MARILYN CLOSE UP

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Marilyn & Me: A Photographer's Memories
By Lawrence Schiller
New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday
114 pp. Cloth $20
Also available by Taschen (signed and numbered monograph)

THE EVENTS SURROUNDING THE PUBLICATION OF LAWRENCE SCHILLER'S *Marilyn & Me: A Photographer's Memories*, lead up to the 50th anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's death. She left the earthly plane on August 5, 1962 at the tender age of 36. Yet Marilyn the icon refuses to die: a solo exhibition of Schiller's seductive photographs of Marilyn went on display in May at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York; an art edition of the photos is published by Taschen; and Marilyn's image as captured by Schiller graces the cover of the current issue of *Vanity Fair*. The legend endures.

What is it about Marilyn that so captures our imagination? Her beauty, certainly, was quintessentially American. Her voice was as alluring as a siren's sweet singing. Yet it is her vulnerability that persuades us, brings us closer, and makes us want more. We sense her pain, her very human insecurity even in the face of outlandish fame. Men want to hold her and protect her. Women want to be her—or at least to share in her otherworldly allure.

And now comes this book. There is something sensuous and comforting in Schiller's warm memoir, *Marilyn & Me*. It feels right. It's a small book replete with endearing anecdotes. Schiller's memories reveal the scintillating charms of the woman obscured by the legend in much the same way as his photographs capture Marilyn's timeless beauty. You don't so much read the book as you slip into it like a silk robe after a dip in a heated pool.

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The photographs Schiller made with Marilyn in the last two years of her life and the prose of his memoir expose an open, soft, enticing real live woman one wants to defend and protect against a world so hungry for her image. You want to thank Schiller for bringing us his intimate pictures and his personal stories of this extraordinary American female seen up close. And then, as you read on, you might want to light up a cigar and celebrate Schiller's wiles as a businessman. For not only does he tell us how he made his famous pictures of Marilyn, he explains how he used them to catapult his career to a whole new level.

Marilyn Monroe was a woman and movie star like no other. She was Norman Mailer's muse. He loved her from afar. I seem to remember he wrote that the closest he got to her was to sit several rows back from her gorgeous back at some event or other Marilyn was with her then husband, Arthur Miller, and one can imagine Norman fuming, smoldering, stewing: "What the hell is she doing with that stiff galoot? A girl that sexy belongs with me!"

So Mailer had her, in his own way, on the page, in the book Schiller brought him, Mailer's *Marilyn: A Biography*, published in 1973. Mailer said Marilyn was "not so much a movie star as a major figure in American life." It became one of Mailer's best-selling books.

But Schiller had her up close. He adored her with his camera, seen, as he tells us, through his one good eye. "The Big Bad Wolf" is how he introduced himself to the star and they immediately hit it off. Schiller was 23 and Marilyn was already a legend, star in over 30 films, cover girl on the first issue of *Playboy* (December 1953), rumored lover of both President Jack Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, as well as Tony Curtis and Frank Sinatra, beloved wife of Joe DiMaggio—and just over two years away from her death when she and Schiller first met and he began photographing her.

Schiller continued to meet and take photographs of Marilyn to within a few months of her apparent suicide from an overdose of barbiturates. He was at her home one day to show her some photo proofs when Bobby Kennedy turned up. The events surrounding Marilyn's death perplexed Schiller and remain a mystery to this day. There were anomalies in the coroner's report and theories that Marilyn was murdered persist. Schiller wisely stays away from the conspiracy theories to focus on the troubled but gracious woman he knew.

Schiller tells of working late one night with Marilyn and arriving home

to find his wife still awake. He had mentioned to the star that his constant traveling put a strain on his marriage and caused him to miss spending as much time as he would have liked with his young daughter. Marilyn had sent a deliveryman with two-dozen roses and a note to say, "Sorry for keeping Larry so late."

"That blew me away," Schiller remembers. "And it still touches me."

He saw the troubled diva, he hung out with the champagne swigging and pill popping daughter of a mentally ill mother and a father she never knew, he got close to the woman who was abandoned as a child and brought up in foster homes, ill-equipped for the fame and adoration that would be hard enough for someone who was well adjusted to handle. But what Schiller related to was her underlying decency. Through it all, the fame, the broken marriages, her sputtering career, her inability to have the child she so desperately wanted, the quest for normalcy—what comes through in Schiller's memoir is her humanity and her desire to be taken seriously.

In her last interview before her death, Marilyn pleaded unsuccessfully with a reporter to end the article with the following quote: "What I really want to say: That what the world really needs is a real feeling of kinship. Everybody: stars, laborers, Negroes, Jews, Arabs. We are all brothers. Please don't make me a joke. End the interview with what I believe."

As Ella Fitzgerald said of Marilyn, "She was an unusual woman—a little ahead of her times. And she didn't know it."

"I knew I belonged to the public and to the world, not because I was talented or even beautiful but because I had never belonged to anything or anyone else," she wrote in her unfinished autobiography.

With this book and his photographs, Schiller gives Marilyn her final wish. Marilyn is no joke. And he brings her so close she belongs to all of us.