

## BOOKS

# A Feminist's 'Marilyn'

Gloria Steinem explores the real woman that hid inside the bombshell persona

For many, Gloria Steinem remains the most visible feminist of her generation. At 52, she still edits *Ms.* magazine, which she helped found in 1971. Recently Steinem published her third book, *"Marilyn"* (Henry Holt, 182 pages, \$24.95), a biographical essay on Marilyn Monroe with accompanying photos by George Barris. Paula Chin of NEWSWEEK ON CAMPUS spoke to Steinem about her recent work and about the current status of the women's movement.

**NEWSWEEK:** What attracted you to Marilyn?

**STEINEM:** Where to begin? There were many fascinating questions and mysteries. Why is she so appealing, and as well known now as she was during her lifetime, even among young people who may never have seen one of her movies? She is a cult figure whom we see in advertisements, memorabilia, imitators like Madonna. She's very current—why? Why do men and women feel so protective toward her? Why this obsession—and not just here but in Europe? There were all these public questions, and there were also private questions. I am certainly old enough to have seen many of her films, and I was embarrassed by her: she seemed a victim, vulnerable, a joke; she was what I feared a woman had to be. It wasn't until later—and courtesy of whatever you want to call the change and understanding that comes from feminism—that I began to realize that to blame her for that was blaming the victim, that she was playing a role women were rewarded for playing. So I became much more curious about the real person, the real Norma Jeane inside Marilyn.

**Do you consider this book to be a feminist response to largely sexist biographies?**

Yes, though I hasten to add that men can be just as feminist as women... for instance, Norman Rosten, a poet and friend of hers, wrote a very good book. But on the other end of the spectrum is the Norman Mailer book, which is more about Norman and his fantasies of a

sexual goddess than about Marilyn. While that is part of her appeal, that isn't the reason women have rescue fantasies about her. We tend to wonder if we might not have helped her, what would have happened if she had had women friends, if she hadn't died before there was some kind of support for women being individuals. She wanted so much to be taken seriously; her last words in one of her last interviews were exactly that: 'Don't make me a joke.'

**Don't you feel, however, that there are contradictions between the sexy photos in the book and your feminist text?**

I don't think there is as much a contradiction as there would have been if we'd used some of the photographs of her that have appeared in the past. These are

**'Don't make me a joke': Monroe**

GEORGE BARRIS



THOMAS VICTOR

**Icon on icon:** Steinem analyzes sex goddess

somewhat more sensitive and pensive. There is some contradiction—but there was for her, too; her insides and her outsides were different... I can only hope that if people pick the book up for the wrong reasons they will come away with a different understanding of her.

**In the last chapter of the book you ask who might Marilyn be now. What is your answer?**

If she had lived to be 60, which she would have been now, she would have had to grow beyond, or lose some of her dependency on, her external, artificial self. Who would Norma Jeane have become is the question... I hope that the women's movement would have helped her refuse to be a victim.

**How do you regard the state of the American women's movement today?**

I will generalize and take a historical view... It was only half a century ago that women were still objects, were ownable, were still chattel. That is an extraordinary victory. Having won a legal identity, now we're trying to get legal and social equality... We're about 15 years into this wave, we're just beginning. In this beginning we have accomplished a lot. First of all, we have pretty much disproven the notion that women's [inferior] position