



Series: My best shot

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Lawrence Schiller's best photograph: Marilyn Monroe

"You're going to make me famous," I said. "Photographers can be replaced," replied Marilyn'

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Interview by Sarah Phillips
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 30 May 2012 09.11 EDT
Comments (108)



Marilyn Monroe in 1962 ... Lawrence Schiller's best shot. Photograph: Laurence Schiller/1996-98 AccuSoft Inc. Click on image to enlarge.

I first photographed Marilyn Monroe in 1960. I was 23 and not yet a very good photographer. By 1962, when Paris Match magazine asked me to shoot her again, I had won awards and was better – but I had a bigger ego, too.

She was filming what would be her last movie, *Something's Got to Give*. I read the screenplay in advance, and discovered that in one scene she would jump into a swimming pool and then pretend to have no clothes on. I saw Marilyn before the shoot and she was upset that she was getting \$100,000 for the movie while Elizabeth Taylor was getting more from the same studio. She said something like: "What would happen if I jumped in with a bathing suit on, and actually came out with nothing on?" Her press agent said: "You're kidding." She wasn't. I was cocky in those days and said: "You're already famous – now you're going to make me famous." "Photographers can always be replaced, Larry," she said.

When she jumped into the water with her bathing suit on, I looked at her as if she were an athlete. My adrenaline was going. She was moving so quickly there wasn't time to focus the camera, so I had to anticipate what she would do next. In a lot of my pictures of Marilyn, her body is always to one side, because I needed to have room for what she might do with the rest of the shot. This was always my favourite. I still get a little laugh inside me when I look at it.

When the shoot was over, I rang the magazine and it hit me: wow, she did it! I realised at the same moment how desperate she was. When she had nothing left, to prove that she could still get more publicity than anybody else, out came the birthday suit again.

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Marilyn approved certain pictures, and they went all over the world. I had no ethical qualms about that; she could have changed her mind. But I had no sense of history and threw the rest away.

She was fired from the film and died several months later. I couldn't believe it. I rushed to her house, then the mortuary and went into journalistic mode. I was there to capture events. A photographer owes it to history not to get emotionally involved. My 10-year-old daughter said of this picture, "It says everything but shows nothing." Even a child could work out the innocence and desperation it captures.

CV

Born: Brooklyn, New York, 1936.

Studied: Studied architecture and business in California. Self-taught photographer

Influences: Yousuf Karsh, W. Eugene Smith, Elliott Erwitt

High point: Becoming a filmmaker. I directed [The Executioner's Song](#), based on my interaction with a murder.

Low point: In 1990, I gambled all my money on a film about Chernobyl and lost everything, including my wife.

Top tip: Don't be like all the other monkeys. Find a way of expressing your own personality.

• Lawrence Schiller is at [Walton Fine Arts, London SW3](#) until 23 June. *Marilyn & Me* is published by Taschen.

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pgzats
30 May 2012 3:27PM

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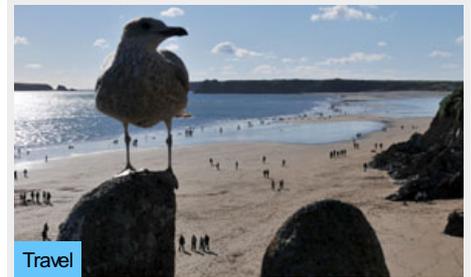
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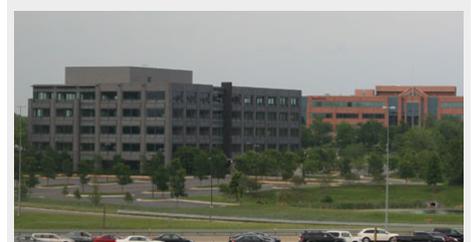
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Marilyn Monroe was an ACTRESS not an actor, exactly as a woman is not a man and the Queen is not a King.

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CremasterSevens
30 May 2012 3:30PM

Great pic, great interview.

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HeyAnonnyNonny
30 May 2012 3:36PM

I agree, actress is not a gender-specific word in any derogatory sense, like commedienne or mistress.

Wasn't there a Guardian obit once in which a notorious womaniser was described as sleeping with lots of actors?

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Zakelius
30 May 2012 3:36PM

Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:27PM

Get with the times, daddy-o.

[Recommend?](#) (85)

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Zakelius
30 May 2012 3:38PM

Response to [HeyAnonnyNonny](#), 30 May 2012 3:36PM

How is *commedienne* derogatory?

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afish
30 May 2012 3:38PM

@pgzats: and you, presumably, are an anachronism

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[Responses](#) (1)

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HeyAnonnyNonny
30 May 2012 3:44PM

The role of a stand-up comic is neutral, therefore there is no need to distinguish between a man and a woman. In acting, the gender of the protagonist is invariably relevant, and it is rare that a male will play a female or vice versa, so it's correct to apply a distinction - it clarifies, rather than demeans.

