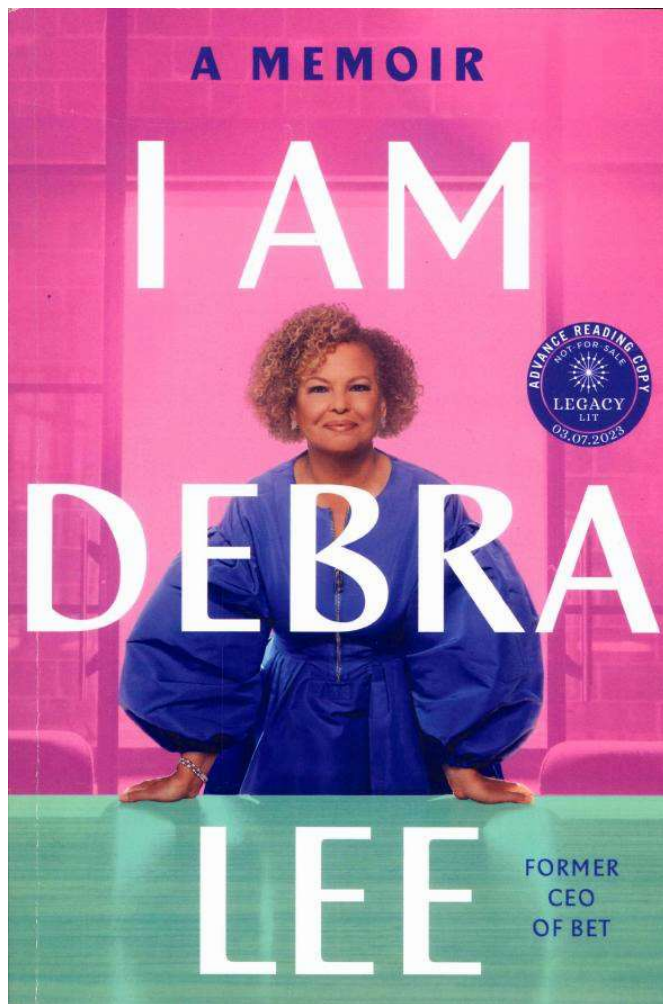


‘I Am Debra Lee’ shows how one woman can make a difference

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“I Am Debra Lee: A Memoir” by Debra Lee. New York, NY: Legacy Lit, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing (Hachette Book Group), 2023, 256 pages, \$29.00 (hardcover).



“Opportunities abound even when we can’t see them,” Debra Lee explains near the beginning of “I Am Debra Lee: A Memoir,” her recently released autobiography. “The trick is to be ready to accept the challenges when they finally reveal themselves. Don’t shrink under the weight of your potential success – because it is heavy – but allow yourself the space to grow into it. Be patient and give yourself plenty of grace as you rack up wins and loses – you’ll get there.”

“It took far too long for me to recognize that what I brought to the table – a brilliant legal mind, public policy expertise, a love of Black culture, and a soft touch paired with a tough spirit – deserved some airtime,” the author continues a little later. “Playing small and staying quiet not only stole my power, but it also took away my purpose. I couldn’t let that happen. Because I did have a purpose – I always knew that. I wanted to amplify Black stories, build up the community, celebrate our culture, and usher more Black people, particularly Black women, into positions of power.”

“Really, at the end of the day,” she adds, “what I wanted was for us to be seen. But first I had to see myself.”

So begins a journey into how one woman truly can make a huge difference in the world. An extraordinarily balanced narrative that succeeds on several levels (personal, professional, existential), I was mesmerized by her characterization of the opportunities and challenges she experienced at every turn on her road to the ultimate success she eventually achieved at Black Entertainment Television (BET). Once again, as an older, white guy, some of the passages were difficult to relate to, although I was able to see the world through her eyes due to her superb command of the language and her outstanding ability to communicate empathetically. The woman definitely knows how to express herself in a way that those outside her cultural realm can appreciate.

Structurally, the book is comprised of an introduction, ten relatively succinct yet substantively dense chapters, and an epilogue. Lee’s literary style is comfortable and conversational; I was inspired by her storytelling as I made my way through this exquisite volume. It didn’t take me that long to finish this one as I was up way too late a couple of nights because I couldn’t find a good ‘stopping place’

(many readers will know exactly what I mean). Honestly, by the time I finished the book I felt Debra was an old friend, such is the power of her prose.

The amazing advice and helpful insight Debra provides throughout the manuscript would be of tremendous benefit to many, not just her intended audience. For instance, I found myself instantly identifying with much of “The Climb,” the third chapter and one of my favorites. Example:

“So much of my success has been built on making the right decisions despite the fact that they looked wrong to most. Envisioning not just the finish line but how to get there – whether it took five years or fifteen – is a singular talent of mine. One that took years to hone, sharpening decision after difficult decision. Knowing my story and sticking to it has long been a guiding light on my life. But standing up for my choices didn’t come easy.”

Amen.

The chief executive officer of BET from 2005 through 2018, Lee’s tenure at the network actually spanned over 30 years. Before reaching the top of the corporate ladder, she also served as general counsel and chief operating officer. Originally from Fort Jackson, South Carolina, she was raised in Greensboro, North Carolina. She graduated from Brown University with a bachelor's degree in political science with an emphasis in Asian politics in 1976; she earned her master’s degree in public policy from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a J.D. degree from Harvard Law School, where she was a member of the Board of Student Advisers. In addition to her work at BET, Lee founded Leading Women Defined and co-founded Monarch Collective; both organizations are dedicated to mentoring, supporting and empowering both women as well as the Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) community at large.

“I Am Debra Lee” is a profile in courage as much as it is a primer for how to navigate an inherently difficult business environment while never losing sight of your core values. Witness the following from “The Passion Phase,” the concluding chapter:

“The industry – from rappers to label execs – was more than happy to hang the network out to dry while BET was out there alone fighting for their First Amendment rights. I never forgot that fact as I crafted the vision of the network moving forward. I listened to the shouts of those protesters and the silence of the industry to make my decision. Standards were loosening across the board, and BET was getting the blame for it. No more. If the network was going to be criticized, it would be because of a clear-eyed decision based on the company’s values, not the whims of a constantly shifting industry. After decades of experience and more than few wins, I was sure of my voice and unafraid to mold the network according to my own principles as a mother, a music lover, and a devotee to Black culture overall.”

As Tara Kennedy, Publicity Director for Legacy Lit, asserts, “There are few people who have achieved the level of success Lee has, and many without nearly the number of challenges that face women and Black people in America.”

I could not agree more. Admittedly, I did not know much about Debra Lee before taking on this assignment. But after learning more about her – both as a human being and as a leader – I have acquired a new role model. The book sparked my interest and I plan to learn as much as I can about her. She’ll most likely be required reading in my Leadership and Administration class. Highly recommended.

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