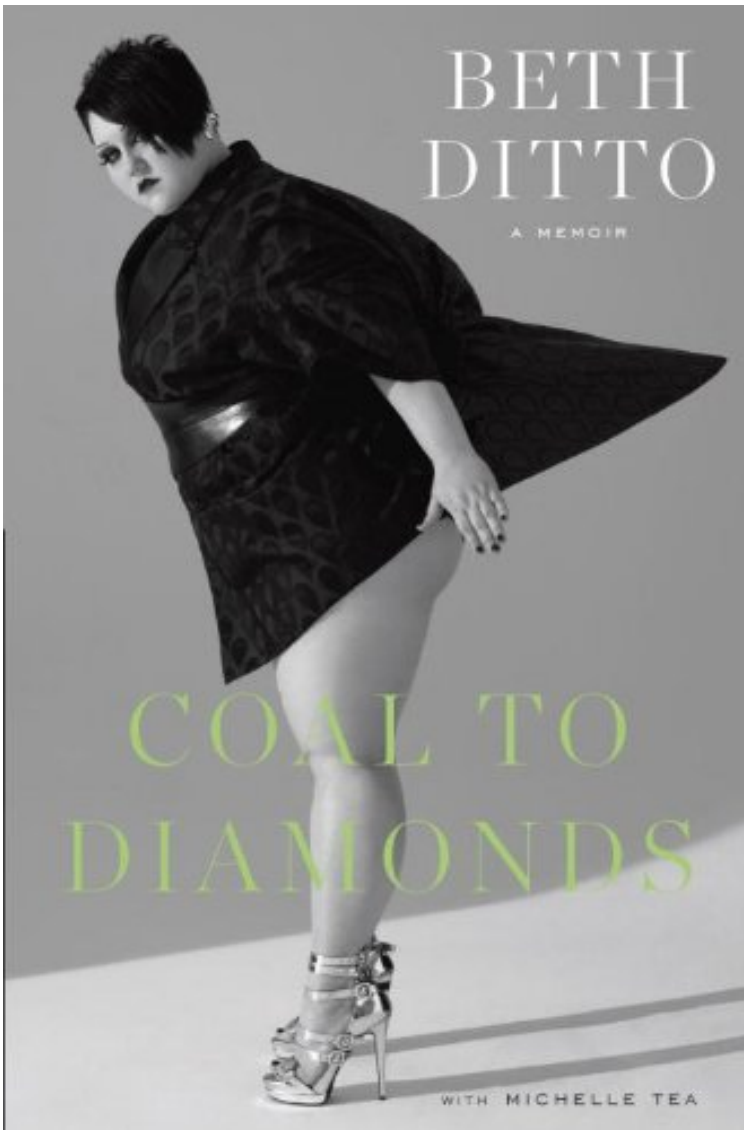


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# Coal to Diamonds: A Memoir



*Par Beth Ditto, Michelle Tea*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA 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, Arkansasa 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 mothers bad boyfriends. Her punk education began in high school under the tutelage of a group

of teensher second familywho 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 whimwith 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 Dittos unapologetic, startlingly direct, and poetic memoir is a hypnotic and inspiring account of a woman coming into her own.

From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait! There was a time when Judsonia, Arkansas, was a booming metropolis keeping pace with the rest of the country. The people were hopefulworking, shopping, and living life. A womens college was teaching ladies, and the town cemetery kept a plot for fallen Union soldiers right smack in the middle of all the dead Confederates. That was back in the 1940s. Then in 52 a tornado swirled in and tore the whole place down, leaving a dusty depression in its wake. After that, time got sticky while the people got slower and stayed that way. Since then, Judsonia just hasnt moved on the way the rest of the country has. At thirteen years old, I was hanging out one afternoon in a pair of sweats and a hand-painted T-shirt, bumming around a mostly empty house. It was the early 90s, but there, in Judsonia, it might as well have been the 80s, or the 70s. I, Mary Beth Ditto, did not go to school that day. I stayed at home to laze around the house a house that was normally crawling with way too many kids and a sick aunt, but which was miraculously empty that day, totally peaceful. Just because I played hooky, dont go getting the idea that I was a bad kid. I wasnt, but I wasnt a good kid either. I wasnt a nerdy square turning in homework on time and kissing my teachers butt, and I certainly wasnt some juvenile delinquent ducking class to hunt down trouble. I just wanted to see what that big, hectic house would feel like full of unusual quiet. My three little cousins were off at school. Because they had the misfortune of being born to the worlds shittiest mom, those three cousins who all had names that began with A had come to live with Aunt Jannie. When social services had finally been called for the fourth time, the social workers poked around to see if those three little As had any family who could take them in, and when they found Aunt Jannie she, of course, said yes. The As made their beds on couches and chairs at Aunt Jannies, crawling next to one another in the night, hunkering down wherever there was space and warmth to snuggle into. Their arrival in Aunt Jannies home was part of a grand tradition in my family. In a family so large that it tumbled and stretched to the edges of comprehension, every one of us came knocking on Aunt Jannie and Uncle Artuss front door eventually, looking for refuge. Something always pushed us there. For the As it was their drunken, neglectful mother. For me it was my violent stepfather. For my mother it was her sexually abusive father. And there were countless other short-term squatters, like my cousins whose mother shot her husband in the head. Children came and children went as circumstance and tragedy dictated. Aunt Jannie just couldnt turn away a kid with nowhere to go, not even when her diabetes made her so slowed-down and sickly. Aunt Jannie took people in for so many years that her house probably wouldve felt empty without stray bodies on every spare bit of furniture. Jannies hearth her original heart was a good and giving thing, even though her life had fossilized pain around the outside. Deep inside, Jannie was secretly warm and caring, and that was the place that made her take in any person who was going through a tough time in life. She never sat down and calculated the costs of being the whole towns savior. Her impulse to help, plus the whole towns expectation that she would open her doors, and everyone loving her for doing it, meant that, eventually, Aunt Jannie just couldnt say no to anyone. Even when maybe she should have.

