

# A Little Life

*My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism*

By Nancy K. Miller

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 222 pp., 2019, \$28.00, hardcover

*Reviewed by Valerie Miner*

Nancy K. Miller's *My Brilliant Friends* chronicles half a century of her life through three close relationships. Author of nine previous books of literary criticism and memoir as well as of two co-edited volumes, Miller muses about whether this will be her last book because of a treatable but incurable cancer: "As long as I'm writing about my friends, I'm keeping them alive, and in keeping them alive, I'm staying alive with them. We are still in conversation, even if I'm doing most of the talking."

Miller's portraits of the scholars Carolyn Heilbrun, Naomi Schor, and Diane Middlebrook follow Miller from graduate school to old age. Using memories, letters, emails, and mutual friends' testimony, she depicts her experiences with three well-known feminist literary critics. "I'll say that each of these women made my life worth living because we believed in each other." In narrating three crucial friendships, Miller explores mentoring, ambition, confidences, resentments, jealousies, provocations, inspirations, and—finally—loss.

Carolyn Heilbrun, who taught at Columbia University from 1960 to 1992, was a formidable scholar and professor. Miller gratefully recalls Heilbrun's early support. As their intellectual connection deepened, they collaborated professionally and became friends. For over two decades, they met regularly for dinner. They toasted each other's publishing successes and commiserated over academic slights and disappointments. Miller includes a page-and-a-half listing of Heilbrun's books and the inscriptions she wrote to her younger colleague as well as a section on the gifts they gave each other. In addition to recalling their struggles—her own infertility and Heilbrun's mastectomy—she writes about her friend's books as lenses into her mind and heart.

Carolyn Heilbrun retired early ("resigned" she said) from Columbia after her colleagues failed to promote a younger feminist colleague.

Columbia has stopped hurting me, but like someone who has escaped a battering marriage—and the analogy is, in many ways not a far-fetched one for feminist women faculty—I cannot wipe out the terrible years. I cannot change the isolation of all my time at Columbia. But the friendships I found among women, and what is still referred to as my private life, have made this isolation, if not welcome then benign as a tumor is benign; it's not cancerous, but it doesn't do anyone any good.

In her last year, Heilbrun seemed to withdraw from academic and social engagements, including her special meals with Miller.



*Brilliant friends. Clockwise from left: Carolyn Heilbrun; Naomi Schor; Diane Middlebrook. Artwork by Jojo Karlin.*

Heilbrun's suicide in 2003 hit Miller hard: she was overcome with shock, grief, anger, fear. Her mentor had long said she would know when to leave. A farewell note to the world, "The Journey's Over. Love to all, Carolyn," was not sufficient for Miller, and Heilbrun's death haunts the rest of the book.

Naomi Schor, two years younger than the author, was not only a peer; she became "The Friend." Both were ambitious about their careers as scholars of French literature, Schor working in the 19th century and Miller in the 18th. "The gap between what we lacked and what we wanted—tenure, a relationship (with a man capable of commitment) a child (eventually)—seemed reducible only by a miracle in our favor. We didn't believe in miracles. On the other hand, we believed in each other."

The two young women shared papers, confidences about lovers found and lost, gossip about friends. They enjoyed shopping together and appearing at parties in similar outfits.

"We loved being two in one, two as one. We needed the doubling.



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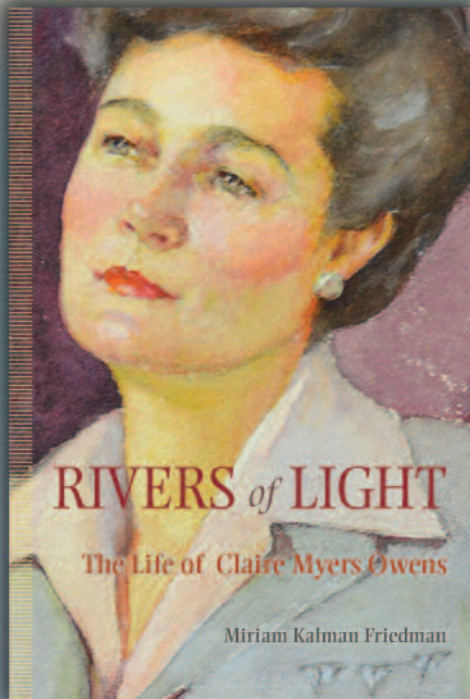
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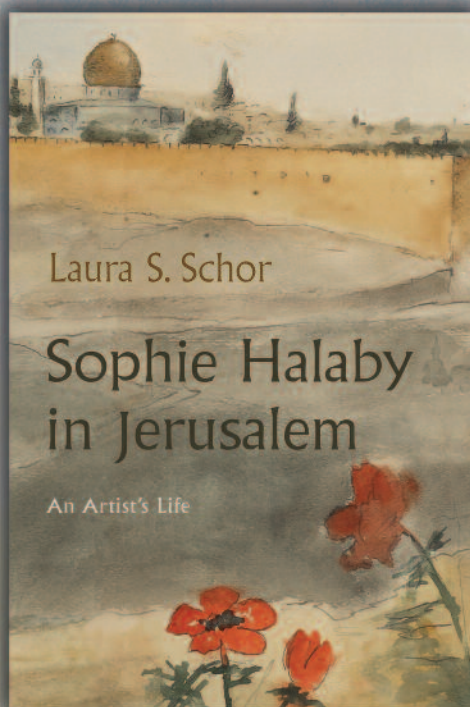
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**“In narrating three crucial friendships, Miller explores mentoring, ambition, confidences, resentments, jealousies, provocations, inspirations, and—finally—loss.”**

