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Autobiography & Memoir

Unveiling the Prophet: The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante
Lucy Ferriss
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Today, this author is the award-winning Writer-in-Residence at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and the writer of numerous books, among them *Leaving the Neighborhood and Other Stories* and *Nerves of the Heart*. In the fall of 1972, however, she was a freshman at Pomona College near Los Angeles, sampling the pleasures of being eighteen years old in Southern California and relishing her newfound freedom far from her home in Missouri.

However, as this entertaining memoir recounts, St. Louis hadn't relinquished its claim on her quite yet, and its summons came in the form of an ornate invitation to the Veiled Prophet Ball, for generations the high point of the city's social season. There, along with several dozen other young ladies and under the eyes of thousands of onlookers, Ferriss would make her debut with an intricate curtsey to a mysterious hooded figure whose identity had remained a secret for nearly a century.

"The story of the Veiled Prophet," she writes, "is a cotillion story, a myth, a civil rights story, and a gender tale—but it also a story of St. Louis." And so it is, a strange, somewhat disturbing *mélange* of Babbit and Southern belle, a sinister dash of the Ku Klux Klan, and a rising tide of racial activism all coming to a dramatic climax in 1972, when a young protestor named Gena Scott swung on an electrical cable from the second balcony to the elaborate stage and snatched the veil from the Prophet's head to reveal the shocked, sweaty businessman underneath.

Skillfully intertwining regional history, national history, and personal experience, Ferriss traces the Ball's history, records her own quest to research her book and track down its key players thirty years after the fact, and tells the bittersweet but often laugh-out-loud funny tale of her own mildly rebellious participation in the great event, featuring an inappropriate gown, a Jewish hippie for an escort, and a plateful of Alice B. Toklas brownies, which added just the right touch of unreality to an already odd adventure.

More a deftly executed sketch than a full-dress portrait, *Unveiling the Prophet* touches lightly but evocatively and perceptively on a range of subjects from the past, present, and future of St. Louis to the ferment of racial, sexual, and cultural politics in the seventies to the way one eloquent woman looks back with affection and a bit of regret at her younger self, her family, and the social world that shaped her youth. Though ultimately not as fully fleshed-out a book as *An American Childhood*, Anne Tyler's wonderful account of growing up in Pittsburgh, this memoir shares many of that book's best qualities and much of its appeal.

Peyton Moss