

She came to represent the ultimate screen siren and the stereotypical blonde airhead but Marilyn Monroe was neither. *MIKE PEAKE* discovers that Monroe, uncomfortable with her fame, was a lonely, unsettled soul who remains – 50 years after her death on 5 August 1962 – one of the most intriguing Hollywood actresses of all time

➤ **TWO DAYS BEFORE** Marilyn Monroe died of a suspected overdose in August 1962, *Life* magazine published a cover story about the enigmatic actress, following a series of interviews by one of the publication's associate editors. The words of that article, which still linger online and in vintage magazine stores, paint a vivid picture of a troubled, very human woman at the height of her fame.

After 50 years of hype, however, Marilyn Monroe has been reduced to something beautiful but rather hollow, an iconic slice of post-war Americana that still looks good on a canvas although it doesn't really add up to much. But there was so much more to her than that.

Marilyn Monroe didn't give many interviews – not of the meaningful kind, anyway; most of them were short and filled with witty sound bites – but the few, truly heartfelt words which survive, revealed in rare, introspective conversations, resound through the decades, as do those of the people who genuinely knew her. That *Life* article just before she died was singled out by *The Guardian* as one of the great interviews of the 20th century. A single paragraph perhaps explains why: "It's nice to be included in people's fantasies," she said, "but you also like to be accepted for your own sake. I don't look at myself as a commodity, but I'm sure a lot of people have. Sometimes I'm invited places to kind of brighten up a dinner table, like a musician who'll play the piano after dinner, and I know you're not really invited for yourself. You're just an ornament."

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Marilyn Monroe grew up, of course, as Norma Jean Mortenson (she later changed it to Baker), born in 1926 and raised by an assortment of foster families. At just 16, to avoid having to leave California with her carers, she married a local boy called Jim Dougherty. The marriage didn't last, thanks in no small part to Dougherty being called up to serve overseas during WW2. Upon his return, Norma Jean had been 'discovered' by an army photographer looking for a poster girl and she was soon divorced from her GI husband. Dougherty gave a rare TV interview, 30 years after her death, in which he said that the Marilyn he once knew, "just wanted to be a good wife and secure and loved. She wanted to feel like she belonged to somebody."

He recalled with lingering bewilderment a conversation he had had with her around the time of their divorce. "I asked her if she had a cold, and she told me no, the studio had told her to make her voice lower."

It was the start of the sultry, unmistakable Monroe drawl and it marked the end of Norma Jean. Dougherty never saw his teen bride again after they divorced but she remained a part of his life

up to his death in 2005 because strangers would regularly come up to him to ask for his autograph. He told the TV cameras that had his ex-wife not died in her Brentwood home all those years ago, her iconic status today would have been greatly diminished. "She'd be a chubby little grandma," he chuckled.

Random Monroe quotations from the archives make for fascinating reading and hint at an intelligent, philosophical woman who was trapped in the madness of Hollywood. "If I observed all the rules, I'd never have got anywhere," she once said. It was intentionally provocative, though at loggerheads with the Marilyn Monroe who did, on occasion, reveal a gentler side. "Just because you fail once doesn't mean you're going to fail at everything" is one of her most fondly remembered observations. "Keep trying, hold on and always believe in yourself, because if you don't, then who will, sweetie? Keep your head high, keep your chin up and, most importantly, keep smiling, because life's a beautiful thing."

Though outwardly radiant, Monroe's insecurities made her difficult on set. Says director Billy Wilder, who worked with the actress on *The Seven Year Itch* in 1955: "She was seldom on time when we worked on the movie, but it wasn't because she overslept; it was because she had to force herself to come to the studio. She's emotionally upset all the time; she's scared and unsure of herself – so much so that I found myself wishing that I were a psychoanalyst and she were my patient. There was no use getting annoyed. Even at the beginning, when I discovered that I had let myself in for a certain amount of trouble, I found myself liking her. At no time did I find her malicious, mean, capricious or anything but conscientious."

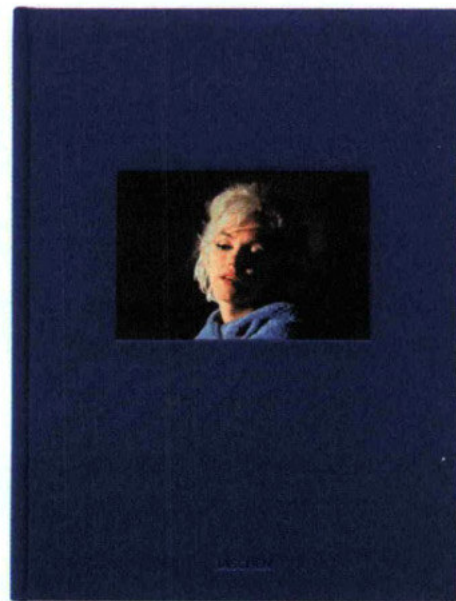
The actor Robert Mitchum who worked with her on *River Of No Return* (1954) opened up about Monroe many years after she died; he declared her to be "convinced that she was not terribly pretty or sexy and in fact she didn't have an aura of sexiness about her. She thought this whole lark of being a glamour queen was just that," he said. "And she would play it, if that was what they wanted." ■



## MARILYN & ME: A MEMOIR IN WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS

Marilyn Monroe was usually keen to build up a rapport with those who photographed her but one young shutterbug got more of Marilyn than most when he turned up to shoot her for Paris' *Match* magazine in 1962. That photographer was Lawrence Schiller, assigned to snap the actress on the set of *Something's Got To Give*, and when she told him, "I'll have a bathing suit on when I jump in, but I'm thinking of coming out without it," it gave him his big break. Those now-legendary images and other rare shots can be found in a new, limited-edition **TASCHEN** book called *Marilyn & Me: A Memoir in Words & Photographs* by Lawrence Schiller, priced at £650.

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Above / Book cover, *Marilyn & Me* by Lawrence Schiller, published in a limited edition by TASCHEN