



## On Michael Jackson

By Margo Jefferson

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Michael Jackson was once universally acclaimed as a song-and-dance man of genius; Wacko Jacko is now, more often than not, dismissed for his bizarre race and gender transformations and confounding antics, even as he is commonly reviled for the child molestation charges twice brought against him. Whence the weirdness and alleged criminality? How to account for Michael Jackson's rise and fall? In *On Michael Jackson*—an at once passionate, incisive, and bracing work of cultural analysis—Pulitzer Prize-winning critic for *The New York Times* Margo Jefferson brilliantly unravels the complexities of one of the most enigmatic figures of our time.

Who is Michael Jackson and what does it mean to call him a “What Is It”? What do P. T. Barnum, Peter Pan, and Edgar Allan Poe have to do with our fascination with Jackson? How did his curious Victorian upbringing and his tenure as a child prodigy on the “chitlin’ circuit” inform his character and multiplicity of selves? How is Michael Jackson’s celebrity related to the outrageous popularity of nineteenth-century minstrelsy? What is the perverse appeal of child stars for grown-ups and what is the price of such stardom for these children and for us? What uncanniness provoked Michael Jackson to become “Alone of All His Race, Alone of All Her Sex,” while establishing himself as an undeniably great performer with neo-Gothic, dandy proclivities and a producer of visionary music videos? What do we find so unnerving about Michael Jackson’s presumed monstrosity? In short, how are we all of us implicated?

In her stunning first book, Margo Jefferson gives us the incontrovertible lowdown on call-him-what-you-wish; she offers a powerful reckoning with a quintessential, richly allusive signifier of American society and popular culture.

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### Editorial Review

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#### Book Description

Margo Jefferson's *On Michael Jackson* is a lucid and elegant cultural analysis of the rise and fall of the King of Pop.

An award-winning cultural critic, Jefferson brings an unexpected compassion as well as her sharp intellect and incomparable insight to Jackson's 2005 trial for child molestation, startling us with her erudite illumination of a media-drenched circus that we only thought we understood. As only she can, Jefferson reads between the lines of Jackson's 1998 autobiography as well as published accounts of his childhood, his family, and Motown--where Michael and his brothers first made the Jackson 5 a household name--leaving us with provocative and perhaps unanswerable questions about Jackson, child stardom, and fame itself.

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#### Margo Jefferson on the Life and Death of Michael Jackson

Pundits love to talk about the crises and cultural flashpoints that give Americans the chance to grow up and think outside of the usual dualities: this is good, that is evil; we hate her, we love him. Michael Jackson's death gives us yet another chance.



Talent, scandal, sudden death, and a 24/7 media cycle make us very worshipful or very cynical. We can do better this time around. We don't have to sneer or be pious. We know Michael Jackson was a genius, and we know he became a tortured soul. The first three days after his death were our grace period. We watched videos, replayed our favorite songs relived our youth, and waxed nostalgia about the good old days when all we had to deal with was his enormous talent. And though I never much liked the song, "we" were definitely the world--crowding onto streets, into theaters and parks, dancing (or at least swaying) to his music. North and South America. Europe. Africa. Asia. Only Antarctica and most of the animal kingdom stayed uninvolved.

Then the nasty stuff started creeping out again, like the ghouls in *Thriller*. Drug reports, rumors of custody wars, tours of an empty Neverland, memorial extravaganza plans; the sight of Michael's father hustling family unity along with his new record company; the statements and counter-statements of siblings, lawyers, ex-employees, companions and bottom-feeders. And, of course, the three children. Whatever we don't know about them, we do know they're worth their weight in gold records and posthumous business deals. And it's only just begun.

But we can live with the damaged life and the great work: both of them, all at once. We have to. So much of Michael Jackson's damage reflects the worst in our culture, and so much of his talent reflects the best.--

*Margo Jefferson*

(Photo © Brent Murray)

From Publishers Weekly

Pulitzer-winning *New York Times* critic Jefferson collects her meditations on what may be the oddest showbiz figure of all time. "Freaks" is the title of her first essay, and she notes Jackson's attraction to Barnum as

well as the strangely apt imagery of his best-known video, "Thriller." Born in 1958 to a bullying father and a mother who was a Jehovah's Witness convert, the youngest member of the Jackson Five quickly became its VIP. Child stars are never "normal," and Jefferson glances at Buster Keaton, Jackie Coogan, Sammy Davis Jr. and, of course, Shirley Temple, the only one of them even more famous than Jackson, unless you count Elizabeth Taylor, Jackson's "best friend," who supplanted Diana Ross as his apparent role model. Jackson, Jefferson believes, is a "sexual impersonator," imitating, at times, a gay man, a white woman, a "gangsta" and a "pop Count Dracula." His bizarre looks and behavior drew literally thousands of cameras to his 2005 trial for child molestation. Jefferson concludes that Jackson may be a "monstrous child," but that he is, to a degree, a mirror of us all. Her slim, smart volume of cultural analysis may remind readers of Susan Sontag's early, brilliant essays on pop culture. (*Jan.*)

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#### From Bookmarks Magazine

It's a high-wire act to admire and defend someone as genuinely bizarre and embattled as Michael Jackson. Most of the public has long come to a conclusion about him, so much so that his name rarely grabs tabloid headlines anymore. That Margo Jefferson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning culture and theatre critic for the New York Times, is able to tease out some new insights into Jackson's relevance is something of an accomplishment. That she provokes some sympathy for her subject is even more impressive. Not that the praise is universal. Her own home paper finds that fanaticism blurs her judgment, something we've all been guilty of from time to time.

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