



Coal to Diamonds: A Memoir

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A raw and surprisingly beautiful coming-of-age memoir, *Coal to Diamonds* tells the story of Mary Beth Ditto, a girl from rural Arkansas who found her voice.

Born and raised in Judsonia, Arkansas—a place where indoor plumbing was a luxury, squirrel was a meal, and sex ed was taught during senior year in high school (long after many girls had gotten pregnant and dropped out) Beth Ditto stood out. Beth was a fat, pro-choice, sexually confused choir nerd with a great voice, an eighties perm, and a Kool Aid dye job. Her single mother worked overtime, which meant Beth and her five siblings were often left to fend for themselves. Beth spent much of her childhood as a transient, shuttling between relatives, caring for a sickly, volatile aunt she nonetheless loved, looking after sisters, brothers, and cousins, and trying to steer clear of her mother's bad boyfriends.

Her punk education began in high school under the tutelage of a group of teens—her second family—who embraced their outsider status and introduced her to safety-pinned clothing, mail-order tapes, queer and fat-positive zines, and any shred of counterculture they could smuggle into Arkansas. With their help, Beth survived high school, a tragic family scandal, and a mental breakdown, and then she got the hell out of Judsonia. She decamped to Olympia, Washington, a late-1990s paradise for Riot Grrrls and punks, and began to cultivate her glamorous, queer, fat, femme image. On a whim—with longtime friends Nathan, a guitarist and musical savant in a polyester suit, and Kathy, a quiet intellectual turned drummer—she formed the band Gossip. She gave up trying to remake her singing voice into the ethereal wisp she thought it should be and instead embraced its full, soulful potential. Gossip gave her that chance, and the raw power of her voice won her and Gossip the attention they deserved.

Marked with the frankness, humor, and defiance that have made her an international icon, Beth Ditto's unapologetic, startlingly direct, and poetic memoir is a hypnotic and inspiring account of a woman coming into her own.

Coal to Diamonds: A Memoir Details

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From Reader Review Coal to Diamonds: A Memoir for online ebook

Andrew Gott says

I'm ashamed it took me so long to read this, Beth Ditto being one of my absolute all-time heroes since the age of 16, but sadly it was a huge, crushing disappointment. As other reviews by big fans have said, the book feels extremely half-hearted, with erratic insertions of potentially really exciting/interesting anecdotes that always fail on their promises. A huge bulk of the book is devoted to very in-depth descriptions of Beth's early life, which is exactly what I wanted to know about, but four chapters on the same information of life at home with a great aunt compared to literally just a few sentences on the monumental explosion of fame Gossip and Beth underwent in 2006/7 with Standing in the Way of Control was appalling. I wanted to know everything, her early life right through to the development of the band and the music they made, which I love and cherish. You just can't help but feel a bit let down when we spend so long with Beth musing on wanting to escape Arkansas, and then suddenly her band is asked to support Sleater-Kinney on tour and she gets to see the entire United States, and tells us next to nothing about what it felt to visit New York or San Francisco for the first time. Her huge fame in the UK is given one paragraph - something like "and all of a sudden I was best friends with Kate Moss" - girl please, you were all over every magazine, in every paper, you were partying with the elite, you had an entire clothing range for Evans...

In the bulk of my later teens, not so long ago, I was obsessed with Beth. I knew her every movement (creepy). I even had a substantially long conversation with her on MySpace (probably the peak of my teens) where she told me all about Paris is Burning (which lit the spark which led to my current obsession with drag culture) and how it was the source material for Madonna's Vogue (I was also beginning my Madonna obsession at this time, and to hear one of my idols criticising another of my idols in MYSPACE PRIVATE MESSAGE was a hoot)... I dunno, I just feel like that enormous huge part of her life was totally ignored in place for endless, monotonous musings on country life. I've seen her perform live a million times, she once wore a t-shirt I made for her on stage, I've bloody motorboated the woman for god's sake! And also, really really upsetting, zero mention given to her artistically triumphant dance EP she made with Simian Mobile Disco which was a total change from anything she did with Gossip but just as good.