I notice the Guardian is stringent with 'actor/actress' but frequently makes reference, less justifiably, to policemen and firemen, when the gender-neutral police officer or fire-fighter would be more appropriate

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ThomasOMalley
30 May 2012 3:45PM

Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:27PM

Careful, that basic grasp of common sense is a thought crime round these parts.

[Recommend?](#) (51)

[Responses](#) (0)

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Dzierzega
30 May 2012 3:46PM

Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:27PM

Marilyn Monroe was an ACTRESS not an actor, exactly as a woman is not a man and the Queen is not a King.

Agreed.

How is the word actress sexist? If it didn't exist it would probably be invented by the very people who want to abolish it.

The idea that language is responsible for sexism is a ridiculous relic of theories that

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World news

Bilderberg 2012: the technocrats are rising at this year's annual conference

were discredited decades ago.



afish
30 May 2012 3:49PM

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The gender of actors may be significant to you, but that doesn't mean it is for everyone or that it necessarily has to be. It is perfectly feasible to argue that the term 'actor' describes an individual in a particular professional capacity that is unrelated to gender, insofar as that 'acting' is the same process regardless of whether it is performed by a woman or a man, or a transgender individual for that matter.



TrinityX
30 May 2012 3:51PM

[Recommend?](#) (11)

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Excellent comments on the merits of the word "actress"!

applauds loudly in wholehearted agreement



pgzats
30 May 2012 3:54PM

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Response to [afish](#), 30 May 2012 3:38PM

@pgzats: and you, presumably, are an anachronism

I'm sorry but you are wrong, I live full immersed in the present time but I simply cannot stand silliness and if there are people, most of them women of course, that have decided that an actress must be called actor for sexist reasons..... well I think that is ridiculous and silly.



pubbore
30 May 2012 3:56PM

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Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:27PM

Neither 'actress' nor 'actor' appear anywhere in this article, so why are you bringing that up now?



Zakelius
30 May 2012 3:56PM

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I'm reminded of the clip of the beauty queen who, when asked about her future plans, said she wanted to concentrate on her *actressing*.



pgzats
30 May 2012 3:58PM

[Recommend?](#) (7)

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Response to [pubbore](#), 30 May 2012 3:56PM

Neither 'actress' nor 'actor' appear anywhere in this article, so why are you bringing that up now?

because it's in the front page!



owaingr
30 May 2012 3:59PM

[Recommend?](#) (17)

[Responses](#) (0)

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Why not *actrix*?



afish
30 May 2012 3:59PM

[Recommend?](#) (24)

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@pgzats: I understand how it can look silly, but I think that is only because we live in a world where gender distinction, even where it serves no obvious purpose, is so normalized. I think it is also interesting that efforts to move away from relying on gender specific terminology often provoke quite impassioned responses. It seems

to touch a nerve for many people.



HeyAnonnyNonny
30 May 2012 4:01PM

[Recommend?](#) (26)

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Ah, from the Guardian style guide:

"As always, use common sense: a piece about the late film director Carlo Ponti was edited to say that in his early career he was "already a man with a good eye for pretty actors ... "As the readers' editor pointed out in the subsequent clarification: "This was one of those occasions when the word 'actresses' might have been used"



pubbore
30 May 2012 4:01PM

[Recommend?](#) (20)

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Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:58PM

Ah, sorry. For what it's worth I agree with you, but I can't get that worked up about it. There are worse crimes being perpetrated on the English language - if I see the word 'chillax' one more time my head is going to explode.



TrinityX
30 May 2012 4:01PM

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Response to [afish](#), 30 May 2012 3:49PM

Apart from this one.

The gender of actors (taking the word in as 3rd person plural) is vastly important: unless the director wants to make some kind of creative statement, men are cast as men and women as women. Therefore it matters if you're casting a male or female actor.

However, if you're going to distinguish between male and female actors, then it's grammatically correct (and far less cumbersome) to call them actors and actresses.

But this paper rarely refers to "male actors" and "female actors", but to "actors" and "female actors". This places women very clearly in a subordinate position to men and is therefore derogatory (suggesting women are less important) and offensive.



afish
30 May 2012 4:02PM

[Recommend?](#) (26)

[Responses](#) (3)

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It's an old argument, but imagine if there were distinct words for black actor - blactor perhaps. Black actors always play black roles, just as women always play women, so what's the difference?



Dunnyboy
30 May 2012 4:05PM

[Recommend?](#) (13)

[Responses](#) (0)

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Response to [HeyAnonnyNonny](#), 30 May 2012 3:36PM

Wasn't there a Guardian obit once in which a notorious womaniser was described as sleeping with lots of actors?

I think you'll find that he was actually a *personiser*.

