



Crowning Glory: An Experiment in Self-Discovery Through Disguise

Stacy Harshman

Andarina Publishing (Jun 26, 2016)

eBook \$2.99

978-0-9973688-0-2

It's confidence by coif in this account of a young woman's undercover journey through New York City.

"My hair has been my archenemy since seventh grade," Stacy Harshman bemoans in her entertaining memoir *Crowning Glory*. The book documents how wearing various wigs helped Harshman to build self-confidence and recover from depression.

In 2005, Harshman decided to embark on a sociological experiment-cum-personal challenge: each week for six weeks she donned a different wig, and with the help of her assistant, Bonnie, she carefully recorded the reactions she received from onlookers and potential partners. Each day she chose three New York City locales, taking in events like lunch, happy hour, and late night socializing. Recalling the time she was hospitalized for a psychotic break in 2000, she marvels at how changing hairstyles could help her feel self-assured and sexy.

The book is an appealing cross between a scientific study and a spy story. Each section is headed with the date and the chosen "Fields of Research" with their location and timing. Bonnie kept field notes and "Stare Stats" detailing all the people who gave Harshman more than a passing glance. On the other hand, the delicious idea of working undercover to learn more about one's self and others makes for a lighthearted read.

Meticulous research methods have allowed the author to recreate scenes and dialogue in realistic detail. The characterization is also effective: there are stand-out portraits of minor figures such as Mischa, a flamboyant Russian diamond dealer, and also of all the alter egos the wigs represent. A red wig turns Harshman into "Kali," bold "Fire Goddess," while a black wig worn at Halloween transforms her into the vampiric "Nada Jolie." The fun companion photographs give hints of the different personas she was able to inhabit.

The regimented structure of the early chapters is one of the book's key strengths, so later free-form sections about the author's experiences in Internet dating can feel superfluous. As her relationship with her long-term boyfriend, Tim, started falling apart, she alternated looks and wigs when she went out on dates. The confidence she built through her disguises manifested itself in a new sexual prowess, sometimes described in cheesy romance novel language ("I walked around feeling like a predatory feline with erotic fire in my sinews").

For the most part, though, the book is written in a fluent, carefree style, with unusual and illuminating metaphors like "I had been growing a real-me seed inside a wig-covered greenhouse." Harshman provides a convincing account of her recovery from mental illness alongside the narrative of her wig-wearing adventures. *Crowning Glory* will suit readers of recent hair-themed nonfiction, as well as fans of edgy *Belle de Jour*-type memoirs.

REBECCA FOSTER (April 20, 2016)

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