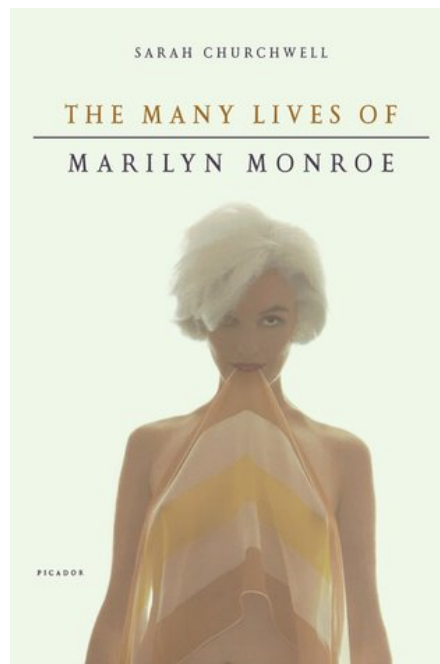




# The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe

*Sarah Churchwell*

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## **The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe** Sarah Churchwell

There are many Marylins: sex goddess and innocent child, crafty manipulator and dumb blonde, liberated woman and tragic loner. *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* reviews the unreliable and unverifiable--but highly significant--stories that have framed this Hollywood legend, all the while revealing the meanings behind the American myths that have made Marilyn what she is today.

In incisive and passionate prose, cultural critic Sarah Churchwell uncovers the shame, belittlement, and anxiety that we bring to the story of a woman we supposedly adore and, in the process, rescues a Marilyn Monroe who is far more complicated and credible than the one we think we know.

## **The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe Details**

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### Emily says

This was a thought-provoking anti-biography which questions everything that has previously been written or assumed about Marilyn Monroe. It painstakingly picks apart the many 'truths' uncovered by various authors and successfully challenges the veracity of various sources. Churchwell is good at critiquing everyone and everything to the point where it makes the reader question the point of trying to do a biography at all since it is always, inevitably subjective. This is a bit wearying and nit-picky at times since it seems for Churchwell even the feminist biographers get it wrong. There were times when I wanted her to actually form an opinion instead of simply picking apart others' attempts to understand the allure of Marilyn Monroe. However, despite this the book kept me interested and somehow, through this dismantling of all previous assumptions, she did manage to create a sense of the person behind the star. In addition it is a successful feminist critique of the way our culture thinks of women in general and because of Churchwell's fair-minded way of critiquing the misogynists and the reactionary feminists, she finds a way of questioning how we objectify women and often fail to see their worth in terms of their talent and intelligence.

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### Julie says

she was so pretty

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### Carrie Marshall says

I am a lover of all things Marilyn. This explores her many obvious layers as a person. She was obviously a disturbed person living in an era with no mental health help. They just drugged you. It's a shame. She also had to do a lot to get where she was, it was just expected of women climbing the ladder at the time. I believe she was smarter than people gave her credit for. She used all of what she had to get where she was, which was great. Tragedy. Tragedy struck as it does a lot who struggle with untreated mental or emotional issues. Also she got in with a dangerous crowd.

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### Stuart Ian Burns says

An interview with Claire Foy I read the other day is an example of how the notion of "celebrity" has the illusion of being far more inclusive than ever. There was plenty about Foy's life which wasn't mentioned, but this window into her mental health made her more approachable, more authentic. Plus she has some control over, which as Sarah Churchwell's book demonstrates has not always been the case with young actors. Even before her death, Marilyn Monroe had become a myth or legend and even though she gave numerous interviews in her life, the sense of who she was gained a mythology which only increased in volume after her untimely death. Churchwell's book is a comparative study of the various biographies, fictionalised or researched, a vast river of text running down an opaque mountain from writers who all arrogantly assume that they know who the real Monroe was and the extent to which Norma Jean regenerated into the blonde bombshell.

The key take away is that no one really knows who she was, because no one external of a person really can. But her predominantly male biographers salivating over the details of her career and private life rarely agree on the simplest items, from her birth name to whether she had an affair with one or both of the Kennedy brothers and ultimately if her death was accidental overdose, suicide or murder. Employing a rorschach test containing rumour, eyewitness accounts and written materials, these writers, some over many years and numerous editions, presume to apply their own expectations and biases on the actress's life, even to the point of attempting to guess her psychological state of mind at important moments, how she "must" have been. They pretty much all seem to agree that Monroe was a facade, a protective shield for a broken personality within.

