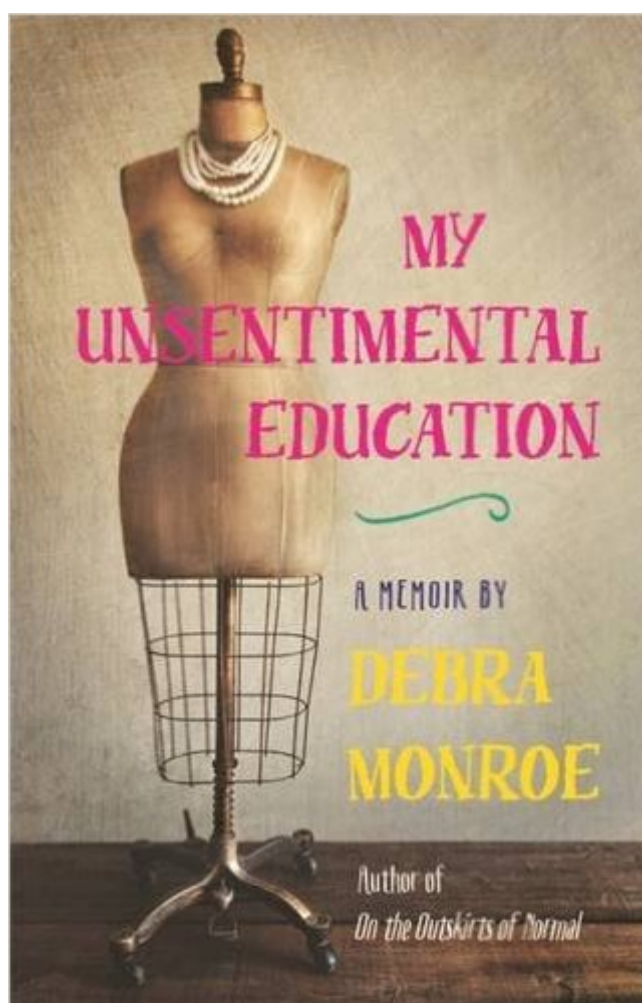


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My Unsentimental Education (Crux: The Georgia Series In Literary Nonfiction) (Crux: The Georgia Series In Literary Nonfiction Ser.)



Synopsis

A misfit in Spooner, Wisconsin, with its farms, bars, and strip joints, Debra Monroe leaves to earn a degree, then another, and another, and builds a career if only because her plans to be a midwestern housewife continually get scuttled. Fearless but naive, she vaults over class barriers but never quite leaves her past behind. When it comes to men, she's still blue collar. Negotiating the world of dating, Monroe pays careful attention to what love and sex mean to a woman ambivalent about her newfound status as liberated. Both the story of her steady rise into the professional class and a parallel history of unsuitable exes, this memoir reminds us how accidental even a good life can be. If Joan Didion advises us to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, Monroe takes this advice a step further and nods at the people she might have become but didn't. Funny, poignant, wise, *My Unsentimental Education* explores the confusion that ensues when a working-class girl ends up far from where she began.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's not an unusual story. A mid-twentieth century family has low aspirations for themselves and even lower for their daughters. Get married. Find yourself a good man who will take care of you. The standard high school graduation present—a typewriter. Mine was. So was Debra Monroe's. A girl needs to learn to type so if she has to work when she finishes having the babies. The end. But not for Monroe. "Sometimes you go sideways or down before you go up," Monroe says. She certainly did. Sideways, down, up, and around in circles as she moved

through her life. Always, always with her eye on up. I practically became dizzy with the adventures, the wins, the setbacks. Still, like Monroe, I kept going. A great story teller, Monroe picks her tales so that her narrative stays fast moving and upbeat even through the drinking, the pot, the rough times with parents, and the rougher ones with spouses. How could this story ever have a happy ending? I'll tell you and I'm not giving it away—the author's biography also tells us. Today, that once erratic, troubled high schooler is using her typing skills to write books. And more, as an MFA professor she teaches others to get their own words down. I knew Monroe had brought her life to an even keel because several years ago I read her moving account of adopting her daughter in her memoir, *On the Outskirts of Normal*. I recommend that book as a companion to this one. They complement and don't repeat.

This is an incredible story told with grace, humor, and sentences that delight. Fans of Mary Karr will appreciate Monroe's wit, as well as her ability to invite us into the life she works to create for herself after leaving home. Any reader who grew up to become the first in their families to view higher education as an opportunity to find fulfillment outside of small, working-class towns will read Monroe while nodding and smiling. Reading this book feels like reading a letter from a friend, one who has lived a life and will be honest about its brightest moments as well as its darkest places.

