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Autobiography & Memoir

Not About Madonna: My Little Pre-Icon Roommate and Other Memoirs
Whit Hill
Heliotrope Books
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Whit Hill's memoir is engaging and interesting, but is it not about Madonna? It's not. That's okay. Expecting a memoir by Madonna's pre-fame roommate to not be about Madonna may be like expecting a minor member of the Jackson family to publish a book not about Michael. Would we care one whit about Hill if not for Madonna? Likely, yes, because she's done what good memoirists who write well do—make readers care about their less extraordinary lives.

Hill vividly recreates the scene when, as young dance majors at the University of Michigan, hers and Madonna's lives intensely intertwine. By the time the two drift apart, before Madonna's even a minor star, and Hill's life takes center stage, she's laid enough groundwork; readers care.

Hill does more than gracefully chronicle her friendship with her oddly-named friend who is by turns sweet and calculating, clingy and coolly casual, loving and a little lonely. The author also inspects the interstices between celebrity and culture, art and artifice, family and fame. Hill's more typical struggling artist's life—in Manhattan and Cape Cod, but mostly the Midwest—is arguably the more interesting: she marries, divorces, raises kids, scrapes by, keeps it together, marries again, and works as dancer, writer, choreographer, teacher, and finally, too, as a singer-songwriter.

She and Madonna remain friends only briefly after Madonna quits Michigan for Manhattan, and Whit graduates. Yet, as Madonna's star ascends, plateaus, and reignites, the celebrity-soaked culture insists that Hill keep bumping up against ex-roomie-as-icon. As the reminders accrue, Hill considers Madonna's shadow, beginning when "making it" meant paying the rent and eating too. Even with Madonna out of Hill's life, she's still present, a repeating trope—absence as pervading presence—on nearly every page.

The author has a sure voice, a generous tone, and rhythmically timed irony. There's a cadence and pitch-perfect pacing here not unlike an eighties pop song—bright and springy.

Other times, she's bluesy, reflective, and languorous. Hill's songwriter chops are clearly on display.

Madonna fans may remember Hill (née Setrakian) from J. Randy Taraborrelli's 2002 Madonna biography, and TV interviews. When media requests surge, Hill begins charging for interviews; her decision sounds logical, yet coming late in the text, it slightly changes what up to then feels not-overly exploitive—if it's possible not to exploit someone famous whose name appears in the book title. This doesn't lessen the book's or author's appeal, but illuminates how a celebrity connection can subtly transform a life in ways public and private: we are never free from our past. Why not "Express Yourself?"

Lisa Romeo