When she was at the end of her mental rope, Aunt Jannie probably needed someone to reach out and give her a hand, but I dont know how she couldve asked for that when she was the one always giving it. Aunt Jannies daughter my Aunt Jane Ann lived in that big house too. Jane Ann was young enough to feel like a sister but old enough to take me to a Rolling Stones concert. Her teenage son, Dean, was the unofficial king of the house. While the rest of us lived like forest creatures, constantly looking for a nice space to burrow in, Dean got his very own bedroom. His own bedroom! I couldnt comprehend the luxury. Like some put-upon fairy-tale princess I earned my place keeping the As in line and tending to Aunt Jannies slow-motion suicidefixing her the pitchers of Crystal Light that had her as addicted as the five packs of full-flavor Winstons she smoked her way through each day. That was taking care of Aunt Jannie: tearing open packets of the fake-flavor tea and inhaling the lemony aspartame powder till my nose was crusted with it, then bringing it to the

kitchen table, where she lit her Winstons one from another. There was always something smoldering in the ashtray. I would sit in the cigarette haze and listen to her talk about the old times in Judsonia. Truth be told, being an audience for Aunt Jannies crazy tales was my real task; they could snag my imagination better than television. I would listen, wide-eyed, to her outlandish stories, like the ones about her running from her wheelchair-bound mother as a little girl and climbing up on the furniture so that poor woman, who was crippled from polio, couldnt grab her. Aunt Jannie was a spitfire Scorpio. She used to sneak down to the river, to a chained-up shed that hid a forbidden jukebox. Judsonia didnt allow dancing, so Aunt Jannie, thirteen years old and full of pent-up fire and life, would sneak into the woods with other barely teenage rebels, and together theyd dance, getting drunk on home-brewed liquor and twirling away the night. That teenage Aunt Jannie felt her culture pushing down on her, and so she pushed back with the shove of her whole body twisting to the beat. In between segments of Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy! she told me all about it. Aunt Jannie always got the answers to all the game shows right, smacking the table with satisfaction when they confirmed her answer. She wouldve won big bucks as a contestant, but she wasnt, so she was just smart, the smartest, a genius, always guessing that phrase before Vanna White flipped the vowels over, or getting the answer before that schoolteacher from Omaha hit the buzzer. Aunt Jannie had the smartsshe was even good at mathbut shed dropped out of school when she was just fourteen. As much as I didnt care about school, I couldnt comprehend being forced to drop out because Id gotten pregnant and lost the fathermy lovein a crashed-up car on a country road. That was Aunt Jannies story, and it was mine to imagine back then, to bear witness to. As the reigning teenage king of the house, Dean didnt have to hang with Aunt Jannie or corral the three little ones. He didnt have to try to keep the wild mess of the house under some sort of control or clean up after the two mangiest dogs ever, Alex and Cleolittle froofy mutts. Dean didnt have to deal with any of it, he just hung out in his room like royalty. He was a year older than me, and even shorter than me, five foot three at best. Dean was a pool shark. Still a kid, trolling the pool halls, hed wager with grown men and come home with a wad of cash balled up in the front of his Levis: twenty, twenty-five dollars. Thats a lot when youre a teenager in Judsonia. He blew his winnings on weed, tall glass bongos tucked in his closet, and cases of something strong to get drunk on with his friends in the woods. As for the Izods and Eastlands, loafers and Levisthe preppy-popular look Dean rocked so wellhis mom, Jane Ann, put all that on credit cards. A credit card wardrobe and a room all his own. Dean had it made. The afternoon that Id skipped school, I was watching television in the kitchen, half missing the constant chatter of Aunt Jannie and her suffocatingly familiar cloud of smoke while I flipped through the stations. My aunts shabby immune system had allowed a staph infection to bloom in her body, so Jane Ann had gone with her to the hospital for antibiotics. Some dork in a suit was cleaning up on Jeopardy! If Aunt Jannie were there shed have kicked his butt. What is the quadratic equation? What is plutonium? Who is Eleanor Roosevelt? Then Dean walked in, doing something violent to a Coke can. What are you doing, Dean? I asked, watching him stab tiny holes into the aluminum with a knife. Makin a pipe. A pipe? On the screen, Alex Trebek confounded the contestants with a new question; in the kitchen I watched my cousins odd crafting, stumped. For pot, he explained. The can was crushed, almost folded. On the far end, away from the opening, Dean poked and punctured until hed created a tiny perforated area for a clump of weed to be ignited, then inhaled through the mouth of the can. Id never thought of a Coke can in quite that way before, and I guess it was sort of nice to observe Dean engaged in something remotely useful. You want to smoke some? he invited. It wasnt like Dean to share the wealth, so I figured I should take advantage of his generosity. Besides, smoking pot with Dean seemed much more exciting than spacing out to another round of Jeopardy! I tagged behind my cousin. Something you should know about that hectic house filled with aging, chain-smoking party girls, young moms and younger kids, with crazy puppies and methe misfit cousin/built-in babysitter/housekeeper/nurseis that the house was built from the ground up by Uncle Artus himself. Uncle Artus was an excellent carpenter and had made a bunch of money supervising jobs around the state of Arkansas. He just must have been so crazy busy with paid work that he never quite got around to finishing up his own place. Though hed built it thirty years before, most of the fixtures in the house still hung from wires. The windows were just frameless panes of glass stuck into the walls, unfinished. A person could see straight into the outdoors through cracks in the joints, especially when it started getting colder and the wood contracted. That day it was chilly, autumn, so the cracks grew wide and the whole house got colder. I shivered in my sweats and my favorite T-shirt Aunt Jannie had painted a chanteuse on the front of it with fabric paint, a glamorous lady coming out of a giant seashell. Back then there werent many things I could call my own. I didnt have a bed, and many mornings I rifled through Jane Anns dresser in search of clean