Churchwell has none of it, offering a three dimension portrait of the star through critiquing the work of others. All of the writers are taken to task for their sometimes quite sinister approaches the actor's life, point out how assertions and what's publicly known simply doesn't fit the conjecture they're presenting as fact. Much of what they apparently say about Monroe fundamentally removes her humanity, that she was incapable of existing outside the orbit of men or pills, that her so-called "good" film performances were the product of her co-stars or director. Except as the writer demonstrates much of the time Monroe was simply fighting to retain her own agency as a performer, her greatest successes happening when she's at her most relaxed, creative and autonomous rather than when, just like her biographers, she was being remodeled through another's expectations.

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## Audrey says

This is the 6th book I've read on Marilyn Monroe and is probably the most interesting one. The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe is not a biography, but an academic analysis of Marilyn Monroe as a cultural figure. Churchwell examines the cultural myths surrounding Marilyn Monroe, including what Churchwell calls "Marilyn apocrypha". Society projects their desires, anxieties, and neuroses onto Marilyn Monroe and her biographers are no different. Churchwell scrutinizes those who perpetuate the "Marilyn myth" - those who present a Marilyn (a fantasy of Marilyn?) according to their own biases (which is understandably unavoidable) such as Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, Gloria Steinem, Joyce Carol Oates, and the main Marilyn Monroe biographers, Donald Spoto, Anthony Summers, and Fred Lawrence Guiles.

After 300+ pages of how people continue to profit by perpetuating a misogynistic, victim-blaming, STEREOTYPE view of Marilyn (Churchwell points her finger at almost everyone I mentioned, in particular Summers, Mailer, and Oates), the book was rather depressing up until the final chapter, when Churchwell unabashedly presents her own vision of Marilyn - not the eternal victim or a symbol of society's desires and anxieties but a beautiful, shrewd, complex, intelligent woman with a steely resolve and certainly a great capacity to be a raging bitch when it comes to plays involving power. She brings in Truman Capote's depiction of Marilyn, from his exquisite short story "A Beautiful Child" (which you can read in Music for Chameleons). This Marilyn was a "beautiful hummingbird made of iron" (Paula Strasberg), she could be "the meanest woman in Hollywood" (Billy Wilder), and "wears her heart on her sleeve and talks salty" (Truman Capote).

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## Samantha Glasser says

She's one of the most famous people of all time. As a result, it is almost impossible not to have an opinion about Marilyn Monroe. Many people have negative reactions to her.

Marilyn Monroe is a mystery. Many biographers claim that Marilyn was only the image and that the woman underneath was really Norma Jean all along. They label Monroe as a narcissist and a liar because she falsified her beauty for her image. However, she was a wonderful comedian.

The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe by Sarah Churchwell attempts to further identify the icon in contrast to previous information written about her. So much of the legend of Marilyn Monroe relies on information made up for publicity and money. Even Monroe's own autobiography titled *My Story* is largely false. Churchwell said, "Monroe was an object of surveillance: she sought to control her image precisely because it was difficult for others to separate her image from herself." Her book is an effort to better separate fact from fiction concerning Monroe's true personality.

One of the biggest labels that Monroe has been given is that of a whore because of rumors that she frequented the casting couch in order to gain fame. Many contradictions exist when analyzing Monroe's personal life including who she was associated with and why. Her last two public marriages to baseball legend Joe DiMaggio and to playwright Arthur Miller seem to conflict with Monroe's image. People say Monroe was ultimately a gold digger.

Monroe might have had other motives for her marriages other than fame and fortune. Early in her career, she was proposed to by a man named Johnny Hyde. He not only could have immensely aided her career, he was to die soon and would have left his wealth to Monroe. She refused because she was not in love with him. Her marriage to DiMaggio ended for several reasons, some being jealousy and possible abuse. The marriage to Miller ended due to Miller's misconceptions about Monroe. It is true that Monroe could have endeavored in relationships because she thought they could have benefited her in ways other than to find love. Churchwell said of the negative speculations, "If these accounts are accurate, then Monroe's early relationships were as aspirational as they were opportunistic: just because she's a sex symbol doesn't mean she was immune to the cultural stories that affect the rest of us."

There is at least one piece of false information in *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe*. In it, Churchwell says that Jean Harlow, a predecessor of Monroe, died when her appendix burst. In reality, the star died of uremic poisoning. Although this is only one obviously identifiable mistake, it makes one wonder whether other information was false as well.

Churchwell cites that up to six-hundred books have been written about Monroe. The vast amounts of resources were utilized for this one. A 6 page bibliography shows that the book was well researched. In consequence, in order to fully appreciate Churchwell's book one is almost guaranteed the need to do prior research of the subject, the more the better. The author's writing seems a bit sarcastic and self-important in places, especially when comparing previous biographies about Monroe to this one. Other works are criticized for not using footnotes as if Churchwell is saying, "I'm better than you."

It is obvious that Churchwell loves her subject. Her final chapter called *Afterward: My Marilyn* is filled with amusing stories and heartfelt emotion. Most of the book is a bit dull because so many facts are presented. This last chapter is one of the most interesting.

