

A black and white portrait of Marilyn Monroe, showing her from the chest up. She has her signature blonde, wavy hair styled in a bouffant, and is wearing large, ornate earrings and a dark, strapless, form-fitting dress. The background is solid black.

MARILYN MONROE

A LIFE OF THE ACTRESS

Revised and updated

CARL ROLLYSON

Marilyn Monroe

Hollywood Legends Series
Carl Rollyson, General Editor



MARILYN MONROE

A Life of the Actress

REVISED AND UPDATED

Carl Rollyson

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of the Association of American University Presses.

Illustration on page ii: Marilyn Monroe (c. 1952)

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Ralph Roberts kindly reviewed what had been written about him in other sources and responded readily to questions about the actress's development of her talent. He conveyed a solid impression of Monroe's working life as an actress and of her fervent desire to educate herself. Our discussions of the Method led him to recommend an interview with Ellen Burstyn, who generously shared with me her experience as a movie actress. She suggested ways in which Stanislavsky would be particularly relevant to Monroe, and she helped to work out an approach to life and art partly based on our discussion of Audrey Flack's painting of Monroe.

A long conversation with Audrey Flack suggested that what she had painted was what I wanted to write. For over three years Flack was a constant source of support, corresponding with me regularly, commenting

on drafts of the biography, and introducing it to friends and associates. My attention has shifted somewhat in this new edition of my biography, and I have deleted a section devoted to Flack's work, but its spirit continues to inspire what I write about Marilyn Monroe.

Norman Rosten consented to several interviews in person, on the phone, and by correspondence. He patiently responded to my pleas for advice and shrewdly assessed several chapters of this book. I am grateful, as well, to his wife, Hedda, who took the time to review her memories of Monroe—especially those concerning *The Prince and the Showgirl*.

Rupert Allan's recollections of Monroe's career, early and late, have proved indispensable. Allan first knew Monroe in his capacity as a writer for *Look*. Then he worked as her press representative. Through it all he remained her close friend. He checked several sections of my manuscript and answered numerous questions in person and on the phone. Stanley Flink, like Allan, first met Monroe when he was working as a writer—in Flink's case, for *Life*. As Richard Meryman suggested to me, Flink's memory of Monroe's early career remained vivid. The wit and enormous vitality she displayed during her first Hollywood years were still reflected in Flink's amusing stories.

Meryman generously made available several hours of his tape-recorded *Life* interview with Monroe. He wanted to demonstrate how easily one could get caught up in her style, in the incredible energy of her laugh. John Springer, the actress's press representative on the East Coast during the last three years of her life, was also very helpful in characterizing the kind of professional life Monroe pursued in New York. Like Meryman and Rupert Allan, he helped me get in touch with others who could confirm Monroe's intelligence as an artist.

Susan Strasberg made astute comments on my manuscript that led to further revisions. She gave me a clearer sense of her mother's part in Monroe's preparations for the screen than can be found elsewhere. Susan Strasberg's father was not available for an interview, but Fred Guiles supplied a tape-recording of his sessions with Lee Strasberg, as well as other material that made a crucial difference in writing this biography. Both Guiles and Maurice Zolotow read my early drafts and answered many queries. Without them, several important leads would have been missed.

Milton Greene was available for a brief interview, and he clarified several points about the actress's working life and discussed her attitude toward *My Story*. It was a flawed autobiography, she thought, but

one worth preserving. Almost everything she ever did, Greene noted, was tinged with regret over not having been able to do it better. I came away from this encounter with Greene impressed with his sober and—it seemed to me—subdued demeanor, which conveyed a sense that he still found it difficult to discuss his fruitful but fraught relationship with Monroe.

Rose Steinberg Wapner yielded insights on Monroe's movie set behavior, and a short talk with Patricia Newcomb clarified aspects of the actress's professional plans in her last year. Newcomb was cordial but guarded, and I regret that I could not penetrate the barrier of her discretion.

I also regret that several other important sources were not available to be interviewed. Joe DiMaggio's fierce refusal to deal with biographers of Monroe is legendary. He once walked out of the room when Fred Guiles tried to put a question to him about her. I had a similar experience with Arthur Miller. I wrote to him asking for an interview. I did not receive a reply. At a reception for him at the University of Michigan I introduced myself and said I was writing a biography of Monroe and would like to ask him some questions. He stared at me and said, "What is your question?" As I began to formulate one, a woman, book in hand, interrupted and asked him for his autograph. Miller turned toward her (his back to me), signaling the end of my "interview." Later, I sent him my manuscript for comment. He replied that he had done with my work what he always did with material that did not include a stamped return envelope: He threw my book in the waste basket. As a result, I have had to make do with his by turns reticent and revealing autobiography, *Timebends*.