What a fine book. Not just beautifully written, but so fresh and insightful and so funny. One of the things I most admire about it is the way she captures so precisely and with so much insight how it feels to make life-changing decisions when it seems like you can see all the way to the horizon, but really are only looking down the block. How what seems urgent and necessary and even rational in the moment later turns out to have been something else entirely. I don't think I ever read anything else that got that so right. What it feels like both in the moment of decision and later when you look back on it. No so much "what was I thinking," but "why on earth was I thinking that?" In particular, it's amazing how Monroe manages to capture the charm of her Midwestern landlady or the menace of a shiftless ex-husband without hitting a single stale note. For some reason, it has really come home to me lately how growing up poor and rural left me unprepared for the larger world—like I was brought up in a place stranded forty years behind the rest of America—so Monroe's struggle to integrate Spooner, Wisconsin with the academic world seemed very real to me. The thing, though, is that she looks back on it with less grief or regret than sheer wonder. That seems very right to me. By the way, the cover might suggest that this is a book aimed strictly at women, but I think anyone who has tried to navigate adult life in a

changing world can identify with Monroe's story. My absolute favorite for a long time.

There's a line early in the book a brothel burning to the ground when an prostitute fell asleep while making a grilled sandwich on a steam iron. That line demonstrates the joyful pleasure this book takes in storytelling. Monroe's voice is so engaging and so attuned to the ways that the absurd can become commonplace in small towns. A pleasure to read.

Full disclosure: I'm a sucker. A sucker for memoir; for underdogs; for 'Small-town Misfit Navigates Big Wide World' narratives; for authentic, unselfconscious narration of sex and LSD trips ("LSD is best taken in glorious weather when you aren't jostling for power with your boyfriend, I decided."). I am a sponge for a life's worth of honestly-earned, and generously dispensed wisdom, and I am a sucker for the serendipitous. How fortunate I stumbled upon Debra Monroe's new memoir, "My Unsentimental Education," satisfying all those cravings? Monroe's tale of growing up in Spooner, WI and meandering from working class roots to a PhD, writing awards and multiple books, exudes a heartbreakingly honest truth and matter-of-fact authenticity. Unsentimental. No apologies. Early, Monroe's staccato sentences flit from detail to detail across verdant meadows of her childhood, sexual awakening and constant effort to find her way in a world neither woman- or smart-shaped. Memories of the early years are recounted in hundreds of tiny snippets, lofted gossamer of visual fragments, smells, impacts, comments -- delicately tossed tinsel giving shape and nuance to an ordinary tree. Why should the memoir be the territory of the rich and famous, or the self-serving recovery addict? The years go by, and the off-beat rhythm continues. More recent, more powerful memories are recorded more intensely and precisely, with a pointillist focus; clear targeted dot by dot application ... a little here, a little there, rapidly... I follow, intrigued by every dot, not sure how it makes sense, and then am blown away when the full picture is artfully revealed at chapter's end. I grew up an intellectual outsider in the middle of nowhere, like Monroe, accumulating successes that began to weigh heavy in a community more focused on alfalfa farming and copper mines than on philosophy. So her story of escaping briefly to a writers' camp, where her gift was suddenly at home, struck a particularly raw, empathic nerve with me. She discovered at the camp she was not as alone as perhaps she thought, and for an intoxicating first time was lauded for her precocious skill. Leaving the camp was her first hangover:... "That night, my parents arrived to take me home. They'd been confused by the whole episode, that I'd wanted to go, that I'd won a prize. They were used to prizes for best jam, best sales record for radial tires in the tristate area, best football playing -- not best

use of figurative language. We drove under interstate overpasses that seemed like cattle gates, one after another hanging over me as I passed through the chute toward home."Like the needlepoint hobby she intersperses in the narrative, Monroe slowly stitched together her education in a crazy-quilt path to a PhD and beyond. Progressing through this later arc the writing becomes more complex, sentences longer. I don't know if this evolution of sentence structure is intentional, but it reflects the evolution of this unconventional woman making her way in the world, by any means necessary, but mostly through hard work, an eye for the quirky, an unremitting love of language and keen awareness the life she would have would be the life she would make for herself."My Unsentimental Education" is matter of fact; not dramatic, competitive recovery-porn, like so many recent memoirs. The title of this meticulously told, thoughtful memoir could not be more perfect distillation of the voice and story within.

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