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Jerry West , Jonathan Coleman

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It was only logical that when the National Basketball Association needed a silhouette for their logo that they selected the side view of Jerry West. For forty years, West has been an integral part of N.B.A. history, first as a player and then as a coach and general manager. "Mr. Clutch" made the All-Star team every year of his career and created the dynasties that would win eight championships. This extraordinarily candid memoir shows that behind that greatness was a man whose life was punctuated by poverty, physical abuse, the death of a beloved sibling, and an ongoing battle with depression. An extraordinary autobiography of an extraordinary man.

West by West: My Charmed, Tormented Life Details

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Kf says

I picked up West by West after reading Jack McCallum's Golden Days which ties the current Golden State Warriors title teams to Jerry West's 1971-72 title-winning and 33-game-win-streak having Lakers team, but feels more like a West biography than anything else. In hindsight, I would've preferred to read WBW first as it ends just as West was starting with the Warriors.

For those unfamiliar with West, the silhouette that makes up the NBA logo is based on him. He played for the Los Angeles Lakers his entire NBA career, scored over 25,000 points, and won a title in 1972, but also lost in the finals seven different times and is the only player in league history to win a finals MVP while playing on the losing team.

WBW is a memoir written with writer and journalist Jonathan Coleman who I was previously unfamiliar with. It's an interesting book as West has lived a fascinating life of which he frequently reminds his reader. I kind of wish I would've taken notes on all the names he drops because it's everyone from Barack Obama to George W. Bush to Jack Nicholson, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jordan, Richard Pryor, and Barron Hilton of the Hilton hotel empire – those are just the names I recall from memory; there's a crapload more.

To call West a complicated person would be underselling complicated. His father abused him as a kid and his older brother, a golden child of sorts in the family, was killed in the Korean War. These two experiences fundamentally altered West (as I imagine they would anyone) and he spends chunks of the book exploring how. He presents himself as uncomfortably intense, unable to take joy even in the winning that drives him because he's unable to ever live up to model set by his dead brother or gain his dad's love.

He's well-aware of his complication and the book is a painfully open self-examination. But even within that attempt at catharsis that the book offers, West either lacks self-awareness or intentionally ignores the conflicts between the person he presents and the actions/stories he shares.

He writes about being shy and quiet, but makes friends everywhere he goes and was even described by former teammate Elgin Baylor as a gossip. To be sure, you can both be shy and be a gossip, but West presents more as a surly social butterfly who has the power to get his own in social situations. He frequently threatened to quit the Lakers, walked out on a surprise party thrown by a longtime friend, didn't bother attending the press conference announcing his departure from the Lakers, and other boorish behavior. All of this explained away as part of his stubborn character, but it's also the kind of thing that only a few people have the luxury to get away with and not be held accountable for. That West, or his writer, failed to acknowledge this calls into question just how honest or introspective he was here.

Another inconsistency is how West talks about being humble and not talking about himself, but then repeatedly humble brags his way through the entire book: he name drops, boasts about how pretty his jumper was, and can't even resist hijacking a conversation with a researcher to talk about his own injuries. He acknowledges having an ego and being thin-skinned, but fails to take any accountability for being a borderline diva.

And one section in particular left me with a bad taste: his comments on therapy. He has some strong views that therapy, at least for him, was something he felt he should be able to handle on his own and that, in his experience, people who have gone to therapy for years aren't any different. For a person who claims to have and displays a strong amount of empathy, this felt like another area where West has either transitioned into a

curmudgeon or just fails to see the callousness of his comments.

Incongruences aside, I enjoyed this book. There's interesting basketball stuff here like his relationship (or lack thereof) with Phil Jackson, including his perspective on the infamous "Jerry, get the fuck out!" outburst from Phil. There's an anecdote about Red Auerbach trying to acquire West coming out of college in exchange for Bill Sharman (eventual Lakers coach) becoming the Lakers coach which, if that happens, it makes for one hell of a butterfly effect. There's an entire section where players from the Showtime Lakers offer what appear to be unfiltered comments on West.

