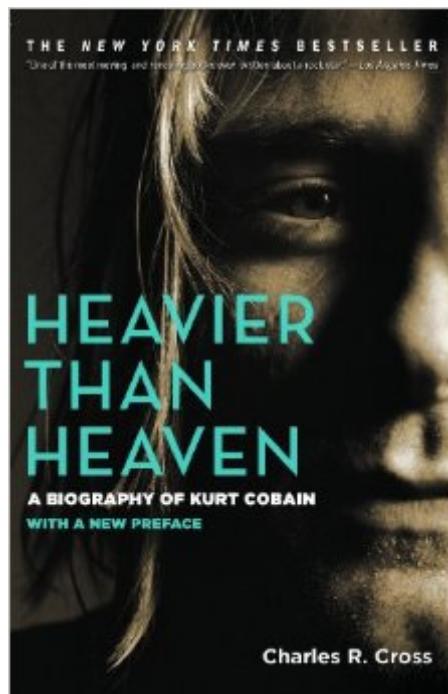


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Heavier Than Heaven: A Biography Of Kurt Cobain



Synopsis

It has been twenty years since Kurt Cobain died by his own hand in April 1994; it was an act of will that typified his short, angry, inspired life. Veteran music journalist Charles R. Cross fuses his intimate knowledge of the Seattle music scene with his deep compassion for his subject in this extraordinary story of artistic brilliance and the pain that extinguished it. Based on more than four hundred interviews; four years of research; exclusive access to Cobain's unpublished diaries, lyrics, and family photos; and a wealth of documentation, *Heavier Than Heaven* traces Cobain's life from his early days in a double-wide trailer outside of Aberdeen, Washington, to his rise to fame, success, and the adulation of a generation. Charles Cross has written a preface for this new edition, in which he recounts some of the events regarding Kurt Cobain and this book in the past two decades since his death.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The mainstream press has praised it to high heaven as the Cobain book to buy. However, there are some major issues here. It was a collaboration between Courtney Love and Charles Cross, which is a red flag off the bat. Love is blatantly trying to change history in it, and paint herself and her late husband in a totally different light. Some of it is based on diaries Kurt left behind. Diaries that could have been easily manipulated at some point or another. It's no secret that Kurt was prepared to divorce Courtney before he died. She admits it herself in taped conversations with Tom Grant in 1994 and 1995. People around them have also spoken out about the turmoil between the two at the time. Yet this book wants us to believe that they had a great marriage. Remaining Nirvana members

are also accusing Courtney Love of changing history and pasting herself into things so they benefit her. Clearly a slap in the face to them, as well as Kurt's memory. Cross also likes to take speculation and present them the same way as he does facts. He writes of Kurt's last morning like he was actually there. *Heavier Than Heaven* has some major flaws, so read this book with caution.

Early on you get a good idea of the course Cross is going to follow, when in the Author's Note he casually, but shroudedly, admits to a childhood akin to Kurt's. At least he plays fair with the reader, admitting off the top that he might be predisposed to looking for suicidal tendencies in his subject. But the reader should also take this as a warning: this is not a fan's-eye-view of Nirvana's chart-topping success (Dave Grohl makes brief and scattered appearances throughout the book), but a gloves-off biography of their tortured leader. Read in that light, it is mostly a success.

Mostly. Cross' greatest strength is the depth and breadth of his research. Apparently Courtney Love, Kurt's widow, gave Cross extensive access to Kurt's personal effects. She also sat for repeated lengthy interviews, as did many of the other notable players in Kurt's life. This kind of access gives Cross an insight into his subject that those of us who read all the Rolling Stone and Spin Magazine profiles of the man never got. It's revelatory, to be sure. For example, he is able to quote liberally from Kurt's diary, which lets the reader into Kurt's head. It offers such revelations as the following, which describes his concession to the inevitable path of becoming a junkie: "if I feel like a junkie as it is [due to stomach pains], I may as well be one." Or, in Cross' greatest discovery, he describes a long lost video of Kurt bathing his daughter Frances, in a scene of seemingly domestic tranquility. The camera focuses on father and daughter for a long moment, and then abruptly pans around the bathroom. Cross, an observant viewer, notes that in the toothbrush holder, instead of a toothbrush, is a syringe. His commentary on this image, how it destroys the conventional familial image established moments before, is some of his best work. Sometimes, however, Cross can go a bit overboard with the facts. Just because he found out a little tidbit like, "[Kurt's] favorite [infant] game was peekaboo, his first tooth appeared at eight months, and his first dozen words were, 'coco, momma, dadda, ball, toast, bye-bye, hi, baby, me, love, hot dog, and kittie,'" doesn't mean it needs to be included. Too often Cross recounts, in laundry list-like prose, trivial facts like this, which really do very little in terms of illuminating the life. It comes across more as showing off his knowledge. He also, at times, can't help indulging into a bit of pop psychoanalysis, where pop psychoanalysis is not welcome. In Cross' hands a picture of the Cobain family, taken when Kurt was 6, supposedly does a precise job of predicting the sorrow to come. Based exclusively on body language on posture. The picture is included here for your perusal. I, for one, didn't see anything near to what Cross saw. He