bras and underwear. But that T-shirt was mine, and so was the character on it: a singer, a girl. Like the rest of the house, Deans room was a mess. His bed was a knot of blankets, and dirty clothes littered his floor. I leaned against the open window and tried to seem cool. Id never smoked pot before. It didnt seem like a terribly bad thing to do certainly more innocent than hard drugs that made people into zombies, or even getting drunk off a bottle of whiskey. But it was a bigger, badder deal than smoking a cigarette, and smoking a cigarette is all Id ever done. An old babysitter had taught me to inhale at the tender age of six. That unethical babysitter she was on the clock taking care of me the day she got herself knocked up taught me how to pull the smoke into my lungs, and Id been smoking ever since. I fed my habit by slipping Winstons from Aunt Jannies pack during our talk-and-television marathons. But marijuana belonged to a whole new tier of inebriants. I watched as he suctioned his face to the can, releasing smoke out the window with ease, and I followed his lead. I angled my mouth against the hole in the can while Dean dipped a lighter onto the scrabble of charred weed. The smoke poured into my lungs in a hot gust. If cigarette smoke was a windy day, this was the tornado that sacked Judsonia. I swallowed it, choked, and felt my eyes burn and turn runny. I was concerned about looking like a baby in front of Dean, but he wasnt paying me any mind. He was already singeing the rest of the weed and taking a final, powerful hit. He pursed his lips like Mick Jagger around the exiting smoke while I waited to feel the effects of the pot, and waited. I felt a little dizzy, but maybe that was from the coughing fit? I took an inventory of my body and mind. Then my cousin dropped the ashy can on his bedroom floor and reached for his gun. In Arkansas, its no big whoop to have guns lying around. If you dont have guns in your house, folks are apt to think theres something not quite right about you. My friends families had cabinets where guns gleamed, displayed like porcelain figurines on a mantel. In Deans pigsty, his .22 rifle was just leaning casually against the wall by his bed. While I was in my stoned reverie, Dean leaned out the window and pop pop pop took down a trio of squirrels in the time it took me to think, Whoa, dude. The tiny mammals fell from their perch, landed on the ground, and sent up a kick of dust around their fur. The same skills that made Dean a kick-ass pool player also made him an excellent shot. Precision and a steady hand, depth perception, angles and physics, and a spot-on instinct for when to shoot, to send the eight ball rolling toward the corner pocket or knock that squirrel out from its tree. It didnt hurt that the backyard was teeming with squirrels. Shit too. Out back was a little trail that led to an open sewer at the edge of the woods. If someone in the house flushed the commode you could watch the shit rush out of the pipe and into this ditch and it would float away, to where I dont know. My cousins and I would be playing out back, where wild mulberry bushes and pecan trees grew. Bunches of the nuts fell from the trees, and what we couldnt gnaw open wed toss into the open sewer, trying to sink the shit that bobbed there. Newly stoned, my body felt grimy and cold. I needed a hot shower. Dean ran out to the yard to collect his kills and I took further advantage of the empty house, luxuriating in the hot water without anyone yelling at me to hurry up, hollering that they had to pee or take a shower themselves, and nobody bitching about the cost of hot water. Compared to the poverty of the home Id run away from well, run away is too dramatic, Id just found a reason to leave, and no one stopped me. Aunt Jannies house was positively