THE GLAMOROUS WRITING LIFE

A TRIBUTE TO CATHLEEN MILLER, REED MAGAZINE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF EMERITA

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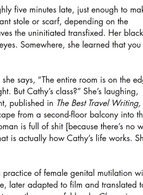

Cathleen Miller is an American nonfiction writer who, with Waris Dirie, co-wrote Desert Flower, which has been cited by the United Nations as playing a major role in advocating against female genital mutilation. Miller earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Penn State, and she was a Creative Writing professor at San José State University for 15 years, where she also served as Editor-in-Chief of Reed Magazine from 2013 until 2020.

Photo Credit: Daniel Garcia

On any first day of class at San José State University, Professor Cathleen Miller arrives roughly five minutes late, just enough to make sure all of the students are waiting. She waltzes into the room wearing a large hat, an elegant stole or scarf, depending on the weather—something she can dramatically whisk off, a flourish of style and pizzazz that leaves the uninitiated transfixed. Her black hair waves around her face, its darkness directing attention to the bright lipstick, the sharp eyes. Somewhere, she learned that you only have one chance to make a first impression, and hers is always a grand entrance.

Former MFA student Jen Clem gushes admiration for Miller. Regarding the first day of class, she says, "The entire room is on the edge of our seats. The first day they usually read the syllabus, and you think, I guess it'll be all right. But Cathy's class?" She's laughing, eyes wide. "Cathy starts telling this story of Brazil, these bandits coming." In Miller's account, published in *The Best Travel Writing, Volume 11*, she had been held at gunpoint and barely managed a harrowing nighttime escape from a second-floor balcony into the Brazilian jungle. While the class was gripped, Clem says, "I'm sitting there thinking, this woman is full of shit [because there's no way that happened]. She's an incredible storyteller. When you get to know Cathy, you realize that is actually how Cathy's life works. She opened a portal, and you're in another dimension."

Author, professor, and world traveler, Cathleen Miller brought global attention to the horrific practice of female genital mutilation with the 1998 publication of *Desert Flower*, an international best-selling biography of Waris Dirie, later adapted to film and translated to more than fifty-five languages. Fueled in part by a grant from the United Nations, Miller wrote another powerful book, *Champion of Choice*, covering the life of Dr. Nafis Sadik, the first female leader of a UN agency. Miller, as an indispensable professor in the SJSU MFA program, served as editor-in-chief of *Reed Magazine* from 2013 until 2020, doubling its pages and restyling it into a splendid, full-color journal. As Director for the Center for Literary Arts, a thriving organization at San José State University, she raised the profile of the university by bringing a slate of award-winning authors to campus.

"It felt like Hollywood!" Jessica Keaton, MFA, recalls of her time working with Miller for both *Reed* and the CLA. Keaton fondly remembers dinners, drinks, and after parties with a slew of award-winning authors—T.C. Boyle, Susan Orlean, and Andre Dubus III among her favorites. Chris Krohn, former mayor and city councilmember of Santa Cruz, reflects on Miller's presentation of authors. Krohn says that after learning the renowned writer Jonathan Franzen would be speaking about a "very downbeat and demoralizing [topic on] why the earth is dying" at a literary arts fundraising event, Miller "turned his talk around. She got him to change…right before going on stage!" She believed the material wasn't right for the audience, Krohn says, and something from his books would better drive donations. He smiles, saying she was right.

Miller's influence enlivened the literary milieu of campus and connected students to literary professionals in other ways. In 2017, she organized a conference that brought top travel writers, editors, and publishers to SJSU, including Don George, travel writer for the *San Francisco Examiner* and editor for *Lonely Planet* and *National Geographic*. As host of the literary events and conferences that brought such talent, Miller always seemed surrounded by fame. Every year of her editorship, she took *Reed* staff to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference and Bookfair, where publishers, academics, and well-known writers gather. Former *Reed* staffer Carmen Patiño appreciates the life lessons she learned from Miller: "She made me a better writer and a better employee." She recalls Miller advising students that AWP "is your one chance to shine. How you present yourself is everything." Patiño adds with a smile that "Cathy taught me all the magic happens at the bar and whoever sits next to you. That's exactly how I got my internship overseas!"

Reed veteran Timothy Cech says Miller helped him launch into the MFA program by accepting his application for the key position of fiction editor. As a new student, he had assumed Miller was "a pretentious academic person," stuffy and unapproachable. He smiles. "Little did I know she's sassy Cathy, who is just as much about business as going out afterwards to let loose." She taught students, he says, to be mindful and appropriately pitch the publication, even outside of the workspace. Cech details how Miller taught them to work hard: when in informal spaces, be aware of timing, when you might seize the opportunity to get an internship or, as Cathy did, sell a book to a publisher. Her students learned not just how to build a product, but how to sell it, how to market themselves, how to have a good time, and how to take advantage of every moment—all skills she learned the hard way.