The book probably has a bit less basketball than some people would like, but there's still a compelling story here. And for all West's attempts to exorcise some of these demons, I walked away thinking he, like most of us, is susceptible to his own blind spots – it just so happens that they're as outsized as his life of gaudy accomplishments. That he did write this book, this attempt at sorting through his own demons, and yet still walked away with an at times brutally inconsistent view of himself makes him more compelling to me.

Carlton Moore says

One of the best, and most honest, memoirs I've ever come across. Helped me understand human nature which is all I can ask for.

Tim Barlow says

A good mix of NBA History, West's personal life/achievements, as well as a good discussion on how he has dealt with depression throughout his whole life despite his many accomplishments. West certainly has a unique perspective on things and it's interesting to learn about all the personal relationships he's had over the years with notable figures throughout NBA history, as well as the impact he has had on the game as a player and executive.

Joel says

Jerry West aptly earned the nickname "Mr. Clutch" for handling the pressure in the waning moments of a big game. But after reading his recent autobiography, one might also call him "Mr. Angst" for his inability to feel comfortable in his own skin off the court. Who knew that cool cat was so troubled? And it's this naked unveiling that captivates in "West by West: My Charmed, Tormented Life."

His unhappy childhood, which included an abusive father and the early death of a beloved brother, is something he still grapples with and the reader senses his catharsis in the writing. He talks of just wanting to disappear and admits to suffering from depression--quelling his pain with medication. At times, though, it just appears he's a humble introvert who found himself mired in a public life more suited to an extroverted personality. And despite basketball being his savior and escape hatch, he is still to this day haunted by all of those losses to the Celtics in the Finals (poor Jerry!).

It's mostly a modest account, but he does manage to mention more than once that he's the one to always pick

up the check. And describes what an ass he was for walking out on his own surprise party, but slips in that the employee who arranged it always felt he was the best boss ever. There's lots of moaning and groaning throughout, but it's countered with the positive as well. In the end, you get the feeling West has bared his soul honestly.

On personal note, the book brought back a painful memory of my own. Back in 1970, my family moved just a few blocks from Jerry West's home. It was a modest neighborhood for an NBA superstar to be living--he would move not long after to a ritzier part of town.

I was a timid 10-year-old at the time, and West's home had a mystery akin to Boo Radley's house in "To Kill a Mockingbird." What went on in there?

At the neighborhood park, as it turned out, I became somewhat friendly with West's son David, who was the same age as me. Then one day, he invited me over to his house. I was stunned, and pitifully terrified, by the invitation. Any other kid would have jumped at the opportunity--Jerry West was a god in LA in 1970.

But with an inexplicable fear, I declined. It eats away at me to this day. Fear of the unknown can be a debilitating and ugly thing.

Daniel says

The strangest sports autobiography I've read, and I've read quite a few. West is one of the greatest basketball players and executives in history, and this book gives insight into essentially none of that. Want to know details behind the Lakers 33-game winning streak in '71-'72? His philosophy behind building championship teams? Won't get that. You will get a long list of his petty grievances and slights he can't get over. Not arranged in chronological order, and barely organized by theme. I ended up feeling so sad for him, that someone so much can be so deeply unhappy. It takes some courage to bare that in a book. But that alone doesn't make the book any good.

Chris says

The only reason I read this book through to the end is because of how iconic Jerry West is. Really, this was not a good book. Poorly written and reads more like a 300 page journal entry.

Jon Mills says

This book candidly reveals the struggles of Jerry West from early childhood until today. I enjoyed the insights and inside history. The book jumped around and could have been better written

Jeff Alexy says

Very interesting life and stories but it's clear that it's an autobiography (or maybe just poorly edited?). There are some slow parts and several parts that should have been cut out or rewritten. But there was still a lot of good material.