needed each other, sometimes desperately.” In 1971, they joined a consciousness raising group which lasted until 1976. At Columbia, where Schor was an assistant professor and Miller a graduate student, they confided their mutual fascination with and fear of the powerful scholar Michael Riffaterre.

Given the capricious currents of academic sabbaticals and fellowships and teaching terms, their relationship was sometimes relegated to letters from different cities or continents. Thus, Miller has a rich epistolary archive. “Our friendship was also public in the little world of French departments and MLA conventions in which we performed . . . we felt we were creating something new: women who compete with but also *complete* each other.”

While both scholars held prestigious positions, Miller fretted over what she saw as Schor’s greater privilege. She, herself, goes from a professorship at Barnard to an esteemed position at CUNY Graduate Center, but she envies Schor’s posts at Brown, Duke, and Yale, which she thinks offer greater access to travel support, merit increases, and research funds. In 1995, after Miller decides to take a spa holiday by herself, the growing distance between the two women becomes a rift that lasts for five years. By 2001, “We were starting over, tentatively, taking first steps on the path back to each other, as we had been, and forward to whom we might yet become, together.” Not long after their rapprochement, Schor died of a brain hemorrhage.

In the third section, “Friendship after Sixty,” Miller celebrates her short but significant friendship with Diane Middlebrook, a Professor of English at Stanford. A year after they met, Middlebrook was diagnosed with liposarcoma. Miller traveled to California and London to visit and care for (and have fun with) her ailing, plucky friend.

It felt natural, even enjoyable, for me to be the one flying around, voting, as a lover once snarkily said about his visits to me, with my feet. She made the role easy for me to play, not least because she was generous with her affection, unabashedly kissy . . . And she was also always specific in her language about who you were to her and why . . .

Miller briefly examines the friendship between Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton (the latter being the subject of a famous or infamous Middlebrook biography) and in this intimacy between poets she finds strength and solace for her connection to the failing Middlebrook. These references to Kumin and Sexton as well as to friendships between Simone de Beauvoir and Zaza Mabile, Paul Theroux and VS Naipaul, Gail Caldwell and Caroline Knapp, Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt, and Thelma and Louise(!) as well as comments from writers as varied as Aristotle and Virginia Woolf enhance Miller’s appreciation for the vicissitudes of friendship. Threaded through *My Brilliant Friends* is a running commentary on the best-selling novels of Elena Ferrante, which



Author, Nancy K. Miller. Artwork by Jojo Karlin.

dramatize the complicated ties between two friends who meet as girls in Naples.

While there is much to admire in Miller’s brave candor and graceful diction, this reader grew impatient with her limited scope. These scholars all wrote eloquently about women’s literature and, to some degree, about the lives of women authors, however; Miller focuses more on these friends’ positions in the academic *scene* than on their specific ideas, discoveries, and insights. Carolyn Heilbrun, in particular, is remembered for her generosity to young writers (something that I can personally confirm). But what about their lives beyond the departments and the pages? Miller doesn’t quite deliver on her subtitle, “Lives in Feminism.” I wanted to know more about these women as people, outside what she refers to as “the little world.” Families, especially, receive short shrift. There’s a little about Middlebrook’s daughter, but where are Heilbrun’s three children? What did these women do together or individually about reproductive rights, general pay equity, or sexual harassment? Did Miller discuss these feminist issues with them? Did they work at shelters or clinics? Did they canvas in primaries or drive people to the polls? I was left wondering: what did feminism mean to Miller and her friends, beyond the academy?

My frustrations aside, writing eloquently about such intellectually accomplished people is valuable. Certainly the book offers pleasing and provocative moments for academic readers. Others may flag at the parochial focus. Miller is a nimble writer, more than capable of exploring a larger world. And the world of women’s friendships contain multitudes. 🌐

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