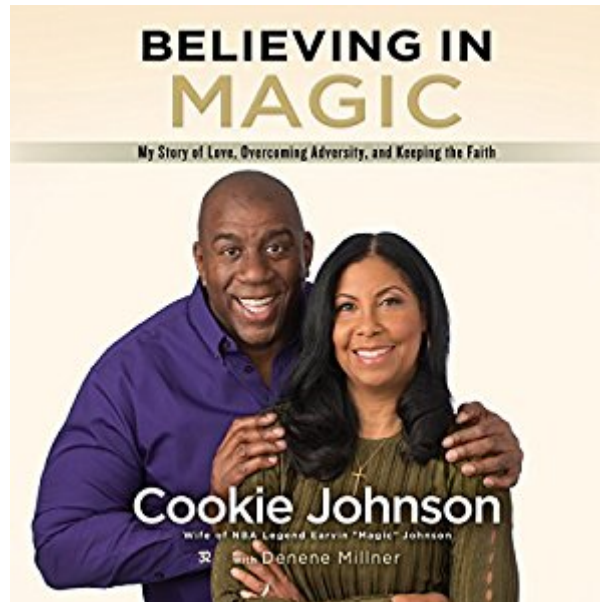


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Believing In Magic



Synopsis

In her poignant and touching memoir, Cookie Johnson, wife of NBA icon Earvin "Magic" Johnson, shares for the first time how her husband's HIV diagnosis twenty-five years ago sent her life and marriage in a frightening new direction. On November 7, 1991, basketball legend Magic Johnson stunned the world with the news that he was HIV-positive. For the millions who tuned in as he shared his news, Magic's revelation became a seminal moment for the nation. Now twenty-five years later, Cookie Johnson shares her story and the emotional journey that started on that day - from life as a pregnant and joyous newlywed to one filled with the fear that her husband would die, she and her baby would, too, be infected with the virus, and their family would be shunned. Believing in Magic is far more than Cookie's account of surviving that trauma; it is the story of her marriage with Earvin and the nearly three decades of loving each other, losing their way, and eventually finding a path they never imagined they'd take.

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Customer Reviews

Enjoyed reading this book. Gave it four stars because while interesting, I felt Cookie was always holding the reader an arm's length away while telling her story. She was open about sharing that they had relationship issues which caused her heartbreak from the very beginning. I appreciated that she leaned on her faith to help her during the trying times. But although she was careful to try not to paint Earvin as emotional abuser by focusing on his good characteristics - this is a woman

who has had to endure a roller coaster of emotional abuse throughout the 30+ years they have known each other. Many talented, smart women get caught in the same cycle of emotional abuse which runs through this book. I understand she loved and loves him - that's actually a typical explanation for staying. And, I suppose when your husband is a millionaire several times over people could say that is reason enough to stay, but I know for a fact that is not true. There are so many incidents when Earvin clearly did not give any consideration to her feelings. Breaking off wedding plans, walking into a family gathering with his three year old son who no one knows about (including Cookie) and introducing him all around. Cookie fearing she will be stood up at the altar until the moment Earvin shows up at the church. The abuse she is tolerating is real - she just doesn't have a black eye, bruises, or broken bones to show for it. Announcing he is HIV positive after they have been married five weeks, one has to wonder - why was he "suddenly" tested for HIV five weeks into their marriage? There's no explanation, and because Earvin has been a master manipulator in their relationship up to this time, the reader is left wondering did he know before they were married and simply choose the time to tell her? Is the fact he knew he was HIV positive why he suddenly decided he was ready to get married when several times before he broke it off because (as he said) "I just can't". Cookie even talks about worrying the fact that married five weeks and pregnant - when he initially told her he had bad news, she feared the bad news was he had changed his mind about the marriage. She did share some about her feelings and turmoil after he clearly disrespected her in front of their friends and then moved out after 10 years of marriage. But then after two weeks he changes his mind and wants to move back. And the reader is left with the impression that after counseling they are now rock solid. Maybe because she is finally standing up for herself as a woman and believes she can survive whether or not he is in the picture? I hope so.