I want to express my appreciation to Gary Vitacco-Robles for sharing with me the manuscript of his forthcoming two-volume biography of Marilyn Monroe, in which, at the last minute, I discovered those revealing notes by Joe DiMaggio that show how much he regretted treating her badly during their marriage and how he vowed to make every effort to make amends.

Several librarians were instrumental in finding obscure sources and suggesting fruitful areas of research: Mary Corliss in the Film Stills department of the Museum of Modern Art; Maxine Fleckner and her assistant Nancy Cieki at the Wisconsin Center for Film & Theatre Research; Geraldine Duclow in the Theatre Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia; and Nancy Goldman of the Pacific Film Archive. For their patient and prompt handling of my requests, I wish to thank the staffs of

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Rea Wilmshurst typed an early draft of the manuscript and through careful editing saved me from committing many embarrassing errors. I owe the biggest debt of all, however, to my wife, Dr. Lisa Paddock. Every page of this book reflects her precise editing; every passage is richer because she helped me to imagine it.

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Foreword

Discovering Marilyn Monroe

I discovered Marilyn Monroe in the late 1970s while working on Norman Mailer. His biography of Marilyn Monroe excited my admiration. Mailer shrewdly drew on previous work by Maurice Zolotow and Fred Lawrence Guiles, Monroe's first two important biographers, to portray a proactive person he deemed Napoleonic. To this day, no one seems to have recognized how his insight into this ambitious actress catapulted Monroe biography to a different level.

To explain, I need to summon the dark days of Monroe biography, the pre-Norman Mailer period, when she was viewed as a rather pathetic figure—a victim of Hollywood, a vulgar popular cultural figure, generally a messed up human being. Of course, there were exceptions to this view. Diana Trilling wrote a sensitive piece about Monroe's artistry, and other writers and artists who met Monroe were impressed with her wit. Maurice Zolotow had the advantage of actually knowing the actress and reporting vividly on her movie set behavior. Then Fred Lawrence Guiles, author of the first comprehensive Monroe biography, probed deeply into her early years, especially her experiences with foster families. But Zolotow and Guiles treated Monroe mainly as a woman who all too often succumbed to the pressures of her career and rarely seemed in control of what was happening to her. Embedded in their narratives, however, was another Monroe, one far more canny and cunning. But this side of the actress was still overwhelmed by stories of how many takes it took for her to say "It's me, Sugar," in *Some Like It Hot*.

In 1978, I published an article about Mailer's book in a new journal, *Biography*, explaining that with his work our understanding of Marilyn Monroe had turned a corner. A year later, a small press offered me a contract to produce a bio-bibliography of Monroe. Only then did I seriously consider what I could contribute to the already voluminous literature about her. I spent the summer of 1980 re-reading Guiles, Zolotow, Mailer, and other biographies. And I realized two things: 1) I was getting bored reading and summarizing what others had written about her,

which is what I was supposed to be doing in a bio-bibliography, and 2) Her three best biographers knew next to nothing about acting and had missed what should be the focus of Monroe biography. In my view, her biographer needed to address two questions: 1) Why did she turn to acting as a way of finding an identity and fulfilling herself, and 2) To what extent—on the screen—did she actually achieve her goal? Previous biographers had no vocabulary to describe her acting, and thus were at a loss when it came to discussing the nexus between her life and her art.

I doubt that I would have recognized the deficiencies of earlier biographies if I had not been a trained actor, one who at a very early age turned to acting for many of the same reasons that Monroe was attracted to the art. In brief, acting allows you to be someone even before you know who you are or what you want to become. And as an actor, you can't just say you are so and so; that so and so has to arise from a complex arrangement of gestures, postures, and mannerisms that are developed both in privacy and in front of fellow actors, audiences, crews, and directors. Monroe began to form a self in the absence of a "mirror," a parent who could acknowledge and validate her. Her mother was mentally ill, and Monroe was never sure about the identity of her father, so she turned to acting as a kind of compensation—as I did after my father died when I was thirteen.