Overall, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* is effective. Churchwell said, "Monroe was a real woman who made difficult choices; they may not all have been exemplary; they may not all have been consistent. The inability to categorize or determine her motives is not a sign of her abnormality-it is a sign of her normality. Monroe was not a fictional character..."

## Marina says

Fair and empathetic. Churchwell critically, systematically dismantles the cultural notion and dead metaphor that has become the story of Marilyn Monroe (the 'many lives' of the title refers to the many biographies Churchwell discusses throughout the book) by continuously subjecting the stories and interpretations to Occam's razor. Additionally, does the reader the favor of not condescending, either to her subject or her reader, pitting historical Monroe against modern notions of women's worth, as a figure struggling for power and actualization in a pre-second wave world. Instead of making her a subject of pity, Churchwell allows Monroe to be complicated, frustrated, curious, romantic, salty, smart, self-improving, competent, powerful, needy--y'know, human.

Really, really good.

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## Graceann says

I abandoned this under the 50-Page Rule, in that it was a very scholarly treatise on Marilyn and full of the kind of psychological analysis that simply isn't my cup of tea. YMMV Under the circumstances, I am not able to give it a star rating - that isn't appropriate if I haven't completed the book.

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## Autumn Brown says

The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe is not an easy read. It is full of analysis, feminist theory and disproving other people's work. The author seeks to unify and weed out theories about the persona of Marilyn Monroe; how she died, why she married each of her three husbands, how intelligent and how sane she really was. Unless you have read each of the biographies that Churchwell has referenced and disparaged, you will be very lost. I, for one, had not. I am a casual fan of Marilyn, who loves her films and was intrigued about the mysteries surrounding her death and life. Unless you have the time and patience to dissect each argument and counterargument during each themed chapter, I would pass on this one.

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## Laura says

A disappointing read, despite what should have been an articulate, comprehensive piece of research by a woman well respected in academia.

Churchwell does not come across well in her book. Instead of expressing the many differing threads to the Monroe bow (as I'm sure was intended, thus the title), Churchwell instead falls into a pit of 'he said, she said,' making her work come across as childish and irrelevant to the enthused Monroe fan.

Random critiques of others work make this book read as a disertation for an English studies degree, which I believe is what most readers do not anticipate. Churchwell is to be praised, however, for her belief in Monroe's dedicatation to her craft. It can hardly be said she is a fan though, as she does not express any degree of sympathy or sisterhood support for her subject.

There are some massively, insightful biographies that exist of Monroe (many of which Churchwell chooses to criticise in her book!) so do not be disheartened by this poor excuse for a biography. Page after page

requotes other authors, which poses the question - if they are so terrible, why did this author feel the need to keep using their research?

Not recommended for Monroe fans, would better suit those who are comparing research articles.

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### **Julia Tulloh Harper says**

Churchwell takes no prisoners in this book - her account (a thorough critique, really) of what are today considered the key biographies of Marilyn Monroe - or at least the ones that have contributed most to the mythology that surrounds her. As one critic put it, she 'flays' the authors of the biographies; for their terrible research, blatant lies, use of opinion as fact, their psychologising of her life (despite having no psychological training), their flagrant misogyny. Churchwell is really compelling and highlights very clearly how little is actually known about Marilyn; she does a great feminist task of revealing the ways in which incredibly sexist stereotypes have been used to characterise MM, how she has been used as a projection screen for a whole lot of social fear, disgust and desire.

I liked it a lot but by the end, Churchwell's style was a little wearing in its relentlessness, in shredding others to pieces. And because I hadn't read the other texts they all blurred a bit eventually (my fault, not hers). I still could have done with some softer or more speculative passages to ease up the flaying - and the conclusion was quite nice for this, whereby she provided some of her own thoughts about MM, rather than just critiquing others. I think this book will be of particular interest to Marilyn fans, or those who are studying/writing about her, otherwise you might find parts of it tedious. On the whole though, an important piece of work.

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### **Stephanie says**

This book looks at the controversies and cliches of Marilyn Monroe's life, and the assumptions we/society make about her 30+ years after her death. Maybe a little too academic for me at times, but certainly interesting. (Really made me dislike Norman Mailer - not a huge surprise - and also Joyce Carol Oates, for the novels they wrote "about her".)