As a child growing up in Asheboro, NC, I was fortunate to grow up in the presence of a father and a brother who both loved sports. I am sure their influence played a big part in how I came to love sports as well. For reasons I cannot fully explain, I was focused on Basketball as my sport of choice. Being who I am, I combined my love of sports with reading, and early in my life I got my mother to purchase me a subscription to Sports Illustrated, which was really my 1970's equivalent to ESPN. I loved the magazine because of its professional and polished writing, and because it allowed me to go inside the World of my favorite players, to learn so much more about them that others did not know. It went deep into their lives as regular human beings, giving out the most subtle and nuanced of details. It really was a rich storehouse of information, information that was esoteric in its very nature, because technology was rather primitive at the time, and we did not have the internet, nor

the proliferation of cable TV, to disseminate information widely in the way that we do now. This meant that anyone who read, such as myself, had a decided advantage over other sports fans who did not. Reading, for me, gave me a much more comprehensive understanding of what was going on in the World of sports, particularly the Basketball sphere, than any other source. Being literate, combined with Basketball, allowed me to use Basketball as a paradigm, a symbol for Life. I came to understand that I had "favorite" individual players, for very different reasons, though some of the reasons overlapped. For example, David Thompson of NC State, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar were my early Basketball heroes, David for college ball and Kareem for professional. David is a more intense reminder of everything positive about my adolescence, in part because his timing matched my teenage years combined with the fact that he is a North Carolina, regional folk hero. Kareem came to represent not only an early love of Basketball, but a perfect lesson of great work ethic, consistency and greatness over a long career. I read everything that I could get my hands on about both of them, and my knowledge pertaining to them was crazy. I could have immediately told you their birth dates at the age of 12. I can compartmentalize Thompson and Jabbar, keeping them in their separate boxes of why I am enriched in enjoying their Basketball skills. Despite my early love of David and Kareem, however, I ultimately settled on Earvin "Magic" Johnson as my all-time, favorite professional player. Magic brought a new energy to the game. I distinctly remember the Sports Illustrated cover shot of him in a tuxedo, and the accompanying article, titled "He's Gone To The Head Of His Class." The piece highlighted a great class of college sophomore players, Albert King, Gene Banks, Jeff Lamp and others, but Magic was said to be clearly at the head of that class. His game was based on a "pass-first" mentality, instead of scoring, which meant that he understood that The Game was not about him, that it took a team to win. That was what he was all about. Winning. I instantly became a fan after reading that article, and began to cover his college career closely. I remember the joy I had the night his Michigan State team beat Larry Bird's Indiana State for the NCAA Championship. I looked forward to him going pro immediately after that. And due to the lay-out of that 1979 NBA draft, where was Magic going? He was going to play with another favorite of mine, Kareem, with the Lakers. For the next 13 years, I was an avid Magic Johnson fan, observing his all-around game about as comprehensively as anyone. Over time, I came to see that most of Earvin's gifts were mental, spiritual, and emotional, over and above the physical, though he was physically gifted as well. His Basketball intelligence made it like he was a coach on the floor. He seemed to know, in advance, where every single player on his team needed to be. He directed an offense more smoothly than any player I've ever seen. He

seemed to have an internal radar, one that allowed him to detect what his team needed early within a game, and once discovered, he delivered what was needed. If his team needed 40 points from him, that's what it got. If his team needed twenty-five assists, that what it got. If it needed 20 rebounds, that's what it got. He did what he did with reckless abandon, his enthusiasm for the game flowing from his every pore, while, at times, he would beam his megawatt smile. It was quite simply refreshing to see someone who genuinely enjoyed playing the game. Ultimately, more than any other professional athlete that I've ever seen in my long obsession of sports, Magic only cared about ONE thing---that at the end of the game, his team had more points than his opponents. That's ALL he cared about, which made him the perfect team player, in a team sport . Now, knowing all that I knew about Magic, I had always wondered if his team-first mentality carried over into his marriage. I never knew that I would have the opportunity to find out. But, there I was strolling through my nearest Barnes & Noble's bookstore, just browsing, when I came across the cover that you see at the head of this article. I went, "Oh wow! Cookie Johnson has a book. Let me take a look at this." I grabbed the book and sat down in the store's cafe, thinking that I would just read a couple of pages. I lost all track of time as I became lost in Cookie's book. Before I knew it, I had read the first 64 pages of it. The book was given more power because of the background knowledge of Magic's history that I brought to the table, but it also gave me the absolute honor of getting to know Mrs. Cookie Johnson. I felt privileged in reading Cookie's book for so many reasons, having her lay all of her past out for all to see. I thought back to the early 1990's when I first saw pictures of Cookie in magazines and on TV, as she was identified as Johnson's partner. At first glance, my male vantage point made it easy to see why Magic had been attracted to her, because she was quite simply, beautiful. Cookie's beauty did not immediately quench my curiosity, as I wondered if there was more to her, as questions of her intelligence, character, emotions, morals, ideas about family stirred in my head. I just wondered "who" the overall person was that was now known as Magic's wife. One question that seemed to be answered right away came from contemplating the Earvin/Cookie marriage. Cookie talked about how she was born in her native Alabama and how her parents had moved with her brother and sister at an early age to Detroit, as part of the Great Migration. She talked of the religious background in Alabama and how that still plays a part of her religious faith. I meshed Cookie saying that with knowing that both of Magic's parents are Southerners, with his father from Mississippi and his mother from North Carolina. I thought that their mutual, humble Southern roots had a lot to do with them coming together. As I proceeded through the book, the one thing that kept appealing to me was Cookie's sense of normalcy. I was not picking up on any sense

