

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 16 (2003)

Artikel: Real Marilyn
Autor: Juncker, Clara
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100012>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Real Marilyns

Clara Juncker

Wherever they situate themselves on the fact/fiction continuum, biographies of Marilyn Monroe gesture through their titles towards essence and myth-making. Norman Mailer's *Marilyn* from 1973 begins the story of "a lovely if seldom simple woman" [9] with a simple title, while other significant records of her life and death include Fred Lawrence Guiles's *Legend* (1984), Anthony Summers' *Goddess* (1985) and, more recently, S. Paige Baty's *American Monroe* (1995) and Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde* (2001). The desire to get to the bottom, so to speak, of Marilyn also inspired Victor Adams' *The Complete Marilyn Monroe* from 1999, an encyclopedic text in which we may look at and look up Norma Jeane's and Marilyn's intriguing activities. Even a poem that through its title, "Marilyns," acknowledges the futility of essentializing its subject leads us into general categories in its "Instructions for Use": "mask, mother, everywoman, nun – / Choose one. This is a factory run" (Ebersole and Peabody 18). Whichever Marilyn one prefers, she lives (on) as refrigerator magnet, coffee cup, earrings, diary cover, poster girl, or, this author's perverse favorite, an empty container with a removable head. Significantly, various members of my family suggest we fill it with cookies, lollipops or condoms – everybody's Marilyn! In the literary marketplace, Marilyn turns in one San Diego writer's moderately accomplished efforts into alphabet soup: under F for French Radical, we find her teaching feminist militant lit at the Sorbonne; under R for rapper, she becomes "the White girl that raps / She's in the big city / She ain't taking no titty . . ."; and under U for UFO, she and Elvis see the world as flying saucers (Ebersole and Peabody). Under L, we find Marilyn as Literary Critic, where she may join Guiles, Mailer, Steinem, Oates and the rest of us in capitalizing on Marilyn's shapes and forms. Oates's *Blonde*, for one thing, appears conveniently at around the time Marilyn would have turned seventy-five, with the sales this hyperreal event might stimulate. Indeed, one *New York Times* reviewer turns into the latest protector of the vulnerable Monroe by castigating Oates for "shame-

lessly cash[ing] in on her subject's status as a legend." She sees *Blonde* as "just the latest effort to exploit the tragedy and fame of Marilyn Monroe" (Kakutani 1). The real Marilyn seems elusive indeed.

Marilyn obstructed efforts to locate her with *My Story*, which she spoke to Ben Hecht while she and her career were still in working order. Prominent Marilyn biographers like Norman Mailer nevertheless pursued her into erotic territory, where she became a blond, if tragic, Venus. Anthony Summers, an investigative writer whose thorough research backed Mailer's murder theory, followed the actress into the morgue, where she suffered from both the writer's and the surgeon's scalpels. Such efforts to resurrect Marilyn enraged feminist writers such as Gloria Steinem, S. Paige Baty and Joyce Carol Oates, who have all tried to wrest the Blond Actress from the embrace of male biographers. Gloria Steinem attempts in *Marilyn: Norma Jeane* (1986) to save the woman and the star from biographers in general and Norman Mailer in particular, but peels off Marilyn mostly to find Gloria. Baty writes up Marilyn as a postmodern academic, who could undoubtedly, like Baty, find herself a job in a prestigious university, and Joyce Carol Oates became as obsessed with Marilyn as everybody else. She tries in *Blonde* through the prism of the actress's life and death to make sense of herself, her writing, and the American Century that, like Marilyn, as the millennium turned, had become messy and unreal.