David says

Jerry West was a basketball legend...one of the greatest. It's a shame that he had to tarnish that legend with this self-serving, poor-little-millionaire memoir. I suppose it was cathartic for him to participate in the creation of the book (with the help of the talented Jon Coleman) but reading it made me feel more like Jetty's shrink than one of his readers.

Drive your Ferrari out to the country club and tell you golfing pals what a rough deal life dealt you, Mr. West, 'cause your whining fell on deaf ears here.

Jim Swike says

An excellent autobiography. However, he focuses mostly on his post playing career. I would have loved to learn more about the Hall of Fame player. Maybe you will feel differently. Enjoy!

Lance says

Rating:

3 of 5 stars (okay)

Review:

Today in our celebrity-obsessed culture it can be forgotten that entertainers and athletes can be human too. One of the greatest basketball players of all time, Jerry West, shows his humanity in this candid autobiography written with Jonathan Coleman. He not only shares his flaws with readers, but also does not make excuses nor shows regret for how his life turned out. Nonetheless, West manages to put together a book that is equal parts basketball and personal revelations that will leave the reader in various emotional states.

While he has been driven throughout his basketball career as both a player as for the Los Angeles Lakers and later as a coach and general manager for the Lakers and Memphis Grizzlies, he reveals himself to be a person who has a hard time getting close to others, would succumb to depression and had a hard time dealing with the death of his brother, who was killed in action serving in the Korean War.

For readers who want to know a lot about his basketball career, there surprisingly was little mention of this by West in the book. Yes, he does discuss the 1971-72 season when the Lakers won it all and some of the

disappointment when the Lakers would often finish second to the Boston Celtics several years in the 1960's. He spends more time talking about his relationships with team owner Jerry Buss and the coaches (Phil Jackson) and players (especially Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant) during his time as the general manager of the Lakers. This was a disappointment to me as I didn't get to see West in his prime as a player, and I would have liked to learn more about that time in his life.

He does spend an inordinate amount of time talking about his flaws – everything from the failure of his first marriage to his inability to get close to people. Of course, he talks about the abuse he suffered from his father and how he succumbed to some of the temptations that every professional athlete encounters. These passages can be depressing at times. This is not meant to be interpreted as West is feeling sorry for himself. Rather, he is exposing himself for all to see.

Overall, this is an enormous undertaking for the man whose silhouette is the logo of the NBA. It cannot be easy to bare one's soul as West does in this book. However, the manner in which this is told is very choppy and does not flow very well. Basketball fans who want to learn more about West's career would do better to search elsewhere, but readers who want to delve into the mind of the man nicknamed "Mr. Logo" might enjoy this one.

Pace of the book:

Good overall. While at times the book shifts back and forth between West's basketball career and his personal life without following a timeline, it reads fairly well and at a good pace. Because of the lack of a timeline, it feels choppy during some chapter. At times it also can be tough to read because the reader can feel West's pain, but it doesn't slow the book down.

Do I recommend?

Yes, despite the lukewarm rating. Fans of the NBA or of West will certainly be interested in the book but readers who may not be sports fans but instead want to delve into the psyche of a driven man will also enjoy this book.

Ann Hunt says

What a tormented jock-and he was an outstanding athlete. I wish he would have seen a counselor to deal with his demons.

Michael says

Interesting musings by JW on his own path to basketball greatness and glory, less focused on the juicy Lakers/NBA anecdotes you might be hoping for, and more on his own internal struggle to overcome self-doubt and relate to any of the people around him.

James Swenson says

It was interesting to learn more about West's remarkable career, which was before my time. As a memoir,

though, this seemed disorganized and disjointed. West (and his ghostwriter) was allowed to describe himself rather than revealing his personality in the course of telling his story. Unfortunately, it became hard for me to trust this flawed character's judgment of himself.

Dale Bennett says

If you like basketball. . . a must read! But book goes into so much more.