Notes:

page 176: Why is it that MM either loved sex or was frigid? Maybe she is like most other people in that she likes it sometimes (when it's good?) and doesn't like it other times?

page 197: apparently "one of her best-kept secrets", say her biographers, is that she wasn't really that great-looking. (It's just feminine wiles and trickery to make you think she is.)

page 217: Interesting argument for rumours of MM's bisexuality - she's "so excessively sexual" or uses sex opportunistically and for her, "bisexuality will only be understood as excess heterosexuality, with which her cup runneth over."

page 262: in discussing 'Some Like It Hot' and the multiple takes: did she force take after take in order to get control of the character and to be sure she was portrayed the way MM wanted her to be? "The only time she said [the line] coherently, she also delivered the line the way she wanted to" that take made the final film. The irony is how 'amazed' they all continued to be at how good her final performance was. [...] The few times

that Marilyn completed an entire scene in one take during filming [...] she did so to make a point: [...] yes, she could do it. When she wished.]".

page 344-345: A story told by Colin Clark who worked on the set of 'The Prince and The Showgirl' - he accidentally walked into MM's dressing room when she was nude. She joked with him at his embarrassment ('Oh Colin, and you an old Etonian!') and he later wrote:

"[H]ow did she know which school I had gone to and what it meant? When I managed to get out of the room and pull myself together, I realised that behind the fog, MM could be a bit brighter than we all think. How much of the MM image is contrived? Acting dumb is a good way to make other people make fools of themselves. What fun it might be to make a movie with MM when she felt everyone around her was her friend. Dream on, Colin."

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## **Mira says**

This book should be read by every Marilyn fan, because it gives the reader many possible perspectives of her life and personality, without making an unfair, subjective commitment to any particular version of the woman none of us actually know (which is something many biographies do).

The writing was so pedantic and academic that it truly annoyed me for the first several pages, until I realized how committed the writer was to respecting her subject and her audience by maintaining her distance. She should be commended for her effort. Many people have come forward since Marilyn's death, telling tales about her that are incredibly suspicious, to the point where it is difficult to distinguish the rumors from the facts. I came away from this book feeling like I had a well-rounded impression of MM as a human being, and also (more importantly) remembering that it is impossible to truly know the whole truth about this storied woman.

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## **Caroline says**

This is an interesting approach to the story of Marilyn Monroe - not so much a biography of her herself, but a biography of her biographies. Perhaps more than any other celebrity or star, Marilyn Monroe's life has become myth, archetype, symbol. We no longer see her, if indeed we ever did. We see in her what we want to see, what we want her to be, what we want her to represent. We like to imagine that the character of 'Marilyn Monroe' was a construct, a shield for the 'real' Norma Jean underneath, the Norma Jean that her biographies set out to reveal - an approach that, as Churchwell points out, no-one ever does for other celebrities with stage or changed names, like Martin Sheen, Judy Garland, Elton John and many many others.

Churchwell sets out to deconstruct how Marilyn's life has been told, cutting through the myth and the hyperbole, highlighting the many many inconsistencies and varieties in the various 'lives' of Marilyn Monroe, the details no two biographers can agree on. On the way she exposes the misogyny and sexual obsession that so many biographers, male and female, display in retelling Marilyn's life - after all, don't we all remember Marilyn Monroe visually, the hair, the pert bottom, the lush voluptuous figure, the red lips and the white skin? Who remembers anything Marilyn said? This obsession with Marilyn's body spills over into the obsession with her dead body - to quote Elton John, "all the papers had to say / was that Marilyn was found in the nude" - and the numerous conspiracy theories surrounding her death, all of which have to do in some way with her sexuality and her rumoured affairs with one or both Kennedy brothers.



Reading this book, I felt tremendously sorry for Marilyn Monroe. Not just as a result of her wretched childhood, hard-scrabble upbringing and tragic death, but for the way throughout her life she was constantly belittled, patronised and disregarded. No-one gave Marilyn credit for having a brain or a will of her own; she was that breathy 'little-girl-lost' in the knock-out body of a sexually voracious woman, every man's fantasy. And that's all she continues to be, in every book and biography - the lost little Norma Jean, subsumed by the artificial construct that was 'Marilyn Monroe'. Because that's who we need her to be, we need to believe that the real struggles against the artificial, that no-one can lead two lives, that her death was tragic and pre-ordained, that Marilyn Monroe's life fits the archetype. Because, as Edgar Allan Poe once said, "The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." Marilyn Monroe, the most beautiful woman in the world, one again reduced to a trope.

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## Susanne says

Instead of looking at what Marilyn Monroe's life says about *her*, this book examines how we look at Marilyn Monroe and what that says about *us*.

It's fantastic and eye-opening. So much has been written about MM - some of which the author exposes as having no actual proof behind it - that one quickly grasps how the zeitgeist of each decade since her death has interpreted and re-interpreted her actions to fit with changing public perception. (she's a slut, she's sexually empowered, she's not a feminist, she is a feminist, she's post-feminist, etc.)

You'll learn a lot reading this book - and it would make for great book club discussions, especially on the nature of biography (real people are contradictory - can we ever really know someone?) and the existence of written "truth."

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