Though she craved attention, Marilyn did not help the fans and critics looking for her. In 1954 she spoke or wrote, with Ben Hecht, her unfinished autobiography, titled *My Story*. In what Mailer would dub "a rainbow of tear-washed factoids," "Marilyn ben Hecht," as he prefers to call the autobiographer, lays the groundwork for subsequent myth-making. Though the text concludes with the Korea trip during her honeymoon with Joe DiMaggio, a tour Marilyn would describe as the high point of her life, she foreshadows subsequent PR work, including tales of the orphan's bathing last in dirty water, fanatically religious foster parents, accusations of theft, a rape by a wealthy boarder, the arranged teenage marriage to Jim Dougherty, her unrequited love for the man we know is Fred Karger, her path to success dotted with men such as Joe Schenck, Darryl Zanuck and Johnny Hyde (sexual details omitted), and her meeting with the All-American baseball hero, Joe DiMaggio. In neatly arranging the factoids of the super star's life into a pattern befitting America's Dream, Marilyn ben Hecht indulges in considerable self-mythologizing.

Norma Jeane, for example, used to watch the brightly lit RKO Radio Pictures sign from her orphanage window. She had to wear the blue skirt and

white blouse of the orphanage, but realized her potential when at twelve she went to math class in a too-tight, borrowed sweater. Marriage to Jim Dougherty taught her nothing about sex. Hollywood will pay a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul. Marilyn loves to linger in her bathtub so as to give Norma Jeane a treat and will make people wait (arriving at the end of her career up to nine hours late on the set) so as to feel wanted. Men are too talkative and women too resentful. And, throughout Marilyn's story, vulnerability and self-destruction hover behind sex appeal and success: "I was the kind of girl they found dead in a hall bedroom with an empty bottle of sleeping pills in her hand" (66).

In *Marilyn* (1973) Norman Mailer created his own collection of factoids so as to advertise, yes, Norman Mailer. Originally he had contracted to write a preface to a photo collection by Larry Schiller, one of the three photographers present during Marilyn's nude swimming for a scene in *Something's Got to Give* two short months before her death, but Mailer's "novel biography" expanded upon his reading of Fred Lawrence Guiles's *Norma Jean* (1969) to ninety thousand words. The novelist confesses to having done no research whatsoever for his publication and introduced the murder theory, he later admitted, only to hit the jackpot. Irreverently, Mailer shoots his Mailerness across the pages and photos of Marilyn, the two entwined like lovers swimming in alphabet soup: "For a man with a cabalistic turn of mind, it was fair and engraved coincidence that the letters in Marilyn Monroe (if the 'a' were used twice and the 'o' but once) would spell his own name, leaving only the 'y' for excess . . ." (20). Norman needs Norma, and Mailer, Marilyn, though the commercial success of his fictionalized biography failed to impress Larry Schiller, who saw Marilyn reduced to "Mailer in drag" (Adams 180). In the "flaming factoids" of *My Story*, in which Mailer sees the "poisons of publicity" matched materially by the Monroe consumption of sleeping pills, Marilyn ben Hecht explains her function also in Mailer's text: "People had a habit of looking at me as if I were some kind of mirror instead of a person. They didn't see me, they saw only their own lewd thoughts. Then they whitemasked themselves and called me the lewd one" (142). Mailer's "angel of sex" has no character or identity; she consists of moist, shiny surfaces and crevices available for male inscription. Libido oozes out of her; she gives "a skin glow of sex," while inside her develops "a blank eye for power unattached to any notion of the moral" (43). As a projection of male (Mailer's) desire, she becomes "a womb fairly salivating in seed" and "breasts pop[ping] buds and burgeons of flesh over many a questing sweating moviegoer's face" (16).

Through text Mailer may possess what in life had eluded him. Marilyn was famous for Chanel No. 5, he realizes, but Mailer “would never,” he admits, “have a real clue to how it smelled on her skin” (19). Following the book by Norman Rosten, a mutual friend of Mailer’s and Marilyn’s, *The Complete Marilyn Monroe* notes more brutally that though Mailer “tried hard to meet Marilyn, she was evidently not interested. . . . [T]he one time Marilyn agreed to invite Mailer to a party . . . she knew he would be unable to attend” (Adams 180). Gloria Steinem would also capitalize on this unadvertised snub.