And I have no problem with reading ghost written books, obviously you can't expect your heroes, who may be extraordinarily talented in some areas like singing or acting, to be top quality writers, but if it's gonna be ghost written, I do expect the quality to be a lot higher. This felt like it was written by Beth... and that's not such a good thing. Real shoddy writing, clumsy structure, erratically flitting from one subject to another - if there was an author guiding Beth they should have done a much better job.

Did any of that make sense?

Rose says

Initial reaction: If there's something I already knew about Beth Ditto that was confirmed in this book, she's made of awesome. I appreciated reading and learning more about her. I have listened to Ditto's work (both with Gossip as well as her solo EP), but I'll admit I didn't know much about her person until after I read this. I think this memoir of her life - reflecting upon her rough childhood and tracing her route with Gossip, are worth the read. It's a rather short book, and easily perused, but while I liked the conversational/reflective tone it takes in her voice, I'm not sure how I felt about the presentation of this since it took me a few times to get

myself back to sorts where the timeline of her life was concerned. That's not a fault of Ditto's, I just think the transitions could've been smoother than what they were.

Full review:

Beth Ditto has my respect as a musician I've been listening to for quite some time, if not in a high frequency, then certainly in a long spectrum. I've always liked the tone, edge, and power in her voice, and the fact that she has quite a few musical influences that I like makes me grin from ear to ear. But despite being familiar with her music as a vocalist from Gossip and her solo work, I'll admit I didn't know much about her person. So I was surprised when I saw that she had a memoir up as an e-galley to peruse and eagerly took the opportunity to read it.

Beth has a strong, conversational, no-bars held tone throughout this book. Her story is a rough one in places. Albeit a brief read, Ditto expounds with honesty her navigation through a rough childhood, her family bonds built and broken, her musical explorations, her rise with Gossip, and some expansions with respect to her sexuality and body image, as well as personal turmoils with respect to illness. It was an eye opening experience for me to learn this much about her. I appreciated her insights, felt for her in both the rougher moments as well as the good.

A few qualms I had with respect to the book had to do more with the transitions between the chapters/sections than the length (though I certainly wouldn't have minded a longer memoir). I definitely liked the casual, candid voice Ditto employs through this, because it's like she's sitting down in front of me and telling me about her life in person, and that's important in any biography/autobiography - to have that connection to the reader. Yet I think the transitions between sections could've been a little smoother. In talking about the timeline of her life, I had to mentally adjust myself several times to make sure where I was in terms of at what point she'd reached and where the conversation lent next. I don't fault Ditto's account, but rather felt it was the written narrative that could've eased into different stopping points better. It made for a read that tended to throw me from the focus of events.

I thought this was well worth the read though, not just to see Ditto's resilience and confidence - even in the face of adversity, but also just to learn more about her individually.

I think one of the last lines she has in this stuck with me, and couldn't be more true:

"Take your inspiration and let it lead you out into the world, into your big amazing genius life...You're perfect the way you are. You don't need to change anything but the world, so get to it."

Overall: 3/5

Note: I received this as an ARC from NetGalley, from the publisher Random House.

Liz says

I never really imagined that I would have much in common with Beth Ditto, who is a queer femme superstar, while I'm a tomboy who is still working through a lot of the crap that society tells me about how I fail at being a girl. But I found SO MUCH I could relate to in Beth's version of feminism and punk, that this book went beyond enjoyable, to inspiring. I wish there was more of it, that the book was longer, but as a memoirist, I'm starting to learn not to dock points for someone's personal story not hitting my ideal marks; to me, wishing it was longer just means that I want to hear more of Beth's stories, so kudos to her for keeping

me hanging on.

Yekaterina says

A fast paced memoir of Beth Dittos rise to celebrity. It's an inspiring story of a young girl whose been used and abused rising above it all to prove that you have control over your destiny.