of pretense nor affectation. She seemed totally straight-forward and direct, laying out her teen years and her eventual landing on the Michigan State campus, a fact that caused a former boyfriend to complain that she was going to meet Magic Johnson and become involved with him. Cookie laughed it off, because she truly had no idea who Magic Johnson was. Cookie found out right away upon her arrival to Michigan State University. It seems her new roommate was totally enamored with Magic, and had every intention of becoming his girlfriend. Cookie had no such thoughts, even after several brief run-ins with him, with friends. She was shocked, when leaving a campus party that Earvin asked her for her phone number, right before they were set to leave for their respective homes at the end of the semester. Magic promised to call her as soon as they returned from Winter break. Cookie wrestled with how to tell her roommate her news, but found a diplomatic way to do it, and to her surprise, her roommate took it well. Cookie was shocked when her dorm-room phone rang almost immediately after entering, after turning the key to open her door, even before she had time to properly place her luggage, upon her return at the beginning of the semester. Magic was on the other end of the phone. To this day, Cookie has no idea how Magic knew to call her with such prompt timing. Cookie lays out the couple's Michigan State years, talking about the indifference she felt coming from White counselors and professors, and just making her way through college life. There was the typical boyfriend/girlfriend things going on with Cookie and Magic. Eventually, the couple broke up, with Cookie remaining at Michigan State for the entire four years to graduate, while Earvin left school early to pursue his professional basketball career in Los Angeles. Her time at Michigan State gave her time to reflect, just as careful study of the eventual couple lends itself to reflection. When I think of Magic, I have come to respect him for a plethora of reasons, many of them not really basketball-related. I love the fact that he is very close to his parents and his siblings, the fact that he is family oriented. Given that his parents are from Mississippi and North Carolina, as a North Carolinian myself, I can relate to the Black Southern vibe that I feel emanating from him and his family. I love the fact that he is socially conscious and is particularly interested in seeing African-Americans achieve in the business sector, as he himself leads the way, specifically by both putting his businesses in the community and by hiring folks from the community. I combine all of this with my love of him as an ultimate team guy in basketball. Now, having said all of this, this book puts me in the mind-set of Cookie Johnson, and allows me to see the World through her eyes. In some sense, this gives me a perspective of a personally selfish side of Magic, from an angle I had never had clear vision upon before. I am not particularly joyful to know this side of him. There are several things to make me think this way. There is the incident in college when Cookie finds pictures of Earvin with another woman. This was at a time when they were a celebrity couple, in the eyes of

nearly everyone on campus. When Magic was confronted by Cookie about the woman, he very forcefully, and vehemently insisted on not answering her question, making the argument that Cookie will not control him. This is the first of several break-ups, when Cookie puts her foot down, informing Magic that he will not be dating both the other woman AND Cookie. The second selfish and insensitive occurrence, from my perspective, comes during the couple's visit to the home of Magic's parents several years later, and Magic leaves for a little bit, only to return later with an unidentified 3 year old child. Both Cookie and Magic's family are shocked to learn that the child is Magic's son, Andre, by a relationship that Magic had during one of his breaks with Cookie. It is not so much the fact of the child, as it was the fact that Magic had not mentioned anything to Cookie, beforehand, about the child. It just seems common decency to have done so. Just as it was difficult to learn of Magic's child for Cookie, one can only imagine how difficult it was for her emotionally, when on two distinct and separate occasions, Magic "called off" their engagement at the last minute, both times just simply saying stoically and coldly, "I can't do it." Both times, Cookie had been in the midst of very extensive wedding plans, informing all of her friends, acquaintances and co-workers. Everyone in her World knew that she was just about to marry Magic Johnson. It had to have been emotionally shattering to face the people in her World, after her disappointments. Her private struggles were equally despondent. These events had to have been monumental "Egg-All-Over-Your-Face" scenarios. Cookie survived her rough patches by relying on her faith, through Bible study and prayer, returning to her solid relationship with God. In case anyone truly misses the main purpose of this book, I would point out that Cookie's reliance on God and her faith in Him, for the whole of her life, is the one central idea she would want any careful reader to walk away with, and to model. She says that her friendship with Mrs. Angie Aguirre, the wife of basketball star, and friend of Magic's, Mark Aguirre, helped her to make it through. Angie encouraged Cookie to put her whole being into her faith, Bible study, and prayer and Cookie says it was these things that helped her to keep her sanity. Ultimately, Cookie's faith and persistence led to her and Earvin finally getting married after 12 years of on-and-off again, but it was early in their marriage when Magic came home to inform her, along with his agent, that he was HIV-positive. She slapped him upside his head when he said he'd understand if she chose to leave him. She told him that when she said "Til death do us part" that she had meant those words, and that she wasn't about to leave him now in his time of need. Cookie's response to Magic's HIV status, helps to highlight one of the most amazing things about her. The fact that Cookie was choosing to stay with an HIV-positive husband shows clearly, that she is no