Mailer is left, in the end, with Mailer, and the anxieties a feminized other might inspire. Behind the mirror hides Marilyn as “a murderous emotional cripple” (23), an interestingly masculinized “general of sex” with “the itch to kill love” (37), a schizophrenic with the personalities of a mouse and a monster. Mailer shrewdly identifies the conflicting impulses in Marilyn’s personality and thus moves beyond the dumb blonde he loves to desire. His own conflicting impulses nonetheless group him with anxious Puritan ministers sermonizing on devouring wombs or, in the twentieth century, Mike Gold predicting that one day “the human female will devour the male in the moment of Love, exactly like a female spider or locust” (20). Despite or because of Marilyn’s charms, “amputation and absurdity” (33) hover in her wake. But Mailer’s own outpourings help him contain his castration fears, along with Marilyn, the marketplace, and, toughest of all, the novelist himself.

With *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, Anthony Summers throws himself, so to speak, on Marilyn’s dead body. He does, of course, a lot more. Contrary to Mailer, Summers conducted substantial research to write up his story of Marilyn’s marriages, and especially of her murder. Summers had previously written a monograph on JFK titled *Conspiracy*, and gathered innumerable interviews and sources relating to Marilyn’s last months, when she was living alone on Five Helena Drive in Brentwood. In *Goddess* he claims to have pieced together the puzzle of Marilyn’s premature death. Marilyn got caught, he argues, in an intricate web of events that included FBI attempts to cover up Marilyn’s alleged affair with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Mafia attempts to incriminate Robert Kennedy and stop investigations of organized crime, Frank Sinatra’s in/famous Rat Pack and their Lake Tahoe parties, and more. Following a pattern of marrying men whose identities she wished to inhabit, Marilyn dreamed of winning a Kennedy for her fourth husband. In Summers’ representation, Bobby arrived at Marilyn’s house on the day of her death to break off the relationship that had turned into embarrassment. Whatever happened in the interim, Peter Lawford, the Kennedys’ brother-in-law, who lived close by, helped destroy compromising

evidence before the arrival of Marilyn's psychiatrist Dr. Greenson and the police.

The titillating triangles – Marilyn, Dr. Greenson and Eunice Murray, the housekeeper Dr. Greenson planted in her household; Marilyn, Frank Sinatra and Jimmy Hoffa; Marilyn and Jack and Bobby Kennedy – would ensure Summers' market share among the forty or so books on Marilyn in print when his *Goddess* came out. Surely his serious research makes his sales numbers well deserved, not to mention the talk show appearances that followed. Yet, like many an infatuated lover, Summers pursues his goddess into forbidden territory. As in numerous books on Marilyn, the illustrations in the biography follow its photogenic subject from Norma Jeane days into close-ups of the thirty-six-year-old, where the camera searches out signs of the Marilyn one-liner that "gravity catches up with all of us." Summers goes further than most, in that he shows Marilyn's Brentwood home on the morning of August 5, 1962, abandoned toy tiger on the lawn and all. He also treats us to a close-up of the bottle of chloral hydrate that presumably helped kill the addicted star. We get to see her nightstand, littered with pill bottles and documents overflowing to the floor, proof that the neat little housewife Jim Dougherty knew had departed forever.

On the following page, Summers invites the reader-as-voyeur to contemplate a photo of Marilyn's remains after the autopsy, an invitation this reader had a hard time accepting and would like to pass over. The caption informs us that the sagging of Marilyn's face this time does not originate in gravity, but in the coroner's knife. Summers' own pen cuts deeply into dead Marilyn as well:

When Marilyn was wheeled away, the beauty was gone. A picture retrieved from police files – the only known surviving postmortem photograph – shows a sagging, bloated face, hair hanging limp and straight over the edge of the table. The facial muscles had been severed during the removal of the brain, and the remains sluiced with water once the doctor's work was done. (318-19)

Obviously, Marilyn-as-Monster has returned to haunt the biographer, who must take to his pen in self-defense. Maybe, like Mailer, Summers had to kill off Marilyn so as to hold on to his masculinity. He hears, after all, Marilyn's mocking, "too-long" laughter down the decades into his own "Age of Anxiety," where his new wife's family suspects that "there was no life outside the subject of Marilyn Monroe" (xvi). Maybe he wished to rescue Marilyn from the fame she came to resent by restoring to her the mortality that would accompany a fall from stardom. He ends, after all, his biography with a tele-

gram from Marilyn to Bobby Kennedy, in which she counts herself among “earth-bound” stars, who demand only their “right to twinkle” (368). Or maybe Summers simply chose to chase his goddess like the paparazzis who made sure that the luminescence and vulnerability of Britain’s Queen of Hearts would live on forever, candle in the wind fashion.