Because of my own voracious reading and commitment to acting, I also understood why Monroe built an impressive library of works on psychology and physiology, keeping copies of Mabel Elsworth Todd's *The Thinking Body*, as well as an edition of Freud's letters on her bedside table. But what interested me as a younger man in the 1980s was Monroe's battle with concentration. When she remained focused, she created an extraordinary range of performances: from the introvert in *Bus Stop* to the extrovert in *The Prince and the Showgirl*. Watch just those two films, and you will see why she is a great actress. Each performance is a de novo creation built through a vocabulary of gesture and movement that is inimitable. In her major roles, Marilyn Monroe did not repeat herself.

Tired of simply reading about Marilyn Monroe during that long summer of 1980, I decided to contact people who actually knew her. Biography is history made palpable. I wanted to forge the human chain of evidence, not just read books and write about them. Not having worked on a biography before, I sought out both Guiles and Zolotow for inspiration and guidance. Both of them welcomed my focus on Monroe's acting and seemed delighted that a young academic (I was then an assistant

professor of humanities at Wayne State University in Detroit) took them seriously. Zolotow became a friend and advisor. Guiles greeted me from a hospital bed, having just suffered a heart attack. He supplied me with a recording of his interview with Lee Strasberg discussing Monroe's work at the Actors Studio. Mailer wished me well, but pleaded overwork and the claims of friends asking for his help and endorsement. In a memorable letter, he referred to their supplications as part of his "guilt impost pile." Later, I was gratified to learn from George Simson, editor of *Biography*, that Mailer told him I had published the best discussion to date of his Monroe book.

Do you know what it was like for a biographer like me in the early 1980s? You don't unless you understand what academia was like then. It was all right to write a book about a Hollywood or a foreign film director. After all, this was the heyday of the auteur theory, when certain directors were treated like authors. But to write about a movie star? Find a biography of a movie star published by a university press before the year 1986. My female colleagues looked askance at my work, although most were polite enough not to come right out and say my subject was unworthy. I say most, because at a popular culture conference in the mid-1980s a prominent feminist scholar told me that next time I should pick a "strong woman to write about." That scholar could have been Lois Banner. In her Monroe biography, she confesses that her own attitude toward Monroe has gone through a sea change. Indeed, both in conversation with me and in her book, Banner singles out my work for showing her just how serious and accomplished an actress Monroe was.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the mid-1980s I was in the wilderness. In Detroit, I would pick up the phone and call editors in New York, pitching my book. I got polite responses but no takers. Now I'm astonished that those editors even deigned to talk to me. In frustration, I turned to Matthew Broccoli, a professor at the University of South Carolina who had all sorts of contacts in publishing. A friend had recommended him. The brusque Broccoli suffered my importuning telephone call for several minutes before finally coughing up a name: Shaye Areheart. She was an editor at Doubleday he thought would be receptive to my approach to Monroe. And she was, but she could not get the publisher's editorial board to buy my book. "It fell between two stools," I was told. It was written in an engaging style, but it was also "serious" and "scholarly." The question of how to market that kind of book puzzled them.

Eventually, through Shaye, I found an agent who convinced me no trade house would publish my book. But if I persuaded UMI Research Press, publisher of my revised dissertation on William Faulkner, to take the book and limit their rights to a three-year deal for the hardcover, I could launch my biography. Then she could get deals for paperback and foreign publication. And that is what happened. Souvenir Press published the hardcover in England, then Hodder & Stoughton came out with a paperback, followed by Da Capo Press with the American softcover—proving not only that a market existed for my book, but that readers were eager to see more facets of Marilyn Monroe than had been on display in the earlier biographies.

I asked readers to consider what Marilyn had been confronted with: the prospect that she was going to portray basically the same character, the so-called “dumb blonde,” in picture after picture. If she took herself seriously, then she had to find a way to make each of her characters live within the very narrow range the sex symbol occupied. By describing Monroe’s impressive repertoire of gestures—from *Bus Stop* to *The Misfits*—I showed that she was, indeed, a consummate professional and more. She was a great artist. When Gloria Steinem read my book, she concurred: “More than anything else in her life, Marilyn Monroe wanted to be taken seriously as an actress. Rollyson has done just that in *Marilyn Monroe: A Life of the Actress*, the first and only book that is entirely an analysis and appreciation of her work. It will be important to both film historians and to Marilyn’s fans—it would have made Marilyn feel honored and worthwhile.”

