



Memoirs of a Minotaur: From Merrill Lynch to Patty Hearst to Poetry
By Robin Magowan
Story Line Press; 273 pages; \$16.95 paper

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Escaping From the Labyrinth

Robin Magowan recalls a life of leisure, verse and strife in 'Memoirs of a Minotaur'

By Morton Marcus

IN MANY WAYS, this has become the decade of the memoir. Of the plethora of memoirs that have been dumped on the market, a number are interesting and excellently written. But the majority are shrill and full of complaints and self-pity.

One problem is that the writing may far surpass the content, recording a life neither resonant enough to excite the reader as far

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as personal implications are concerned nor meaningful enough in terms of the social, political or historical context of the reader's life. Just as damaging, the writing may be merely competent or worse, thereby failing to evoke the world of the writer's experiences.

But what if you were someone who was surrounded and propelled from childhood by a dazzling array of famous people: financiers and corporate kings, literati of the highest order, a Brahmanic family--in short, people who were stars among the rich and famous? And what if later in life you had become a target of a revolutionary group that for more than a year dominated newspaper headlines around the world? And what, finally, if you were a published author of a number of books who had the wit as well as the writing skills to tell the story as it should be told?

Robin Magowan is such a person, and his just-published autobiography, *Memoirs of a Minotaur*, fulfills the potential such a combination of elements promises.

BORN INTO the Fortune 500 family of Charles Merrill (his grandfather and founder of the legendary investment house of Merrill Lynch), Magowan spent his early years shuttling between a fabled five-story Manhattan town-house and his grandfather's Southampton estate, followed by a classic Ivy League education that would have made Jay Gatsby gasp with envy: Exeter, Harvard and advanced degrees from Columbia and Yale, which led to a teaching position at the University of California at Berkeley in the most tumultuous years of the tumultuous 1960s.

Magowan's father was Robert Magowan, a poor working-class boy who is offered by his father-in-law "the choice of running Merrill

Lynch, 'the world's greatest money-making machine,' as I remember him calling it, or Safeway."

Magowan chooses the burgeoning Safeway supermarket chain and creates one of the great corporate fortunes of America from it. He attempts to pull young Robin and his four brothers into his business in order to continue the family dynasty in his name. But Robin's vivacious mother and her brother, Robin's "Uncle Jimmy," show him the life of art and culture--and prevail.

It is a life Uncle Jimmy is well disposed to proselytize, since he was one of the most lauded American poets of the second half of the century: James Merrill, Robin's mentor and cherished friend, who, says Robin, "may have created me out of nothing--the Southhampton vacuity, the dreams darting like dragonflies at my boy's feet."

Magowan includes many trenchant insights and amusing anecdotes about family members, such as this tidbit of maternal extravagance: His parents had just purchased a house in the posh Pacific Heights section of San Francisco, "an elegant palazzo, with its Italianate loggia and breathtaking views of the Bay." Mother "had been in her new house for a while when she noticed that it lacked what was for her a necessity--a cosy nook where she could lunch with a friend. So she acquired the house immediately below her on the hill and had it razed. That allowed her to tack on the 10 feet she needed for a breakfast nook off the dining room. My father could not believe it."

Meanwhile, Magowan's travels take him to Greece, Haiti, pre-Castro Cuba, Samarkand, Bukhara and Southeast Asia, experiences he writes about with much panache and insight in several books (*And Other*

Voyages and Fabled Cities: Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva), while his love affairs include a torrid, character-transforming relationship with Nancy Ling Perry, who, a year after her liaison with him, becomes the principal architect of the Symbionese Liberation Army, the revolutionary outlaws who kidnapped and brainwashed Patty Hearst and targeted Robin and his father as their next victims.

About Perry's death in a nationally televised police siege in L.A., Magowan writes, "It was not a flick of the dice that brought Ling to the SLA and the SLA to Watts, but something intensely willed. Death, for most of us, cannot be completion. ... But for Ling, pausing to reload, I think it was."

And later he elaborates almost elegiacally: "It is the absences, the things we didn't talk about, that still haunt me. Her suicidal yearnings, for one. ... The affliction of the ghetto was not the source of her pain, but a disease was, and it could and should have been treated."

BESIDES BEING an absorbing story teeming with exotic locales and bigger-than-life people, *Memoirs of a Minotaur* is a historical document of rare candor and eloquence, evoking life among the upper classes in the 1930s, '40s and '50s and the drug-drenched, mind-expanding, politically explosive years of the 1960s and '70s.

Of his return to Berkeley in 1971, the year after the abortive marches against U.S. involvement in Cambodia, Magowan notes that it was a "much darker town than the Berkeley of the mid-sixties. Everyone I knew now felt powerless to stop the war and powerless to transform the globe; two actions which, only a few years earlier, had looked not only possible, but inevitable."

Ultimately, however, the character who is most revealed in *Memoirs of a Minotaur* is Magowan himself. The book is self-analytical to the point of being a confession. That and Magowan's insights into others, and what he chooses to say about them, are so unexpected, so individual, that the reader begins to see the world through his eyes. This aspect of the memoirs is further enhanced by Magowan's intelligence, which is everywhere apparent in the estimates of people and events that abound throughout the book.

The vehicle for this extraordinary trip into the author's psyche is Magowan's prose style. Although there is little of the opulent, almost baroque eloquence of Magowan's poetry and travel writing in the book, there are a number of verbal moments when the writing soars, as when he describes his professor at Harvard, the great American literature scholar Perry Miller, who was "paunchy, white-maned ... nothing less than Moby Dick personified. If the whale intrigued, we followed him, from one mouthful of plankton, one great briny sea, to the next. ..."

As a public and private document that candidly presents an individual and his world, *Memoirs of a Minotaur* is a model of the memoir form. It is also endlessly fascinating reading.

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