Gloria Steinem, a well-known feminist and founding editor of *Ms.* magazine, sought to save the sex symbol from her male biographers and uncover the life story of the real Marilyn. She notes that most of the eulogies following Marilyn’s death had male authors, as do, by her count, most of the forty monographs on Marilyn published before her own, *Marilyn: Norma Jeane* (1986). She finds that editors’ bias played a role, since “they seemed to assume that only male journalists should write about a sex goddess” (26). Before second-wave feminism, women worried, moreover, about “being trivialized by association” (27). Were they to publicize their fascination with Monroe, they would be compelled to “admitting an identity with a woman who always had been a little embarrassing, and who had turned out to be doomed as well” (26). Steinem argues, nonetheless, that for men and women both, “the ghost of Marilyn came to embody a particularly powerful form of hope: the rescue fantasy” (25). People simply wished to rewrite the tragedy of Marilyn’s life and death and cast themselves in the savior part. For Steinem to go public with her own rescue fantasy became a way to show that we’ve come a long way, baby.

This road began in 1953, when Steinem left *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as she writes, “in embarrassment at seeing this whispering, simpering, big-breasted child-woman who was simply hoping her way into total vulnerability” (18). Steinem’s rescue project sends her looking for the Marilyn behind the platinum hair, the wiggly walk, and the hour-glass figure. As Steinem’s double title suggests, she peels off Marilyn and finds Norma Jeane Baker, both misunderstood by male writers. Steinem discusses, for example, the rape of the eight-year-old Norma Jeane that most biographers have questioned – even the level-headed Fred Guiles, who bases his skepticism on the absence of male boarders in Norma Jeane’s foster families. Yet Steinem offers the theory that the British actor who rented most of the little white house Gladys Mortensen, Norma Jeane’s mother, could not afford, might fit the profile. Steinem also seeks to reconcile the contradictory stories that earned Marilyn a reputation for being casual with truth by stressing the “emotional consistency” of her memories (66). Underneath the glamorous exterior hides a different woman, as Steinem concludes with Andrea Dworkin. This other woman, Dworkin writes, “hadn’t liked it all along. . . . [H]er apparent suicide

stood at once as accusation and answer: no, Marilyn Monroe, the ideal sexual female, had not liked it" (qtd. 179).

If Steinem can no longer rescue the real Marilyn, she can instead take her place. Gloria's embarrassment with Marilyn in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* thus leaves a residue of bonding: "How dare she be just as vulnerable and unconfident as I felt?" (12). In terms of the writing project she undertakes, Steinem usurps the position Marilyn should have filled. For after being fired from *Something's Got to Give*, Marilyn was at the time of her death collaborating with photographer George Barris on an illustrated biography she hoped would "set the record straight" (7). Only twenty-five years later did Barris consider publishing his photos. He contacted Dick Seaver of Henry Holt, who immediately began to look for a writer "to help explain Marilyn as an individual and as an icon of continuing power" (8). Steinem volunteered.

Though Steinem shared with Barris "an empathy for [their] subject" (8), her own agenda propels Marilyn the individual into feminist territory. Throughout her text, Steinem uses Marilyn and her life to exemplify a general suppression of women. In discussing the sexual assault on Norma Jeane the girl, Steinem notes that one in six women has been sexually abused in childhood and that "most were made to feel guilty and alone, and many were as disbelieved by the grown-ups as Marilyn had been" (28-29). She explains to us that "as with most women, the decision to have or not have children was the major undercurrent of [Marilyn's] life" (121), and discusses her "classic struggle" between her career and Joe DiMaggio's wishes. Steinem finds that Marilyn's search for love "was rewarded and exaggerated by a society that encourages women to get their identity from men – and encourages men to value women for appearance, not mind or heart" (157). Steinem markets, in short, her convictions through Marilyn, whose body engenders a feminist text.

