



## My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism

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## BOOK REVIEW

***Rev. of My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism***, Nancy K. Miller, Columbia University Press, 2019, 232 pp., \$29 (Hardback), ISBN 978-0-2311-9054-1

Nancy K. Miller (born 1941) has extraordinary intellectual and emotional friendships with her female colleagues. Now an academic in her twilight years, living with a cancer diagnosis, she looks back on three departed and important women in her life and reflects on the theme of female friendship in general. She brings to bear the wisdom reaped from a full life and decades of erudition in her own work on French literature and autobiography. Her friendships are colored by the ideals of a noncompetitive 1970s feminism yet betray a very different, intimate and fierce, reality. We watch as these women manage ambition, jealousy, lovers, family life, and jockeying for rank and recognition in a male-dominated field. Miller paints a nuanced picture in tribute to her three brilliant friends: Carolyn Heilbrun, Naomi Schor, and Diane Middlebrook. And, in so doing, she emerges as a truthful, talented, flawed, and yet sincere player in her own field.

### **Carolyn Heilbrun (1926–2003)**

At the center of the friendship between Nancy Miller and Carolyn Heilbrun is a twenty-year tradition of meals starting in the late 1970s: “Two women having dinner on their own and talking over wine: That was Carolyn’s ideal of female friendship, Woolf’s Chloe and Olivia in their laboratory.”<sup>1</sup> But the portrait à deux is not confined to literary references. As they migrate from one unremarkable Upper West Side eating establishment to another, they talk about children and Nancy’s infertility, about politics in their workplace, Columbia University’s French department, and about food and body image, all of it with a disarming sincerity wrapped in high wit: “Carolyn took a dim view of raw fish, but she finally accepted a weekly dose of sashimi, though she insisted on a fork for the rice.”<sup>2</sup> Carolyn’s familiar book inscriptions to Nancy are a testimony to the multileveled intimacy the women establish: “Marking twenty years of conversation, raw fish, and my gratitude for your friendship,” inscribes Carolyn to Nancy on *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, Trilling*.<sup>3</sup>

Carolyn is a tenured powerhouse who writes a book a year—both academic and popular mysteries written under the pseudonym Amanda Cross. But Nancy does not dwell on her impressive achievements. Rather, she notes that they admire each other with humility and self-deprecation. Nancy admires how Carolyn sets her own standards, embracing heft and aging: “The hell with living on celery”—she quotes Carolyn’s New York patois.<sup>4</sup> Nancy astutely analyzes Carolyn’s character in her mystery books, the overweight, androgynous sleuth Woody, as her double. Carolyn, on the other hand, paints herself as “rumpled” compared to Nancy’s chic, French sartorial panache. Nancy praises Carolyn’s book *Writing a Woman’s Life*, particularly for its interest in unconventional women who write their own lives as did Carolyn. But Nancy too shines in her writing of her friend’s quixotic life and, as much, her death.

This chapter leaves quite a strong impression on the reader for how it narrates the meeting of these two exceptionally strong women in the adverse atmosphere of male-dominated Columbia, dubbed the “violent little universe on the shores of the Hudson.”<sup>5</sup> This opening chapter asks questions about the strong bonds of the heart and the mind within unequal friendships, setting the stage for Miller’s subsequent exploration of her relationship with erstwhile best friend Naomi Schor.

### Naomi Schor (1943–2001)

Miller’s title refers to Elena Ferrante’s novel *My Brilliant Friend*, and the parallel is closest in the friendship between the author and Naomi Schor. The real and fictitious friends are roughly contemporaries, coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Nancy likens herself to the studious and successful author Lenù, while Naomi is like the brilliant and beautiful entrepreneur Lila. Like Lenù’s, Nancy’s self-image is tied up in the accomplishments and aura of her friend, and she does not seem to notice her own brilliant abilities, instead yearning for approval. And, like the Italian friends, they compete over their accomplishments and for a shared pool of men: “I struggled not to envy her, as I had my sister. I sometimes succeeded. We were feminists, after all. We did not believe in penis envy and we did not believe in feminine rivalry.”<sup>6</sup> It is the true, messy portrait of gender and power thirst, sexuality mixed with idealism, that makes this chapter so appealing.

Nancy revels in how they are mistaken for sisters, and how Naomi is a better version than her real sister, but frets that Naomi is slightly better than she, more stylish and vivid, and dressing with more panache. Naomi seems happier: she is better married, she has more creative parents, and she later lands an Ivy League job to Nancy’s state-school job. While they

do not physically share the same men, there is a literary *ménage à trois* when Naomi's boyfriend Serge writes a book accusing them of a too-close friendship that competes with him.

