When We Were Brilliant

by Lynn Cullen



About the Book

They were an unlikely pair --- a blond bombshell and a photographer determined to be taken seriously --- but Marilyn Monroe and Eve Arnold would make a deal that would change their lives in this dazzling new novel from the nationally bestselling author of MRS. POE and THE WOMAN WITH THE CURE.

In 1952, Norma Jeane Baker follows documentary photographer Eve Arnold into a powder room on the night they first meet. She has a proposition for her. Norma Jeane created Marilyn Monroe to be photographed, and she wants Eve to do it. Eve is better than anyone she?s seen at revealing a person?s inner truth. Together they can help each other. Together, she says, they can make something brilliant.

Skeptical of this cipher of a young woman, Eve demurs. She?s looking for more serious subjects than this ambitious starlet. But she keeps getting drawn back into Marilyn?s orbit, and the women come to recognize something in each other --- something fundamental. Nothing will get in the way of what they want, and when Marilyn?s star takes off to teetering heights, neither will ever be the same.

A lavish and transporting novel, WHEN WE WERE BRILLIANT captures the halcyon days of an icon and the grit of women determining their own futures as it explores the exceptional and complicated friendship between Marilyn Monroe and Eve Arnold.

Discussion Guide

1. What impressions of Marilyn Monroe did you have before reading this novel? Did this story change your perception of her at all?

2. Had you seen any of Eve Arnold?s photographs of Marilyn Monroe before reading this book? If you looked at any

while reading, did you recognize them? Many people claim they can tell that a photograph of Marilyn was taken by Eve before seeing the photographer?s name. Do you see that to be true? Why or why not?

3. Did you know that Marilyn had endometriosis? How do you think it changed the course of her life, career and happiness?

4. If any, which of Marilyn Monroe?s movies have you seen? Now that you know more about Marilyn?s state of mind while she filmed some
of her biggest films, do you think about her talent differently? Are there any films you?d like to watch again or for the first time?

5. Do you think our society?s treatment of celebrities, in particular female celebrities, has changed much since Marilyn?s time?

6. Eve captured many historically significant moments during her photography career, but she feared being best known for her photographs of Marilyn Monroe. Do you think being ?Marilyn?s photographer? detracted from her other work? Why do you think she viewed that designation as limiting?

7. Eve struggled with feeling like an absentee parent, but her sense of purpose in her career ultimately took precedence. What example might she have set for Francis? How has being a working mother changed from her era to today?

8. Marilyn had quite a few high-profile romantic relationships. How did her identity shift based on each man? Did you think any of the men she chose had a positive influence on her life? Why do you think she pursued relationships with each of them?

9. Marilyn dreamed of having a child. How do you think her life might have been different if her dream had been realized? What was it about her own childhood that made her so eager to be a parent?

10. What about Eve?s and Marilyn?s childhoods allowed them to connect with each other the way that they did? Why do you think it was so hard for each of them to build meaningful relationships otherwise?

11. Do you think Eve made the right decision in embargoing her photographs of Marilyn after Marilyn?s death? Do you think the conversation around Marilyn would have been different had Eve released the photos then? Do you think the discussion about Marilyn and her achievements has shifted since her death?

12. Friendship, empowerment, recognition and perception are all major themes in this story. How do you think each of these played into Marilyn?s short, illustrious life? How do you think they played into Eve?s longer, incredibly impressive career?

Author Bio

Lynn Cullen?s bestselling novels, including THE WOMAN WITH THE CURE, THE SISTERS OF SUMMIT

AVENUE, MRS. POE, TWAIN'S END, THE CREATION OF EVE and REIGN OF MADNESS, have been translated into 17 languages and are the recipients of various honors, including NPR Great Read, Oprah.com Book of the Week, *People* magazine Book of the Week, Indie Next List selection, and *Atlanta* magazine Best Books of the Year. She lives in Atlanta.

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Publication Date: December 1, 2026
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: Berkley
ISBN-10: 0593954572
ISBN-13: 9780593954577