Lily Dayton, a former *Reed* editor and MFA student, first met Miller at a literary event. "It's because of her and that meeting that I applied to SJSU. I wanted to be a part of this!" She says Miller is "a force to be reckoned with," given all of her accomplishments and her support for a whole community of emerging writers—a role that earned her the award of Silicon Valley Artist Laureate for her influence on the region's literary community. Miller referred to her MFA students as her "Flock." Their gatherings, "Flock-ins," were "fueled by inspiration, conviviality, creativity, a few glasses of wine, and magic," according to poet Mark Heinlein. "The universe bends beneath her magnetism."

With Miller, everything has an aspect of intrigue but also an air of the incongruous. While researching one story, the well-dressed Southern belle traveled in an old Winnebago—in St. Petersburg, Russia—to interview sex workers. Miller's life is rich with these happenings, but it hasn't always been so worldly.

The Early Life

Miller is the first of two children born to Bobby Boyd Miller and Paula Irene Burns in the bootheel of Missouri. Miller's father, after discharge from the Navy during the Korean War, worked nights in a factory. Fretting his absence, his wife Paula would stay up late watching TV while a young Cathy comforted her until he returned. But sometimes he didn't come back for a day or more, and eventually he never returned. On December 17, 1966, a cold early morning in St Louis, Cathy's mother died by suicide. "Gunshot wound of the brain, self-inflicted," reads the death certificate. The *Birdhouse Chronicles*, Miller's 2002 memoir, includes glimpses of this pivotal event in Miller's life. The book reveals a longing, a sense that the adult writer wishes she could time-travel and comfort her mother through the darker days.

Cathy, age ten, and her sister Susan spent the rest of their childhoods with their maternal grandparents in a flimsy mobile home in tornado country, where Cathy "felt frightened, helpless, and exposed, as if hiding in a toy box tossed around by a giant." She longed for a permanent home, preferably of stone.

When storms came, Cathy writes that she watched her grandpa "fetch his straw or felt fedora—depending on the season—check the mirror to be sure his hat was cocked at the proper angle, and head out into the gale. Just because his life might be in danger was not a good enough reason for a man to go out improperly dressed." This admiration for her grandpa may have led to Miller's own penchant for hats. "It takes a certain person to wear a hat, a certain amount of self-confidence and desire to be the center of attention," says friend and former student Sharon Simonson. "If you are going to wear a hat, you had better not be a bore." Miller has been many things. A bore is not one.

Miller "eagerly" left her life in Pemiscot County soon after high school. Her memoir, however, omits formative details of marrying as a teen, being abused by her husband, and escaping back to Grandpa, who then pointed a gun at the husband and told him to never return. Carmen Patiño, who experienced a similarly challenging childhood, says, "Cathy is glamorous, but most of the decisions she made were for her survival." Miller has since become a great supporter for women's rights, reflected in her TEDx talk on how to raise your daughter to become a world leader, and her two books about influential women.

Miller finally came into her true self thanks to government aid for college. At Southeast Missouri State University, she studied art and cultivated a persona. In her memoir, she writes that she "didn't know Chardonnay from Shinola until [she] moved to California" years later. But when dealing with the city girls who called her a dimwit, Miller brilliantly turned a perceived weakness into panache: she acted like Scarlett O'Hara, describing with flourish the sylvan life, "though my family's plantation raised watermelons instead of cotton." Miller had transformed from bumpkin to belle, gaining not only independence and style, but also a firm sense of self.

Former student Nikolina KuliDžan, a Foreign Service Officer serving at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, admires that style, observing that "whether she was teaching a class, tipsily flirting at a party, or having a heart-to-heart with you, she was always in her voice. There were moments when I wondered which part was artifice and which part the real Cathy, but I've come to believe that it was always all her. Perhaps she had fashioned and constructed some aspects of herself, but she didn't do so to conceal where she came from or what she had left behind, but because it was the only way for her to become her true self."

The Drudgery

Writing, Miller tells her students, is often a lonely affair full of drudgery and rejection letters, a point she makes not to discourage, but to encourage her Flock. "You just keep sending your work out," she insists—even though payment is more likely to manifest in Washingtons than Franklins. "I always think of her telling us that when she was in grad school, she would go to the post office every Friday and submit something," recalled Chris Krohn in admiration of Miller's persistence.