also, at one point, compares Kurt's image in early band photos to "Christ in Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper'". I suppose one sees what one wants to see. And anyone who lived through the period, like I did, will find dubious statements such as the following: "'The Cobain baby' was as talked about across lunch counters and supermarket checkout lines as the Lindbergh baby had been decades before." The *Vanity Fair* article that revealed Courtney had used heroin during her pregnancy was big news, true. But only within the community. It was not nearly the global tabloid scandal that Cross makes it out to be. Misleading analysis like the preceding calls into question every other statement Cross has to make. It does a lot of work undermining his credibility. Further compounding the problem is Cross' hit-or-miss writing. For the most part he utilizes an objective, almost journalistic prose style, laying the facts at the reader's feet without unnecessary ornamentation. But every once in a while he will indulge in odd analogies: "Like senior citizens going to a dentists' appointment, the band made sure they were early for this all-important show." Was that bit of superfluous style really necessary? These bits appear out of nowhere in the text, and come off as if the writer had a burst of inspiration, albeit a rather dull one. Though, even when he's playing things by the book, Cross is still prone to blunders. He clumsily describes the *melody* of the song "About a Girl" as "sweet, slow, and *melodic*". Despite the numerous complaints I've outlined above, Cross' book is still consistently readable; although I suspect that the power of the story being told has a lot to do with that. I've always thought that a biography should be judged on how the author was able to stay out of the way, and let the events of the life present themselves. In this case, Cross is, like I noted above, mostly a success. His reputation as a respected music and entertainment journalist is apparently well-earned, despite some missteps along the way, and his objectivity is very rarely questionable. That being said, his greatest feat, paradoxically, is the way he handles Kurt's final days. Much of it of course is speculation, for no one but Kurt knows how it all went down. But what Cross comes up with to tell this part of the tale is moving and powerful, without ever pandering to melodrama. The final moments are recounted with credibility, pathos, sorrow, and, most importantly, empathy. The book breaks from being a standard biography at this point, adding untold emotion to these well-written scenes. Cross even manages to tie up the book's (and, consequently, the life's) main themes. These final pages do yeomen's work making up for any errors Cross has made along the way, and, ultimately, they make the book a worthwhile read.

I bought this book with great hopes, but about halfway through it I became thoroughly disgusted with Cross's writing. For a biographer, he takes too many liberties when filling in the unknowns in Cobain's life. For example, the bit about Cobain walking around the entire day after first getting laid,

smelling his fingers. Please. Cross ruins a potentially good story with fabrications like this. Cross also neglects to write about Cobain the artist. We learn nothing of his creative process, of his long hours spent practicing guitar, nothing from anyone he's played with. This is too bad because to understand Cobain's life, one must appreciate the role that art played in his life. You cannot remove the music from Cobain's life and tell the story of an ordinary man, because Cobain lived and breathed music for most of his life. Alas, we are left to figure out for ourselves when events in Cobain's life occurred relative to his musical achievements. The only glimpse we get into Cobain's art is when we learn about the woman who inspired several songs on *Nevermind*, a token account when considering the consistent brilliance of Cobain's songwriting. The worst problem with this book by far is that Cross relied too heavily on Courtney Love's version of events. This leads to numerous errors in the book, for example, we are told that Love helped Cobain pen *Pennyroyal Tea*, but any bootlegger knows that Cobain first performed this song in late 1991, before he ever met Love. One can only wonder how many other inaccuracies sprout from Love's egocentric retelling of events, events for which there is only Love's side to the story. For this reason, I consider virtually one third of the book entirely worthless, since it is based on interviews with a person proven to lack credibility. All in all, it's worth reading, but I don't consider it a worthy biography of Cobain. The John Lennon of generation X deserves a more professional biography, but for now we will have to make do with the shoddy journalism that plagues so much of the literature on Cobain.

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