“gold digger.” However, there were things that had happened before Magic’s announcement that had made this clear. Cookie had moved back into her mother’s home, after college graduation, even though Magic had invited her to stay with him in L.A., where he said, “I will take care of you.” One senses that she did not move to L.A. then because she did not feel comfortable with their relationship status, that there wasn’t a solid enough monogamous commitment to it. A number of years later, when Cookie did move to L.A. to give the relationship a shot, she had her own job and maintained her own apartment, still driving around town in her gold Honda. It is eye-opening to realize that Cookie’s true financial elevation did not occur until she officially became Cookie Johnson, which is another indication that she was not parasiting off of Magic and is no gold digger. Any woman who stays with an HIV-positive man for love has been nullified from the “gold-digger” label. Ultimately, this book is a clear indication that Cookie Johnson takes seriously the character of love that God truly is, since she is such a representation of it. There is no doubt in this book that Cookie Johnson loves Earvin Johnson. No doubt. She is 100% committed to him. But, there is also no doubt that she loves her children as well, fighting for his lifetime to “steer” their son E.J. into being a heterosexual male. Though she fought for him to be “straight” for years, her ultimate love for her child was to finally accept him for who he was, which was to accept that he is “gay.” Many may disagree with this assertion, but for ANY parent to accept her child for who or what he/she really is, is the ultimate definition of parental love. What was more amazing was when Magic came around to holding the same position that Cookie had in reference to E.J, unconditional love and acceptance for who he is. I have no doubt that Magic’s shift to this position has a lot to do with both Cookie’s influence, and love. She also shows the same level of heightened love for the couple’s adopted daughter, Elisa. One sign of this was Cookie’s acceptance of, and encouragement for Elisa to seek out her birth family and to get to know them. Cookie and Magic were both secure enough, and loved their child enough, to allow this. In conclusion, what has this book by Cookie Johnson ultimately shown? It shows an extremely solid woman of character, secure enough within herself to have stood up to Earvin Magic Johnson at times when she had to, for her self-respect. It shows a woman with a bountiful store of love for the people in her life, her family, Magic’s family, her husband and her children. It shows a woman who appreciated the efforts of others, like Michael Jordan and Larry Bird, to accept an HIV-positive teammate on “The Dream Team,” helping to bring him back into the fold as “just one of the boys” in sincere camaraderie. Most of all, it shows a

woman in love with God and her faith. The Bible says that God is love. No matter how far and wide Magic Johnson searched, I am convinced that he would have never found a woman who would have loved him more than Cookie Johnson. In her, he found what she says so many times in this book, "the love of his life." Most men would kill to have a Cookie Johnson, in the full flower of who she is, in their life. Magic Johnson has this. Cookie Johnson is just a solid, solid person of character. And I am quite simply overjoyed, that a person I have profound regard and respect for, Magic Johnson, has Mrs. Cookie Johnson as his wife. It is quite possible that this is so because the couple has managed to "Believe In Magic."

I admire Cookie for being so honest about her life, but I was left feeling sad for her. It seems that Earvin was just not into her that much, and she was the one forcing the relationship. He tried to dump her many times, but she wouldn't let him. Even in pics, he seems closed off from her! If he wasn't a rich man, I don't think she would have pursued him that hard.

It only took me one day to read this book and now I understand God's plan for our lives when we get married. Today, far too many couples get divorced over the smallest thing. It is wonderful to see a couple that has gone through major obstacles, but still are standing 25 years later. It takes a great deal of courage to stay married through the hard times, and Cookie Johnson has proven that with faith, family, and determination you can see the sunshine at the end of the rainbow. What a powerful testament to what marriage is all about. It is easy to love someone when they are doing all the right things. It's harder when you have trials and tribulations. This is a book for every woman and young girl on the power of love and faith. Believing in Magic is appropriate, because today it takes a strong constitution to get past the outside noise. Bravo Cookie Johnson this book is timely and should be a study guide for young women today. Can't wait to share with friends. Evelyn

Honesty at it's core. Happy for her family that they continue to fight for love. Love that Cookie told her story. Great read and a fast read.

Cookie is the real deal. She opens her life and allows us to see behind closed doors. She doesn't sugar coat her life with Magic Johnson. She is real, honest and raw. One thing for sure, she loves her family and she loves God. With that combination she has been able to overcome all odds. A very good read.

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