



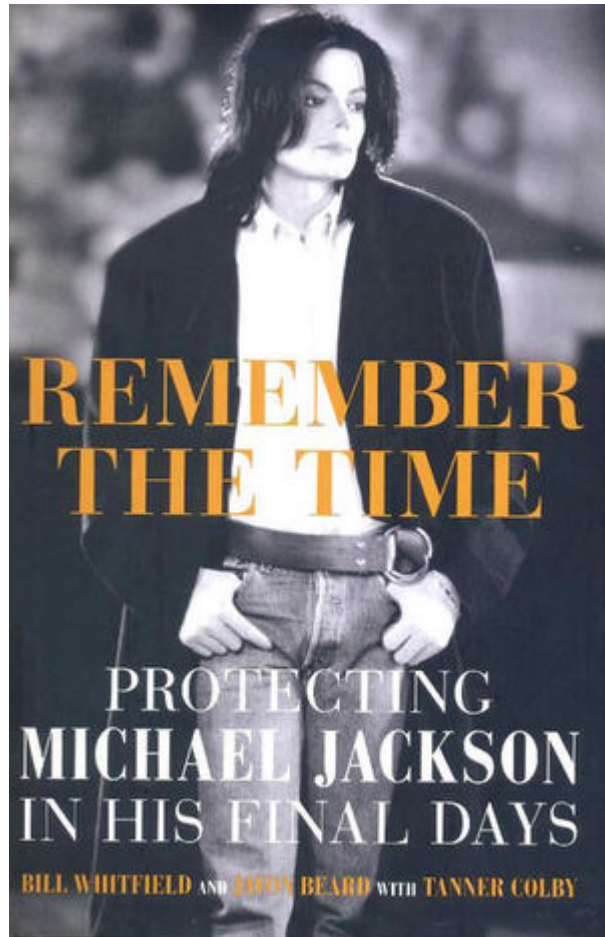
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Book a powerful character study

Posted: Sunday, November 2, 2014 12:00 am

“Remember the Time: Protecting Michael Jackson in His Final Days,” by Bill Whitfield and Javon Beard, with Tanner Colby. New York: Weinstein Books, 2014. 323 pages, \$26.



“In the fall of 1979, after the success of ‘Off the Wall’ made him independently wealthy, Michael Jackson began putting the pieces of his solo career in place,” Tanner Colby explains near the beginning of “Remember the Time: Protecting Michael Jackson in His Final Days,” the new book he co-authored with Bill Whitfield and Javon Beard.

“Jackson’s talent – and the unlimited earning potential it represented – served as a magnet, drawing the most powerful people in the business to his side,” Colby continues. “When the singer surrounded himself with the right people, he flourished. When he surrounded himself with the wrong people, he faltered. By the late 1990s, more and more of the wrong people started coming around.”

Some people seem to have the ability to handle fortune and fame. Jackson wasn’t one of them. I was in college when Jackson rose to prominence as a solo artist in the late 1970s. Like many people my age, the Jackson 5 had been a part of my adolescence. I fondly remember their early

recordings and TV appearances. But I was never much of a fan of their music, and this carried over to Jackson’s later career. At the same time, it was hard to deny his appeal to a large portion of the population – an appeal that always seemed to cross racial barriers. Certainly his impact on the modern music scene has been undeniable.

Whitfield worked in law enforcement before moving into private security in the 1990s. Beard originally planned to become a professional athlete, but his life eventually took a trajectory similar to his partner’s. In addition to Jackson, Whitfield and Beard have provided security for Sean Combs, Alicia Keys and Shaquille O’Neal. Colby is a contributor to “Slate” magazine, and his previous books include “The Chris Farley Show: A Biography in Three Acts” and “Some of My Best Friends Are Black: The Strange Story of Immigration in America.”

One of the things that captured my imagination about “Remember the Time” was the vignettes scattered liberally throughout the volume. Whitfield and Beard can make even the most mundane episodes seem interesting. For example, consider Beard’s description of a typical event in Jackson’s life from “Why Don’t They Just Leave Me Alone,” the second chapter:

“It was after we’d been in New Jersey for a couple of weeks, when we went and did the photo shoot for Italian ‘Vogue.’ The magazine put us up at The Carlyle in Manhattan on the Upper East Side. The shoot was at a studio off the West Side Highway on 53rd or 54th Street, this huge loft in an old warehouse building. It had an elevator big enough for our SUVs, so we drove the trucks right into the building and rode up and parked on the floor where they were doing the shoot. They had racks of clothes and all this expensive jewelry for him to wear.”

Providing these kinds of details serves to give the reader a sense of what it was like to be Jackson, as well as how he was revered by almost everyone he worked with in the entertainment business:

“I could see just how all these people approached him and interacted with him, how differential he was,” Whitfield observes later in the same chapter. “These were all successful, important people in the industry, but they all bowed to him. Everything moved around him. Everywhere he stepped his presence would shift the whole energy of the room.”

“Remember the Time” is essentially a series of firsthand accounts by Whitfield and Beard regarding their experiences guarding Jackson during the final weeks of his life. The book consists of 19 chapters chronologically arranged in three major sections. As a case study in how not to handle success, the book succeeds on many levels. The writing style is particularly suited to the subject matter; the vast majority of the narrative is in the form of first person anecdotes told by Whitfield and Beard. This approach gives the prose a kind of intimate, front-row-seat feel to the events chronicled in the book. It is fascinating to see how the story builds to its inevitable climax in 2009.

“On the evening of June 24, Jackson had arrived at the Staples Center for full-dress rehearsals,” Colby explains. “After weeks of seeming weak and fatigued, the singer appeared full of renewed energy and ran through the entire program, giving a show-stopping performance that director Kenny Ortega described as ‘bioluminescent.’ Jackson left the arena at 12:30, returning home for yet another sleepless night. Trying to bring him down from the evening’s performance, Dr. Murray first administered heavy doses of the sedatives lorazepam and midazolam. But by the time the sun came up, Jackson still hadn’t slept, and at 10:40 a.m., Murray gave him a final push of 25 milligrams of propofol.”

As has now been well-documented, Jackson died shortly after this final attempt to provide him with a much-needed escape from the adrenaline that had come to define his existence. But as Whitfield, Beard and Colby make clear, his very predictable demise was set in motion years earlier.

“Remember the Time” is an engaging and powerful character study of how immense talent can be both a blessing and a curse, especially when it is not balanced with restraint and empathy. I’m convinced a lot of readers – even those who don’t especially care for Jackson, would find it informative and even instructional.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*