Lurking in the background is the subtext of a discriminatory workplace and a job market heavily weighted toward men. Late in life, both bond over feeling left out of the footnotes of famous colleagues' books or not being invited abroad to lecture, overlooked when the men in their circles are not. Nancy paints an irresistibly dark portrait of one such man: the advisor she and Naomi share at Columbia, Michael Riffaterre. He is the supervillain and the only fleshed-out male character in the book. Ruling the roost at Columbia's French department, Riffaterre wields his power to vote on the junior women's faculty appointments, dangling his intellectual approval and sexual attentions. He tells Nancy that he would like to be on a desert island with her and "if life had been arranged differently, he would have besieged me with his attentions."<sup>7</sup> At a party, he looks her over "while gently grazing my right breast with his knuckles. His eyes never left mine."<sup>8</sup> Nancy leaves herself completely open to him, even haplessly begging for his approval when she asks "do you still believe in me?" during his office hours.<sup>9</sup> Riffaterre fails to answer or to support her career. As a reader, I cheered and shivered at the same time when Miller ultimately rejects Riffaterre, prompted by disparaging public remarks rejecting feminism because of how it was dismissive of him, the phallus.

In a way, Naomi dies twice for Nancy. But I will let the reader discover how. What I will say, however, is that Nancy tosses in how Jacques Derrida was a friend of Naomi's, and a quotation from Derrida is like a funeral epitaph concluding this chapter. Once again, they are grazed by a brilliant man, who upstages them.

### **Diane Middlebrook (1939–2007)**

The final tale of friendship offered here takes us again to the death as well as life of female friendship, here with flair and bitter twists of fate. Nancy befriends Diane late in life. Diane is only two years her senior but, one year into the friendship, she gets a cancer diagnosis, and she dies six years later. I had to put the chronology together as, in Nancy's recounting of it, the numbers do not quite match up. She tells us that the friendship with Diane began after the other two women's death. The slippage between history and memory is telling: life has messier overlaps but the emotional truth is there. Her friendships with Carolyn and Naomi presumably failing and her friends soon dead, she had been figuratively and then literally friend-orphaned and yearned for the intellectual

companionship of a fellow writer at the time she miraculously met a new friend. Diane proves to be more emotionally generous and more open with Nancy than her other two friends.

Because Diane and Nancy share the same field of biography writing and theory, and because this book is a memoir, this section reflects the most on the nature of memoir and writing a tribute. Nancy notes that, in terms of ethics in life writing, she does not have her deceased friends' permission to write a biography, and she is honest about her bias as she inserts herself into their portraits. That said, she has nothing but praise for Diane: "She was poise incarnate, and her prose sparked fire."<sup>10</sup> In fact, Diane's specialty was to write about great friendships, and she did so in a book about the poets Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin. Nancy writes that during Diane's convalescence, she was not yet aware of her own cancer diagnosis. In hindsight that is almost a eulogy, she feels Diane is more generous than she and was able to transform her pain into a meditation on writing, memoir, and truth.

*My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism* is a window onto the intimate spaces shared by highly accomplished women, be they an apparel fitting room or their collaboration on a book manuscript. It builds on Miller's signature weaving of the personal with the intellectual (the "creative critical"<sup>11</sup>), employing a refreshing hybrid approach. For while it is written in the first person, it includes academic footnotes and refers to famous friendships, be they Thelma and Louise or Montaigne and Étienne de la Boétie. It is part of a current of literature in which academic women frankly link their personal with their academic research, often in France—for example, Eunice Lipton's *Alias Olympia* (1992) and Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons: A Memoir* (1993). Yet Miller is somehow more visceral, and proud to understand the feminism and beauty of what others (myself included) might have relegated to marginalia before reading this book.

In an earlier memoir, *Breathless: An American Girl in Paris* (2013), Miller focuses on lovers and her husband in the context of chauvinistic French society. It is a more classic coming-of-age tale of how Miller learns to dress like the French, eat like the French, and interact with male expatriate and French academics. She establishes her voice as an intelligent, intellectual free agent, then leaves her marriage to return to her native New York. *My Brilliant Friends* picks up where *Breathless* left off.

Reading both books, I was struck by how women's status has barely evolved between our generations. I lived in Paris off and on from the 1980s and began my career in the 1990s; Miller began her narrative in Paris in the 1950s and in New York in the 1970s. I feel a particular

kinship with her because we both live between Paris and New York, and frequent some of the same shops and restaurants. I too have written a memoir of these years to parallel my academic work—a way of making sense of my trajectory. My friends and I were likewise belittled by male colleagues and faculty in our beds and in the wood-paneled offices and seminar rooms of the Sorbonne and the Art History and Archaeology department in Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia. Perhaps in my day disparagement is more subtle and hidden beneath a rhetoric of equality and statistics that lie about parity. But the fact is that I have still encountered discrimination and chauvinists, still struggle for crumbs, and still strategically try to dress like the French in order to navigate academia.

Miller's book is a quiet revolution that creates a new space for women's friendships. She reminds us to cherish the friendships we have because what if, in the end, the erstwhile marginalia, and that marginal space relegated to women in academia and at large, is actually the central nerve of all creative intellectual life? Miller recognizes the transformative power and centrality of the nitty-gritty in women's outer and inner lives, and the vital, enduring friendships they form.

## Notes

1. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 17.
2. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 19.
3. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 46.
4. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 9.
5. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 15.
6. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 84.
7. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 122.
8. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 102.
9. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 121.
10. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 150.
11. Contemporary critical practice has become self-reflective, and a sizeable minority of academics have even penned their own memoirs. Conversely, life writing practitioners are more engaged with the theoretical debates that surround creative practice. Jolly, "Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice," 878–889.

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