I read this book rather quickly. It's not too lengthy, just long enough to cover what is essential. This book definitely has a target audience and I would say it's females ages 14-25. I would almost call it a guide- to growing up in a tough environment.

I was a bit turned off by some of the typos, however it was an ARC so they don't count. I also felt that the author went on and on about 'rock camp,' and it started to lose my attention. It was well outlined but I feel like the last 3 chapters were the best. They were the heart of the book. I wish there was more emotion in the first couple chapters.

All in all, it was a good feminist read, but I found it hard to relate to the author until the very end, and then it just ended.

* Thank you Goodreads First Reads for the free ARC!*

Straw says

Look y'all I love me some Beth Ditto. I saw her grow up in Portland in the 1990's...playing tiny shows at the Medicine Hat etc. This book is awful. A series of poorly woven vignettes with the help of, how shall I say it, the hackish Michelle Tea. Can I just say stop the madness in regards to memoirs. Your 30-40 year old life might not be interesting enough to merit one, let alone three (looking at you Tea).

Brittany says

Before Coal to Diamonds, I had not read another queer memoir that made me as emotional as reading Kate Bornstein's A Queer & Pleasant Danger. Maybe it's because I'm more emotional lately. Maybe it's the damn moon cycle. Regardless, Beth knows my riotous soul inside & out and it was so refreshing to be able to read a memoir and relate so perfectly as I did with hers. I, like others, wish I could have read this when I was fifteen and figuring out whether or not I was a giant queer living in the south (spoiler alert: I am) and I would have loved to have had Beth as my BFF. Maybe we would have made out. Maybe she could have been my buddy at all the local punk shows that I had no one to go with, and could have been like, "listen. cis males aren't the answer. they're gross. yuck. penises? the hell are those. queer feminist punk solidarity is all we need, besos~" And then maybe my high school and college years could have been a bit easier. If you read nothing else of her memoir (and you shouldn't do that, that would be wrong and I would hate you) read the last three pages, copy and paste the last paragraph and remind yourself of her advice every day if you have to. We all come from the same place, and those of us in the queer community all have to help each other to keep breathing. This b has it all figured out.

Praise be, Beth Ditto. Praise be you goddamned beautiful angel.

Jess says

Very simply written, and for me like reading about my own life (minus the fame, obv's) - lots of intergenerational trauma, working poor families, finding subculture/your own queerness and leveraging it to escape from racist and cyclically abusive small town, figuring out and valuing femme gender and fat positivity, and the immense crushing hangover after you escape and rejoice at your new life and then realize you have to begin the trauma processing that will last the rest of your life. I wanted to read so much more about finding queer community, finding femme community, creating her fashion life, basically everything about everything, but still a great read.

Belinda says

I don't know if my many positive reviews are because I tend to pick books that I am pretty damn sure I will like or if I am just humbled by people's ability to write an entertaining book so I don't judge--I suspect it may end up somewhere between the two. Anyway, I digress...I loved this book--not surprising, as I adore Beth Ditto and Gossip are one of the few bands that are of recent vintage that I enjoy. I have always loved her attitude, her voice is to die for and her politics are straight up my alley. Reading her autobiography just cemented that for me--imagine being a fat, gay and intelligent child in the wilds of Arkansas--even then you can't imagine the life Beth Ditto has had. With the wit I have always seen in her interviews and performances she lays out quite a story. The funny parts I knew would be there--the touching parts were a big old bonus. She's the proverbial flower blooming in the desert--coming from poverty, sexual and physical abuse, and a town without pity, she overcame to become the supremely confident and amazing person she is. She embraces the words "fat" and "queer" as positives that prove her acceptance of herself and others--she's beautiful, brave, funny and crazy talented and I feel privileged to have learned even a part of her story.

Jerry says

Got an advance copy. Amazing life story. Explains so much and I related (coming from trailer trash myself).