Steinem's feminism creates a niche among the host of biographers attracted to Marilyn, including Fred Guiles and Anthony Summers, whose biographies had both appeared within two years prior to the Steinem/Barris publication. Her feminist angle explains, for example, the gender-segregation of certain chapters – the short "Among Women" and the longer "Fathers and Lovers." It appears in details: Marilyn's white poodle "Maf" arrives in Steinem's text as a gift from a woman friend, whereas other biographers credit Frank Sinatra with the present and the name Marilyn gave it as a joke on Sinatra's Mafia connections. Steinem sees Marilyn's marriages through a feminist prism. DiMaggio tries to possess her – before, during and after the marriage – and Miller fares only slightly better: "In a world that equates womanliness with dependency on a man, he might be forgiven for finding

Marilyn's extreme dependency extremely appealing –" (153). Her male psychiatrists, Steinem writes, "gave her a dangerous permission to remain dependent," failing as they did to "challenge Freudian assumptions of female passivity, penis envy, and the like" (118). Instead of a passive Marilyn, Steinem has her actively engage in contemporary politics by reprinting in full a letter from Marilyn to Lester Markel, the Sunday editor of the *New York Times* (99-100).

Steinem further seeks to liberate Marilyn from her "Body Prison," another chapter title, by casting her in the asexual roles of mother and child. Two pages into the text, she reminds us that "almost everyone who saw Marilyn anywhere near children has remarked on the direct, emotional connection she had with them" (9). She also tells us of Marilyn's close ties to DiMaggio's son and Miller's children, and stresses that she kept photos of all three stepchildren in her bedroom. Outside of dependency sections, Steinem highlights Marilyn's childlike behavior, though the feminist author follows the child around: "(Can we imagine a male movie star being praised for acting helpless, looking for motherly sex partners, and singing sensuously, 'My Heart Belongs to Mommy')? Because she was a woman Marilyn was encouraged to remain a child" (159).

Though Steinem's hostility to Norman Mailer originates in gender politics, she also uses the figure of Marilyn to vent her private resentment towards his work and his person. She comments angrily and repeatedly on Mailer's "obsession with this long-dead sex goddess" (19) and seeks to rescue Marilyn from "the sugary blonde Norman Mailer desired" (144). She points to Mailer's blind spots with undisguised relish, noting in discussing Marilyn's refusal to marry the dying Johnny Hyde that "Mailer treats her refusal as inexplicable. In fact, he missed the romanticism that governed her behavior and was the legacy of her Depression childhood" (88). Steinem informs us that she actually met Marilyn at the Actors Studio in the early 1950s, whereas Mailer never got to see his sex queen, though he pushed Norman Rosten for an introduction. "Though Mailer quotes from Rosten's slender book," Steinem writes, "he omits the account of his own rejection" (132). Though her vendettas against sexism and Mailerism overlap, Steinem writes her feminism on Marilyn's skin. She promotes Marilyn not least to promote *Ms.* magazine:

If you also would like to contribute to the Ms. Foundation for Women, a tax deductible public charity, and earmark your contribution for the Marilyn Monroe Children's Fund, write: Ms. Foundation for Women, 370 Lexington Avenue,

New York, New York 10017. Together, we can help Marilyn to help other children in the future. (10-11)

S. Paige Baty discusses in *American Monroe* the reasons for Marilyn's endless appeal. She, too, has been haunted by Monroe and the voices that insist on repeating her story (Baty counts seventy books exclusively on Marilyn in 1995). Baty writes about inhabiting a "Marilyn country," a metaphorical and/or actual plague-ridden city in which otherness and insanity reign (5-6). In the tradition of Frank Norris and John Dos Passos, who both represented Hollywood as an infected site, Baty seeks out Marilyn amidst underworld rubble. She finds an unholy hybrid of academia and mass culture, fact and fiction, as well as history and fantasy.

