

# Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

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The Jerusalem Report, Apr. 26, 1999

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Monica's Story by Andrew Morton.

Surprisingly, it's not a tale that's had particular resonance either for Jews or for anti-Semites. And it's not a fable of the post-feminist woman. Monica Lewinsky's story, rather, is that of a young woman who found the wrong people to teach her about love.

THE WAY ANDREW MORTON tells it, Monica Lewinsky's tale is a love story, and she is a tragic heroine. Yet Morton's attempt in this authorized biography of President Clinton's lover to make her life seem monumental --- "a fascinating human story of love, betrayal, and obsession" --- is defeated by the long parade of embarrassing details that he sets before the reader. And in laboring to invest her uninspiring adventures with importance, Morton --- as in his previous biography of Princess Diana --- promotes the cult of celebrity, which did so much to injure both of the women whose biographies have brought them, and him, so much public attention.

Intelligent and insecure from early on, Monica Lewinsky grew up in Beverly Hills, California, where she learned to see appearance as all-important, to equate success with popularity, to view expensive luxury items as necessary goods, to be obsessed with her weight, and to confuse sex with love. Monica was raised as a Jew --- her father's parents both having fled Germany before the Holocaust --- but she gives us no evidence that her Jewish education had anything but a superficial effect on her identity or life.

She was an awkward, self-conscious teenager who craved popularity but could not keep up with the "in" crowd. While working in high school theater, she enjoyed a few brief dalliances with a drama technician in his mid-20s who at the time was engaged to be married. After she entered Santa Monica College, and despite his recent marriage, they became lovers. The on-again off-again affair persisted through Monica's college years and even extended to her time in Washington. It was a source of comfort and self-esteem to the emotional and erratic young woman, but at the same time a cause of inner turmoil. Though obviously hopeless and self-destructive from the outset, the affair was propelled forward by the conniving and exploitation of her lover and maintained by Monica out of weakness and need, and it must be said, with little regard for her lover's wife and family.

In July 1995, shortly after graduating as a psychology major from Lewis and Clark College, in Portland, Oregon (where she had transferred from junior college in Santa Monica), with neither interest nor expertise in politics but with a good family connection, Monica landed a six-week stint in the White House as an unpaid summer intern.

THOUGH SHE BEGAN HER internship without any special interest in him, Monica developed a "crush" on President Clinton after spotting him at various ceremonial events in the White House. Her forward and flirtatious behavior quickly caught the president's eye. Encouraged by his own flirting, she obtained a second internship, then a full-time job in the fall as an assistant in the Office of Legislative Affairs in the White House, making \$25,000 a year.

The time, place and physical details of the approximately 20 private meetings over two years between Monica and President Clinton are by now well known, thanks to the Starr Report and the months of jokes flying forth from the opening monologues of late night talk shows and circulated promiscuously by e-mail and the Internet. Yet Monica maintains that there was much more to their relationship than sex, that she fell in love with the president, that for a time she perceived him to return in significant measure her feelings, and indeed that he gave her reason to believe that after his term in office he might leave his wife and make her the next Mrs. Clinton.

What is striking is the gulf between Monica's interpretation of her affair with the president -- - chronicled with fulsome earnestness by Morton --- and the lack of indication in the president's conduct, as depicted in the same pages, that he had romantic feelings for her. Monica declares that she loved Clinton for the vulnerability, sweetness and humanity he displayed in their time alone. And yet the two never shared a proper meal, their conversation does not appear to have embraced matters of substance or delicacy (notwithstanding the advice Monica was proud to have offered him on education policy), during the affair he conducted himself with callous disregard for the effect of the relationship on Monica, and after the affair ended and as the independent counsel closed in on him, he unleashed his close aides to attack "that woman" as a bimbo and a stalker. Though Monica quickly came to regard the president as her "sexual soulmate," even their physical encounters --- described by Morton with vague euphemism, in contrast to the blunt clinical detail preferred by the Starr Report --- seem decidedly quick, controlled and unerotic. Monica speaks of the "chemistry" between them, but based on what she says and Morton writes, it seems more reasonable to believe that what the president particularly prized in the young woman was her availability.

THE PUBLIC RESPONSE TO Monica has not always been exactly what one might expect. Of course she has suffered endless ridicule in the media, and for some she has become an object lesson in immodesty and loose morals. Though a few fringe right-wing voices sought to exploit anti-Semitic feeling by depicting her as a Jewish temptress, what is revealing is how

little impact these slurs have had on the American imagination. More damaging have been Monica's own ignorant and absurd analogies to the Holocaust --- an increasingly common tack for those who suffer in the United States --- to bolster her sense of victimhood.

Oddly, feminists have not rallied around her as an icon of the exploited woman. And, bafflingly, some have wished to see her as a model of one fashionable interpretation of the new post-feminist woman: In tune with her sexuality, unconstrained by old-fashioned morals, fully in touch with what she wants, and prepared to do whatever it takes to get it. Such a woman knows the power of sex and is not afraid to deploy it. And not worrying about love or fearing pregnancy, she feels herself free to aggressively pursue the man to whom she happens at the moment to be attracted. But whatever one thinks of what might be called the postmodern post-feminist woman, Morton's biography makes clear that it is sheer fantasy to believe that Monica exemplifies it. If Monica is paradigmatic, it is of that very different and increasingly common type in our society: One who yearns for love but lacks teachers who can explain its demands or exemplars whose lives demonstrate its joys, responsibilities and strength.

ANDREW MORTON DOES NOT seem to be concerned much or even notice that in his telling, Monica's is a story bereft of heroes. She can be brash and likeable, and sought to protect the president at considerable risk to herself, but is also credulous, self-deceiving, and desperate. The president is at best a selfish cad who thoughtlessly trifles with the affections of a young woman and in so doing recklessly endangers his ability to carry out the duties of the highest office in the land. Linda Tripp, the erstwhile friend who provided the Office of Independent Council with 20 hours of taped conversations with Monica, is fiendishly manipulative. William Ginsburg, the California medical malpractice lawyer hired by Monica's father to represent his daughter after Kenneth Starr's investigators began to question her, is a pompous self-promoter lacking in discretion and legal competence. Starr and his prosecutors are overzealous, partisan bullies. And Morton himself is too often clueless or cynical, reporting the pathetic as if it were noble, the tawdry as if it were sweet and romantic, the trivial as if it were of epic significance. In the whole sorry spectacle --- of which the book is the most recent but no doubt not the last episode --- one searches in vain for a single individual with a reliable moral compass. This is what makes Monica's story sad and portentous.

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