Steinem also authored an important feminist analysis of Monroe in a book published the same year as mine. Steinem wondered whether Marilyn might have been heartened by the second wave of the women’s movement, which would have put her plight into historical context and made her protest against male chauvinist moviemaking all the more powerful. Perhaps—although Banner, who is sympathetic to this argument, also wonders if Monroe, as a male-identified actress, would have been able to make the transition to a new era. On balance, I side with Steinem because of what I know about Marilyn Monroe. She never stopped reading and learning and arguing. Hers was not a closed mind.

At the same time I was writing my interpretative Monroe biography, I encountered Anthony Summers, then involved in researching the star’s life—especially her connection with the Kennedys. He called me at the urging of one of our mutual friends, Steffi Sidney. I exchanged informa-

tion and ideas with Summers and agreed with his assessment that we were writing very different kinds of books. When his book *Goddess* appeared in 1985, it was highly praised and roundly denounced. In over six hundred interviews, he had amassed an astounding record of testimony that some deemed gossip, while others found his work suggestive evidence that considerably widened and deepened our understanding of the incredible range of Monroe's appeal. It is not too much to say that Summers's work made the endeavor to comprehend Marilyn Monroe into a Napoleonic campaign that attracted other ambitious biographers. Without Summers's spadework, I don't see how the noteworthy biographies of the 1990s by Donald Spoto and Barbara Leaming would have been published.

For a long time, I resisted revising this book. I felt it had its place in the history of Monroe biography, and short of discovering new material and conducting extensive new interviews—a daunting prospect because of my commitments to other projects—I did not see the point. But then two books of primary source material appeared, providing fresh insight into both the young woman preparing herself to become Marilyn Monroe, and the star struggling to maintain her focus on her art. *Fragments* and *MM-Personal* reveal her acute self-consciousness, a Virginia Woolf-like obsession with watching herself and scrutinizing her relations with others. Monroe did not keep diaries as faithfully as Woolf did, and she did not have Woolf's literary gifts, but Monroe had a sensibility like Woolf's that relentlessly pursued itself to the point of extinction. In short, it was not the traumatic childhood, not the factory-like production of movies, not the failed marriages—not her even her disappointed hopes—that led to Monroe's demise, but rather her unrelenting focus on herself. This self-consciousness appeared at least as early as her first marriage, years before she became a star or even had an acting career.

In this new edition, I have drawn on the discoveries and commentaries made since my book first appeared in 1986. I have also provided a bit more of the social and historical context in which Marilyn Monroe made her fateful choices. Virtually every page also reflects, I hope, my development as a writer of better sentences. But mainly I have sought to flesh out the story that shaped my initial narrative: the struggle of a great artist to realize herself and her talent.

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Marilyn Monroe

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Childhood (1926–38)

On the Outside of the World

On February 11, 1924, Gladys Pearl Baker married Martin E. Mortensen. She already had two children (then not living with her) by a previous marriage to John Newton Baker, from whom she was divorced. She was a quiet woman who worked as a film cutter at one of the Hollywood studios. Gladys kept to herself most of the time, and friends and family never seem to have fathomed what went wrong in her second marriage to Mortensen, a union that lasted only sixteen months. Although they were not divorced until June 1, 1927, Gladys left him two years earlier on May 25, 1925. When her daughter, Norma Jeane, was born on June 1, 1926, the birth certificate listed her last name as Mortensen, although Mortensen almost certainly was not her father.

Gladys never told Norma Jeane who her father was, although the mother confided to her daughter a few things about him, including a story about his death in an auto accident that the child refused to believe. Many years later, when Norma Jeane became the starlet Marilyn Monroe, she said she learned that her father was Stanley Gifford, one of her mother's co-workers in the film industry. Gifford refused to acknowledge her efforts to contact him, and she took his rejection bitterly. It gave her one more reason to think of herself as a waif.