Like Gloria Steinem, Baty wishes to save Marilyn from the desire of all the male writers who construct her as erotic object. She dismisses, for example, Hans Jørgen Lembourn's *Diary of a Lover of Marilyn Monroe* (1977) as pure fabrication. Writers such as Lembourn and Mailer portray Marilyn "as the object of her author's desire and the subject representative of American sexuality." These writers do not, in Baty's view, invite their readers to "enter Marilyn's textual body via a critique of pornographic scripting, but rather as the site of a shared or mass-mediated desire" (23). A decade after Steinem, Baty engages in a new version of the rescue fantasy, though the feminism of the 1970s and '80s in Baty's text has turned into feminist postmodernism.

While Steinem sought to rescue Marilyn by taking seriously her efforts to improve herself through books, Baty elevates Marilyn much in the way a British university professor some years ago sought to discuss "Academic Elvis" at a University of Warwick conference, while two women visiting from Nashville kept stressing that Elvis had been real nice to his mom. Baty chooses, for example, chapter headings in Latin: "In Medias Res," "Ecce Signum," "Vita Feminae," "Amor Fatality," and "Corpus Mysticum." She thus lends to the study of Marilyn a highly serious aura, though her titles smack of a new brand of idolatry. They suggest the anecdote of Laurence Olivier, who directed and co-starred with Marilyn in *The Prince and the Showgirl*. During a taxicab ride he heard Paula Strasberg, Marilyn's acting coach, flatter her boss *ad nauseam*: "You are the greatest woman of your time, the greatest human being of your time, you name it. You can't think of anybody, I mean – no, not even Jesus – except you're more popular" (Guiles 311). Anecdotes aside, Baty's Latin attempts to give Marilyn intellectual dignity, as do the numerous, lengthy notes and the academic, postmodernist diction of *American Monroe*. A random page in "Amor Fatality" thus informs us that "Whereas the iconographic mode of remembering manifests a fluency

through specific, often super- or ahistorical units operative outside of any particular structure, the cartographic mode underlines the importance of structure as content itself' (119).

Baty's angle on Marilyn also seeks to rescue her from the image of the dumb blonde. Baty does not view Marilyn as a sexual icon but focuses on her primarily because she constitutes a site on which American political culture is written and exchanged. By linking Marilyn with knowledge and power, she propels the star from rumors of Kennedy indiscretions into respectable political and cultural terrain. She further deemphasizes sexuality by discussing Marilyn as a "representative character," like Frederic Douglass a century earlier; both function as symbols that "exist at the intersection of cultural production and consumption, circulating in specific times and places where they are made to mediate values to a given community" (9). Baty retains, however, by using the passive voice, a whiff of victimization, as the slave and the sexpot become the objects of communal systems of signification. In her assertion, they share the vulnerability that made Marilyn Monroe.

Baty uses a number of authorial voices in discussing "her" Marilyn. Having listened to "the chroniclers of mass-mediated immortality," she has produced "a schizophrenic text . . . reflected in the voices of its author." By occupying shifting authorial positions, she inhabits, as have other writers, a space identical to Marilyn's own. Baty pluralizes Marilyn: Mailer's, Guiles's, Steinem's, Summers', Baty's: "Everybody's Marilyn is different." Baty usurps, as did Steinem, the territory Marilyn had occupied – literally, perhaps, by moving to the outskirts of LA, and symbolically by placing "her" Marilyn "at the nexus of academia and my television screen" (5, note 6). Or has Marilyn swallowed Baty's life, maybe taken over Politics and Women's Studies at Williams College? Is "Marilyn" Mailer's monster or his mouse?

Baty's Marilyn becomes, like the author herself, a postmodern heroine, who thrives on hybridity. In *American Monroe* she combines high and low culture, presence and loss, indeterminable identities, and potentially infinite positions on the time/space continuum. She has moved out of '50s America and into simulacrum. As Baty stresses Marilyn's commodification, the "real" Marilyn vanishes, and a postmodern product shows up. If Marilyn indeed functions as "a surface on which different bodies, identities and histories may be reconstructed" (22), she becomes in Baty's text representation itself (24), a story available for endless circulation.

Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde* recycles Marilyn's life story, in some readers' view, endlessly. One *New York Times* reviewer feels as unenthusiastic about Oates's millennium Marilyn as about Edward M. Kennedy in *Black*

Water, here labeled Oates's "embarrassing 1992 fictionalization of Chappaquiddick" (Kakutani 1). The reviewer complains of "pages and pages of the sort of heavy-breathing, romance-novel prose one would think beneath a writer of her distinction" (2). Close to eight hundred pages of small print, Oates's *Blonde* seeks to add weight to Marilyn's renowned body through its thorough treatment of her life and death. Its mere bulk further takes up space among the many Marilyn books available. Oates writes in her "Author's Note" that she has consulted *Legend* by Guiles and *Goddess* by Summers, as well as *Marilyn Monroe: A Life of the Actress* (1986) by Carl E. Rollyson, Jr. She points to other "subjective" texts about Marilyn as myth, including *Marilyn* by Mailer, yet many voices echo in her text, not least the breathy whisper of Marilyn's *My Story*. Oates insists from line one on fiction as her form, a claim prompting the *New York Times* reviewer to state that she "is using the life of Marilyn Monroe as a substitute for inventing an original story" (Kakutani 3) to cash in, once again, on the commodified star.

The cover of *Blonde* stimulates buyer curiosity by showing Marilyn or a look-alike from the back and by retrieving from the black background only a blond head and shoulders. The illustration promises a new angle on the Marilyn mystery, which the blackness enveloping her figure also suggests. At the same time, we see the world from Marilyn's perspective: black. Glued to her back or crouched on her shoulder, we partake in the nightmare Marilyn dreamed. We get to devour the threatening female and to market the goods of Marilyn Monroe. Angry rescuers notwithstanding, Joyce Carol Oates explodes lines between readers and voyeurs, victims and victimizers, merchants and merchandise, and reel and reality. She invites her audience to inhabit a Marilyn country where anything goes.

Oates thus allows herself – and us – to merge a number of genres and voices. She indulges in melodrama, as in the sections Marilyn becomes "The Fair Princess" or what another reviewer calls "a pitiful impostor called the Beggar Maid," who "allows for some genuinely terrible kitsch" (Miller 3). This purple prose blends with the poems Marilyn writes in *Blonde*, and with the stereotypes that appear in Oates's re- or unnaming of characters important to the Blond Actress: "the Ex-Athlete" for Joe DiMaggio and "the Playwright" for – guess who? Her portrait of DiMaggio echoes that of Steinem: too much male bonding, too much TV on the couch, too much jealousy, and too few words. Her textual universe takes on the quality of a Marilyn movie. In Laura Miller's opinion, Oates's "subject is of Cinemascope proportions, an undisputed titan of America's mythic imagination, so she can't be too vulgar or grandiose" (3).

Depictions of real life characters like Lee Strasberg, Frank Sinatra or the Kennedys also work in Cinemascope and certainly revise the mythic standing of Old Blue Eyes and Camelot. Though Kakutani objects to Oates's "using the liberties of a novel to tart up the facts" (1), poetic license makes for unusual descriptions of America's youngest president and all his men, including Peter Lawford, who serves as pimp, and Bobby Kennedy, who gets the hand-me-downs. The scene at the Carlton Hotel in New York, when Marilyn flies in to service the President, depicts a chauvinistic power broker forcing the Blond Actress to her knees without interrupting for a moment his phone calls. This violation prepares for still another invasion – the (fictional?) sharp-shooter who in August '62 sinks a six-inch needle into the heart of the President's whore.

Oates uses cinematic metaphors to blur the lines between fact and film that the Blond Actress herself also prefers a bit hazy. She skates across Marilyn's many surfaces – from Norma Jeane to her mirror to the mirror-as-movie and back to the curly-haired girl who learns that "whatever isn't in the spotlight isn't observed" (69, 78) or, for that matter, lived. Since film can be edited, erased, run backwards and forwards, Oates produces a Marilyn that suits her market. She highlights, for example, a love triangle consisting of Charlie Chaplin, Jr., Edward G. Robinson, Jr. and the Blond Actress that may or may not have a basis in fact. Oates thus delivers a story that is marketably new, while simultaneously circulating the old Marilyn that, as Kakutani writes, "has been commodified by sleaze merchants," "pawed over by conspiracy theorists and sifted by scandal mongers," as well as "deconstructed by academics" (1).

