

Maya Blue: A Memoir of Survival

Brenda Coffee

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Maya Blue is a startling memoir about the long road to recovery from trauma.

Brenda Coffee's gripping memoir *Maya Blue* is about being the wife of an addict and a survivor of kidnapping and sexual assault.

Though the book is divided into three parts, its first part, "The Spy House on the Hill," consumes most of its space. It concerns Coffee's life in San Antonio, Texas, with her first husband, the affluent entrepreneur Jon Philip Ray. Coffee was Ray's unpaid business collaborator through start-up ventures including an early smokeless cigarette. Photographs of business products, quotes from outside experts, and evidence captured during corporate meetings and lawsuits ground the section in the context of the boom-and-bust cycles of the 1970s and 1980s.

Disruption is introduced via an experience ten years into Coffee's marriage, when Ray dealt with withdrawal from Valium, seizures, and hospitalizations. This haunted the remainder of the marriage. Coffee also had to face Ray's decision that making cocaine in a basement laboratory should be his next project. Once, in a cocaine- and alcohol-fueled rage, his distorted face is compared to warped clocks in a surrealist painting. Paradoxes abound: A bodyguard was hired to keep the couple and their possessions safe; he became a constant reminder of the dangers posed by Ray's business decisions.

Moving at a relentless pace through the risks, rewards, and dangers of Ray's work and its impact on the couple's marriage, the first section is sometimes repetitive, as with recurring questions of whether the situation might have been different had other choices been made at particular points. Indeed, Coffee volleys between hope and despair in her role as the passive wife of a secret-keeping husband, determining that "it would be easier to stitch sequins around the moon" than to cure Ray's addiction. A moment of clarity leads to confrontations and recalibration.

The book's second section, "Guatemala," covers Coffee's solo travels abroad, where she was kidnapped by paramilitary commandos while trying to locate Mayan ruins. However, the book's shift in location from Texas to Central America is quite abrupt, and the shift in tone from meek to bold happens sans context. Indeed, the obsessive situation with Ray feels too unresolved. Still, the book holds attention through its jarring transitions thanks to its striking physical details, as with those about the dangers Coffee surmounted, including graphic details of being sexually assaulted in a foreign country.

The book's throughline is Coffee's work to discover the causes of people's obsessive behaviors and to recover from past traumas. Indeed, the brief concluding section, "Finding My Voice," centers Coffee's work toward managing her traumatic memories and getting back into the business world after Ray's death. But in focusing on Coffee's development as a businesswoman and her recovery from codependence, the section further highlights the discordance of the second section.

Maya Blue is a harrowing memoir about existence on the edge—and living to tell about it.

MICHELE SHARPE (January 24, 2025)

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