Agathafrye says

I was hoping for a bit more discussion of Beth's time in Olympia and I agree with another reviewer who said that the last third of the book left the impression that the authors were tired of the story and just wanted to get it over with. None of this takes away from the fact that Beth Ditto is an inspirational badass and Michelle Tea, no stranger to badassery either, is the perfect co-writer for this memoir. Many quotable moments in this book (which has expired off of my eReader so I unfortunately can't share any of them with you). This is a great gift book for that teen girl in your life.

jess says

I wish I could have read this book when I was 14 or 15. I would have gotten a lot out of it. The story of Mary Beth Ditto coming from a small town in Arkansas and ending up as an international queer, feminist celebrity

is pretty cool. I grew up in a tiny town in Oklahoma and I feel so awed by Beth's success. It was cool to read about Gossip shows I attended, like the NYC show when they were touring with sleater-kinney in 2000? I remember I took a bus overnight from Pittsburgh to go to that show and I asked one of my friends "Who is this opening band, Gossip?" and she was like, "Don't worry, you'll love them."

My thirty year old self felt like the story was too rushed. It could have been at least another 50 pages to not glossed over so many pivotal moments. I love Beth Ditto and I tolerate Michelle Tea, but the collaborative writing diluted Beth's voice.

I was a little embarrassed to read about people I know in this book. Like, embarrassed enough that I wish I didn't read it.

Daniel Welsh says

As a massive fan both of the music of Gossip and of Beth Ditto as a person, I was disappointed by this book. Beth is such a fun and vibrant person I was hoping this book would be a riot, but it really wasn't. The more exciting events were just described as a series of facts, which finished pretty much as soon as she got famous, and the rest was just massively depressing. Of course, it's not Beth's fault she's had such a surprising amount of trauma in her life, but still this was not at all what I was expecting, from someone who is one of my all time heroes.

Also, it generally isn't very engaging, which does make me wonder quite how much of it was actually ghost-written. I'd definitely be in no rush to read this again.

Sorry Beth!

Rebecca says

This book was okay, I think it could've been a lot better. It felt like a lot of things were just an overview, and she could've given more details. Like at one point she says she's very excited to go on tour with Le Tigre, and then says nothing about the tour. She mentions a bunch of interesting things, and doesn't really elaborate on them. Like she had some weird eye disease, and the doctor said it was one of the most interesting cases he'd ever seen, and she probably could've written a memoir just about that, but it just takes up a couple paragraphs here. I think the strongest parts are the beginning of the book where she talks about growing up in Arkansas and abuse that goes on in her family. She'll talk about recording albums, but not what year it is or what album is being recorded, so I don't know how well this will hold up in a couple years. I imagine it will just be confusing. I liked reading it, I just thought it could've been much better. Also there were no pictures in the book Disappointing!

Carol says

***Please note: I received this book through Goodreads' First Reads program.

As a casual fan of Beth Ditto's band, Gossip, I thought that I would enter the giveaway for this book because I had heard that she is LGBTQ-positive and body image-positive and was curious to hear her own opinions

on these matters. The book also provides her anecdotes about growing up in poor, rural Arkansas.

The book itself is about 150 pages and a very easy read. It's written in a casual, conversational style, which I found easy to relate to. The timeline of her childhood isn't linear and is peppered with her thoughts on growing up gay in a small town and being judged based on her weight. Because of these two things, I had to re-read a few passages to remember where we were in her life.

Overall, I did find her writing to be eye-opening and oftentimes refreshing. Please be aware that she speaks openly and frankly about her own rape and molestation so if these are triggers for you, I would strongly recommend avoiding this book. If you are looking for a story about someone going literally from rags to riches and her journey along the way, then I would recommend 'Coal to Diamonds:A Memoir'.

Bridget says

great read cover to cover. I only wish there was 18 more books. What's not to love about a queer fat Femme feminist person writing about poor / working class life? It's amazing