lower-middle-class. They had multiple boxes of Kraft Macaroni Cheese standing inside their cabinets. They had Little Debbie snack cakes, all kinds of chocolate delights harboring secret creamy middles, chocolate dunked in chocolate, tunnels of sweet peanut butter, and Aunt Jannies favorites chocolate-covered cherries. Aunt Jannies house had credit cards backing it, so anything was possible new appliances, guns, televisions, a bounty of groceries. But still, no one was rich, and the cost of hot showers for a household of eight added up. I toweled off, got back into my sweats and special chanteuse T-shirt, and walked out of the bathroom into the greasy, meaty stink of fried squirrel. I had the munchies! Dean hooted from the kitchen table. The plate on the table in front of him was scarfed clean, a pile of leg bones and the dirty frying pan the only evidence of Deans impressive stoner feat: nailing three squirrels with a shotgun, then skinning them out in the yard, cleaning the meat, and frying it up, all while high on some kind of bud smoked out of a Coke can. Smaller than a chicken, bigger than a rat. I hadnt eaten squirrel since I was a kid, and it would take more than stoner munchies to get me to snack on it again, especially in a house stocked with Little Debbies and Doritos. I wasnt a vegetarian, but something about eating the animals that had been traipsing through the backyard moments before squirrels, deer started to gross me out as I got older. Hunting everyday mammals was as normal in Arkansas as the guns ornamenting everyones houses. My dad liked to boil a squirrel head and suck the brains out the nose. Not my idea of gourmet, but nothing outrageous in Judsonia. Simply the sort of vaguely nasty food enjoyed by adult men where Im from. The tails, however, fit into my idea of a good time. While the squirrel skins and grisly innards were dumped in the yard to be picked away by scavengers (or Alex and Cleo), the tails were

treasured like rabbits feet a bit of the wild in the palm of your hand, exotic and icky, lucky even, though not for the squirrel. Growing up, all the kids had squirrel tails; in the fall, when squirrel hunting peaked, they were everywhere. You'd carry them around and play with them until your mom decided they'd become too disgusting and threw them away. But before they got too ratty they were sleek and soft, like a secret curled in your jacket pocket for you to snuggle your fingers into. The pot wore off before I could really figure out whether or not it had done its job on me. Dean left his squirrely dishes behind for me to clean up, and he took the stairs two at a time to seal himself inside his bedroom. Soon the three As came home, and later Jane Ann, but Aunt Jannie, hadn't. Forty-seven years old, gone into the hospital for a staph infection and held there for lung cancer. I waited for her in the stale cigarette air of the kitchen, but things would never be the same again. *Revue de presse* [Ditto's] candour makes you realise anew what she overcame to make her way in the world. Her story stands both as a 'personal is political' manifesto, and as testament to the power of music to make sense of the world, no matter how fucked up it might seem. **BOOK OF THE WEEK, NME 27/10** A bold shows stopper and a candid commentator "Coal To Diamonds charts Ditto's formative years, leaving home, lodging with her fledgling band in a "carny punk house" in Olympia, Washington, touring internationally - and all the while remaining an Arkansas spirit. Her collaborator, Michelle Tea ("the queer writer of our time"), has helped the book retain her distinctive sweet-and-salty twang and Ditto hasn't lost it in person either.' - Metro, Arwa Haider - 13/11/12 A Hard hitting story 'An iconic and controversial star' - Belfast Telegraph Online - 13/11/12