I tell ya, it's political correctness gone mad (or as we prefer to say these days "experiencing mental health issues").



Dunnyboy
30 May 2012 4:06PM

[Recommend?](#) (9)

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In that picture, is that all one woman? Are you sure the leg doesn't belong to someone else?



andrewjackson17
30 May 2012 4:08PM

[Recommend?](#) (19)

[Responses](#) (0)

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His lowest point was losing everything, including his wife?

Surely throwing out nude pictures of Marilyn Monroe would be his low point?

I weep.



CheererUpper

30 May 2012 4:08PM

Response to [pubbore](#), 30 May 2012 4:01PM

Hey [pubbore](#), chillax already.

Sorry about your head!

[Recommend?](#) (5)

[Responses](#) (1)

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Dzierzega

30 May 2012 4:09PM

Response to [afish](#), 30 May 2012 4:02PM

It's an old argument, but imagine if there were distinct words for black actor - blactor perhaps. Black actors always play black roles, just as women always play women, so what's the difference?

But there isn't so nobody is attempting to disfigure our language by abolishing it.

There are some people who think it is racist to describe a person as black. We need to stop the euphemism carousel and tackle the underlying problem - then the quirks of language will be irrelevant.

[Recommend?](#) (12)

[Responses](#) (0)

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martytohero

30 May 2012 4:09PM

Guardian
pick

What a boring debate...

Nice photo. Read 'Blonde' by Joyce Carol Oates recently. Very sad. How dreadfully us men treated poor Marilyn.

[Recommend?](#) (35)

[Responses](#) (1)

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ThomasOMalley

30 May 2012 4:13PM

Response to [afish](#), 30 May 2012 3:59PM

I think it is also interesting that efforts to move away from relying on gender specific terminology often provoke quite impassioned responses. It seems to touch a nerve for many people.

These efforts are usually laughably ham-fisted, and recall the days of 'womyn' and 'herstory'. It's not that they touch a nerve, they're just goofy at best. Plus, I hate to see someone effectively given persona-non-grata status for using a term which is used by the vast majority of people (including the Oscars and the Baftas) without any notion of controversy, but is suddenly controversial on The Guardian website.

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[Responses](#) (1)

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afish

30 May 2012 4:16PM

@Dzierzega: I think you are missing the point, but life's too short to take this any further.

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[Responses](#) (0)

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Mmmmf

30 May 2012 4:18PM

Oh, I'm confused.

If it is demeaning to use the word 'actress' and preferable to replace it with the word 'actor', hitherto only used for the male gender, then logically we should abolish the word 'women' and refer to everyone as 'men'.

Anyway, nice photo. Beautiful contrast between water colour and naked flesh.

[Recommend?](#) (11)

[Responses](#) (3)

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Gelion

30 May 2012 4:25PM

Guardian
pick

Looking at the picture I had forgotten how breathtakingly good looking Marilyn was.

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[Responses](#) (1)

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And also a very fine thespian in both drama and comedy- see what I did there? I completely avoided the actor / actress debate above.



HeyAnonnyNonny
30 May 2012 4:26PM

Response to [ThomasOMalley](#), 30 May 2012 4:13PM

This is just it - it's widely accepted by the mainstream that actor and actress are perfectly equal terms in which the differentiation is relevant to the profession

There's no implication in actor and actress that one is doing the job that ought to be done by the other, as there is with out-dated terms like 'Woman Police Constable' or 'male nurse'

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GreenRevolution
30 May 2012 4:36PM

I first photographed Marilyn Monroe in 1960. I was 23 and not yet a very good photographer

How the hell did you manage to do that?

When she jumped into the water with her bathing suit on, I looked at her as if she were an athlete

How did you stop your hands from shaking? You must have an inbuilt stabilizer.

Athlete? Did you mean a sex bomb or a real olympian?

I still get a little laugh inside me when I look at it.

No comment

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atmhso
30 May 2012 4:41PM

What sort of photographer throws photos away! In particular, photos of Marilyn Monroe.

I see in the 'CV, money was an issue for Lawrence Schiller. Had he possessed and sold but a single totally exclusive photo of Marilyn, I suspect he would have done just fine.

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pubbore
30 May 2012 4:41PM

Response to [CheererUpper](#), 30 May 2012 4:08PM

You are a total, total... a word has yet to be invented for what a total whatever-it-is you are, but you are one, and a total, total one at that.

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pgzats
30 May 2012 4:42PM

Response to [Mmmmf](#), 30 May 2012 4:18PM

then logically we should abolish the word 'women' and refer to everyone as 'men'.

Exactly. :-) But I don't think the feminists will agree. :-D

[Recommend?](#) (3)

[Responses](#) (1)

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phaine
30 May 2012 4:44PM

Only Guardian readers would take an article about a naked Marilyn Monroe and talk about the sexist/non-sexist use of the term 'actress'.

