resourceful, have hired coaches for him and tutors in the languages with the most etymological links to English. The other Indian-American is Nupur, a quietly expressive Floridian. The wild card is Harry from Glen Park, New

Jersey, a chatterbox who entertains himself so richly with his own dumb jokes that you can't help grinning at him.

The movie begins with a close-up of Harry, his face contorted into one gargoyle pose after another as he struggles to work out a difficult word. One of the elements that makes *Spellbound* so much fun is that the kids haven't yet learned to mute their feelings.

The picture is full of amazing, unpredictable moments, like Neil's randomly getting the word "Darjeeling." All his training in European languages can't help him work out the spelling of a word from his own culture that is meaningless to a boy of his generation.

And Blitz is alive to the vaudevillian nature of his subject. He presents a montage of befuddled responses by contestants encountering unimagined words. He's canny enough to include an interview with a trio of Nupur's schoolmates, three classmates she beat out for the honor of school champion--pals of assorted sizes and colors who are natural comics. And he notes in passing a billboard paying tribute to one of the kids en route to D.C., which misspells the word "congratulations." (It's a Preston Sturges moment.)

Blitz takes the contestants and their parents as he finds them; he refuses to comment on their peccadilloes. It would be easy to condescend to April's mother, who's plastered their home with cute puns and pictures of bees, but Blitz seems touched by her enthusiasm for her daughter's all-consuming hobby. We may cringe at first at the elaborate coaching program Neil's dad has arranged, but Blitz makes sure to note his graciousness when Neil drops out close to the end, just as he includes a throw-away moment when Ted's younger brother, in the laconic style that marks all the members of his family, assures Ted after his losing round that he's still a champ in his brother's eyes.

Spellbound is as much about American families as it is about spelling competitions, and in its playful, unsentimental, nondoctrinaire way, it presents them with appreciation and hopefulness.