Norma Jeane never had anything like a normal relationship with her mother. Just twelve days after her birth, Gladys took her daughter to Wayne and Ida Bolender's home in Hawthorne, California. The Bolenders were neighbors who would look after the baby for more than six years while Gladys worked. Gladys apparently doubted her capacity to handle a child full time, because even when she was not working she seemed more like an aloof visitor to the Bolender home than a mother

who missed her child. She did not respond to her daughter's use of the word "mama." Instead, as Monroe later recalled, her mother stared at her and gave no sign of affection. She did not even hold her daughter, and she barely spoke to the expectant little girl. On visits with Gladys, Norma Jeane was frightened and spent most of her time in the bedroom closet hidden among her clothes. Gladys cautioned Norma Jeane not to make "so much noise." It was as if the child were an intruder. Even the sound of Norma Jeane turning the pages of a book made her mother nervous. In sum, the child had few opportunities to behave in a free, spontaneous, and autonomous fashion.

Norma Jeane looked for a way to fill the void in her visits with her mother. She noticed on the wall of Gladys's room a photograph of a rather jaunty looking man with a lively smile and a Clark Gable mustache, and she was thrilled to learn from her mother that this robust figure was her father. No more was said about the photograph, but Norma Jeane dreamed about it constantly, probably because it exemplified the exuberance of spirit stilled in herself.

Norma Jeane spent several months with an English couple, movie extras who had rented part of the bungalow from Gladys. Then Grace McKee, Gladys's friend and co-worker, was named the child's guardian. But McKee kept her ward for only a brief period, and Norma Jeane found herself in her first foster home with the Giffens family before being sent to an orphanage on September 13, 1935. She spent nearly two years there. When she finally left the institution in June of 1937, she stayed temporarily with two foster families before settling again with Grace in January or February of 1938.

In her years as a starlet, Marilyn Monroe would treat her childhood like a Dickensian story involving a dozen or so foster homes, the drudgery of washing and cleaning dishes in an orphanage, sexual molestation, and even her attempted murder, when her grandmother Della tried to smother her with a pillow. These shocking tales derived from Marilyn's feeling that she had been deprived, exploited, and violated at a very early age. The normal pattern of growth had been disrupted, and she had trouble making the connections between herself and the world that children from stable families take for granted.

Norma Jeane had to discover some way of building and controlling her self-image in a world that could easily wipe away her attachments to it. She turned to daydreaming and to the movies as a means of self-fortification, for she was a child who "often felt lonely and wanted

to die." As Monroe later put it, fantasizing exercised her imagination: "[I]n a daydream you jump over facts as easily as a cat jumps over a fence." Daydreams provided her with an effortless, instantaneous attractiveness: "I daydreamed chiefly about beauty. . . . Daydreaming made my work easier." She dreamed of appearing naked in church for "God and everyone else to see." This confession in *My Story* seems circumspect compared to a reflection she later recorded in a private notebook, noting her "strongly sexed feeling since a small child."

Movies also filled in the gaps in her identity. Films made her feel more alive and more conscious and better able to visualize the world that otherwise excluded her. There was nothing she could not follow on the screen, and nothing that could diminish the intensity of her perceptions: "I loved everything that moved up there and I didn't miss anything that happened—and there was no popcorn either." Her phrasing dramatically recaptures the child's awestruck love of human experience as magnified on film, seemingly compensating for the diminution of her own experience outside the movie house.

Grace McKee, who had worked alongside Gladys in a film laboratory at a movie studio, never lost touch with Norma Jeane and often came to her rescue. Twice divorced and with a 1920s figure and stature that made it easy to share clothes with Gladys, Grace found the little girl adorable and apparently responded to that "strongly sexed feeling," telling Norma Jeane that someday she would be a movie star, another Jean Harlow (1911–37). Grace, who liked the bootleg liquor available during the years of Prohibition (1920–33), often joined Gladys on nights out with various men. So it is little wonder that Harlow, who played the quintessential platinum blonde and good time girl in both silent films and talkies, should appeal to Grace as a desirable role model for Norma Jeane.

By the early 1930s, Harlow had become a superstar. Paired in six films with Hollywood's premiere leading man, Clark Gable, she enchanted audiences with her gift for comedy and her sexual allure—precisely the qualities that audiences would find so appealing in Monroe. Harlow's shocking death at the age of twenty-six, just after Norma Jeane's eleventh birthday, made a deep impression not only on Harlow's fans but also on a nation of moviegoers. This shimmering platinum blonde presence, a spirited woman who held her own on the screen with seasoned leading men such as Spencer Tracy and William Powell, left a void that no other actress of her generation seemed able to fill. Grace mesmerized Norma Jeane with the promise of Hollywood stardom, a dream that countless

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