Oates writes up the many Marilyns – the angel of sex, the vulnerable orphan, the emotional cripple, the sphinx, the slut, and the comedienne – that have turned into clichés, and whirls them around in Marilyn fashion. She demonstrates that Marilyn can no longer be rescued, or de-commodified. She distances the Blond Actress from her army of saviors and shows them and us that anything goes. The real Marilyn never existed in the '50s or elsewhere, and Oates's Marilyn serves as a (screen) product we may choose to buy. We may learn a thing or two about movies, about markets, and about Marilyn; we may even stare at ourselves in her mirror or find ourselves well entertained. *Blonde* is, like Marilyn, a total mess, part potboiler and part philosophy, an (un)appetizing hybrid that, once again, sends Marilyn to the malls.

Whether or not Marilyn will live on remains an open question. Some of her contemporaries do. Marlon Brando, for example, who after a fling with her in 1955 became a loyal friend and *confidant*, may be the only person in

her circle who refused to cash in on dead Marilyn, and still does. Seventy-seven years old and earning \$3 million for three weeks of work, he has recently finished *The Score*, directed by Frank Oz and co-starring Robert De Niro and Ed Norton. By all reports, he behaved as obnoxiously during production as Marilyn ever did, *The Misfits* and *Something's Got to Give* included. Brando would refuse to appear on the set if the director were present, thus forcing Oz to watch his actors on an off-site monitor and send instructions via an assistant director to De Niro, who would then talk to Brando. Self-respecting Marilyn biographers include routine speculations or chapters such as Steinem's "Who Would She Be Now"? – and the Brando scenario might generate visions of a seventy-five-year-old Marilyn still bossing everyone around.

Like Marlon, Marilyn Monroe has the right millennium sound: mmmmmmmh. And in her newest outfit as postmodern vamp(yre), she might (embodied by Madonna?) survive. When last year I asked in MegaFona for a Marilyn CD, I was nonetheless pointed to the Hard Rock section, where I located only a leather-wrapped Marilyn Manson, so-called. Talk about unholy postmodern hybrids – at least to those of us who remember the Charles Manson murders. In Alex Music, the sales girl knew right away that a Marilyn CD hid nowhere in the store – her shrug directed, I choose to believe, at Marilyn's age and not at mine. But if Marilyn's music has not survived, other parts of her obviously have. On August 23, 2001, the Danish DR2 channel aired a documentary on Marilyn's life and death, and this volume also makes room for the Marilyn mystery. And, just so you know, I still don't own a Marilyn Monroe refrigerator magnet. If you want to donate one, please send it to my home address, and help Marilyn help me.

References

Adams, Victor. *The Complete Marilyn Monroe*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

Baty, S. Paige. *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Ebersole, Lucinda and Richard Peabody, ed. *Mondo Marilyn*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Gold, Mike. "The Loves of Isadora." *New Masses* 4 (March 1929): 20-21.

Guiles, Fred Lawrence. *Legend: The Life and Death of Marilyn Monroe*. New York: Stein and Day, 1984.

Kakutani, Michiko. "Darkening the Nightmare of America's Dream Girl." *New York Times on the Web*. 31 March 2000. <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

Mailer, Norman. *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973). New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1974.

Miller, Laura. "Norma Jeane." *New York Times on the Web*. 2 April 2000. <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

Monroe, Marilyn. *My Story* (1954). New York: Stein and Day, 1974.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Blonde: A Novel*. New York: Harper Collins-Ecco, 2001.

Rosten, Norman. *Marilyn: An Untold Story*. New York: Signet, 1973.

Steinem, Gloria. *Marilyn: Norma Jeane* (1986). New York: Signet, 1988.

Summers, Anthony. *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1985.