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pgzats
30 May 2012 4:56PM

Response to [phaine](#), 30 May 2012 4:44PM

[Recommend?](#) (3)

[Responses](#) (0)

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Only Guardian readers would take an article about a naked Marilyn Monroe and talk about the sexist/non-sexist use of the term 'actress'.

Well, it has been provoked by the front page that says:
Lawrence Schiller on shooting the actor on her last movie in 1962.



XcryptO

30 May 2012 5:06PM

I am not a native English speaker thus I want to know more about the issue discussed in comments (as well as I am concerned the word actor is not in context). I sometimes use the word actor for women. I know that there is word for it but actor does not sound that bad. Is it totally incorrect? thank you in advance.

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blaggard

30 May 2012 5:09PM

Pubbore wins today thanks to the Rimmer quote.

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[Responses](#) (0)

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Jazzactivist

30 May 2012 5:21PM

Guardian
pick

Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:27PM

FGS pgzats. If Sweden can introduce a gender-neutral pronoun into the Swedish language to suit modern times then we can surely say "actor" in English for both men and women. Or are you really trying to say that an "actress" is different to an "actor" in her knowledge, skills, experience and attitude within the acting profession?

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[Responses](#) (1)

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Jazzactivist

30 May 2012 5:24PM

Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 4:42PM

Again what a load of traditionalist tripe, pgzats. Whether MM was a woman acting a part or a man acting a part makes no difference to the quality of the photograph. It is intriguing and perfectly captures the increasingly wild sensuality of the era.

[Recommend?](#) (6)

[Responses](#) (0)

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CheererUpper

30 May 2012 5:27PM

Response to [pubbore](#), 30 May 2012 4:41PM

You are a total, total... a word has yet to be invented for what a total whatever-it-is you are, but you are one, and a total, total one at that.

I know. I'm very special.

[Recommend?](#) (4)

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kathfromcardiff

30 May 2012 5:27PM

Putting aside the whole actor/actress thing and actually reading the article - I'm intrigued that Lawrence Schiller appears to have undergone an epiphany in the months between photographing Marilyn

I had no sense of history and threw the rest away.

and her death

A photographer owes it to history not to get emotionally involved.

I wonder what brought that about?

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Polymorph

30 May 2012 5:29PM

The actor/actress discussion makes a change from the usual 'that's your best shot, I could have done better with my Instamatic' style of comment that usually litters this series.

Still, it seems to have run its course as a subject so I'll just say I think this is a good

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shot with the perennial fascinations of Marilyn and nudity combined to tantalising and chaste effect. Clever, especially as the lighting and colour work well. Reading between the lines I'm assuming that the lighting is from the film setup - he talks of being at the shoot and the light doesn't seem as harsh as flash and seems to be coming from above rather than from near the photographer's position.



pgzats

30 May 2012 5:37PM

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Response to [Jazzactivist](#), 30 May 2012 5:21PM

Or are you really trying to say that an "actress" is different to an "actor" in her knowledge, skills, experience and attitude within the acting profession?

When I write a comment I do not *try* to say anything more than what I actually wrote. If there are people that want to read into my words other things.... well, I cannot prevent this to happen.....



ClareLondon

30 May 2012 5:41PM

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Response to [pgzats](#), 30 May 2012 3:27PM

Marilyn Monroe was an ACTRESS not an actor, exactly as a woman is not a man and the Queen is not a King

Look, the **job** is 'Actor'.

The **person** is either an *actor* or *actress*.

It's not that hard. It depends on context, which term you use.

Firefighter is generic, as someone above says and equivalent to 'actor'. The only difference is that there is no further gender-specific term to describe *male* or *female* firefighters.

There are many vocations which don't have gender specific names for the people who do the craft.

Except, possibly, in ballet, where you have the generic 'ballet-dancer' to denote the craft, and then 'ballerina' or 'ballerino' for the male dancer (the last not in common use).

I think this is all a non-argument. All perfectly clear to me.



SarahPhillips

30 May 2012 5:43PM



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Response to [atmhso](#), 30 May 2012 4:41PM

Schiller threw out the pictures that Monroe did not approve, which seems quite an admirable, ethical decision to have made. There were plenty of images available from the shoot anyway.



SarahPhillips

30 May 2012 5:46PM



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Re. actor/actress, as [@HeyAnonnyNonny](#) out it's [Guardian style](#)



alonsofan

30 May 2012 5:48PM

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"Actress" indicates a female actor and "actor" a male - this saves me a lot of confusion. It's ridiculous all this equality shit and sometimes I think it goes too far.

Feminist will one day be the female's downfall.

I'm a (wo)man by the way.

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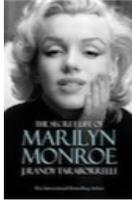
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