Sometimes the writing itself takes an immense toll. While working on *Champion of Choice*, for example, Miller fell into depression—not just the melancholy a writer gets when confronting subjects of torture, rape, and sex trafficking—but the kind that entwines with dark spirits, self-doubt, and impostor syndrome. The whirlwind trip around the world, interviewing and hobnobbing with world leaders and ambassadors, had long faded and the real work of writing had caught her in a pit of quicksand. Divorce, moving homes, heavy teaching loads, and a long-past-due manuscript compounded the feelings. Her instincts shouted, "Run away," but she had obligations to fulfill, bills to pay, tenure to secure.

Retired teacher Steve "Spike" Wong remembers the last class of one particular term. "Cathy says, 'I just want to tell you that all semester long I was going through a divorce.' She was at one end of the table and I was at the other. I remember clearly my mouth dropping. I knew how fucking hard my divorce was and teaching through it was agony."

"A key to Cathy's character is that, like Gandhi and Lincoln, she lost a parent when she was young," said colleague Scott Winfield Sublett, who dedicated his book, *Screenwriting for Neurotics*, to his friend Cathy. "I think that explains her incredible resourcefulness and self-reliance. People who lose parents young get the message that they have to do it for themselves. She doesn't believe in luck. She believes in herself."

Additional anguish came when students in her nonfiction courses wrote about suicidal tendencies—a topic their professor understood all too well. They also described their bouts with depression, bulimia, and abuse. Whenever there was some trauma from writing, she'd laughingly say, "It's the glamorous life of the writer." Although that laughter belies the emotional truth, Miller is nothing if not resilient and disciplined. "I really respect her," says Candice Wynne. "She was very successful. She had her party side, but she had her sit-in-that-chair-and-finish-that-book side to her, you know? Serious." And sit in the chair Miller did, sequestering herself one summer until the *Champion of Choice* manuscript was complete. At just over five hundred pages, the book, with all its source material and interviews, is an impressive professional accomplishment.

The Flock Speaks

Miller's classes have attracted many talented people. Jan McCutcheon and Spike Wong met in class, forming an imprint that produced three books and launched McCutcheon's publishing career. They both appreciated Miller showing up for their readings and book launches. "Her heart is really, really big," says Wong. At one event, while reading a piece about his infant son's death, he says, "I caught her eye. I could see her starting to cry. She came up to me after. She said, 'I never heard that before.' That shows how genuine she is."

Like many former students, Thalia Adry saved all of the feedback from Miller. "Cathy had written that I have the voice of a true essayist," Adry remembers, "and that this was a rare and important gift to nurture. Her feedback was not only kind and encouraging but challenging. She knew where to ask more questions so that I might 'dig deeper,' as she'd say." Adnan Adnan, an engineer who was transformed by Cathy's class and has since drafted dozens of novels and memoirs, says Miller "was willing to listen and give me a chance. I was about 30, going through a spiritual conflict, a little bit lost, and [her] class gave structure to my life. I looked forward to it every week." Jen Clem, among many others, benefited from Cathy's approach to feedback. "She could see what you were trying to accomplish. She didn't try to change your style. She didn't let other students' feedback derail your work." Miller "returned to what you were trying to accomplish," Clem adds.

Miller's support of her students also led to career opportunities for them, as with Les Brady. "Cathy asked me to serve as a [teaching assistant] in her undergraduate creative writing course. I was thrilled! I'm getting a little emotional," he says, waving a hand to air his face. "It gave me a stepping stone to get to where I wanted to go. To be on the other side of the desk, so to speak. I loved doing it. I got to see how much work is involved in building just one course." Soon after, Brady was hired to teach creative writing, and he thanks Miller for her support and coaching. "I said, 'I'm not sure how it will go on the first day.' And she said 'Oh honey, don't worry. They'll be terrified of you!'"

A Bird Flies Across the Pond

I was completing my MFA in fall 2004 when Miller started teaching at San José State University. She'd left a part-time job at the University of San Francisco for the coveted tenure-track position at SJSU. She was struck by my forwardness—instead of asking if she'd be my advisor, I just assumed she would do it. She was living in San Francisco where she and members of her travel writing group, the Wild Writing Women, held literary salons. I drove a few students to the city to experience the "glamorous writing life." The highlight of the night was hearing Miller introduce us to the group—not as students but as bona fide writers. The crowd clapped for each of us, and for the first time, I felt like a real writer. Although I hadn't known her for long, she validated my work. When I handed her my wobbly thesis, she dutifully read it on her summer break flight to Ireland.

Over the years, Cathy and I worked together on a variety of projects. In 2016, I suggested that she apply to the Fulbright Program and spend a semester teaching abroad. Many of our happy hour conversations revolved around dreams of moving abroad or at least having lives that let us travel. A year later I received an email from the Fulbright Commission about a position with an extended deadline, so I again encouraged my friend. She applied, was awarded the Fulbright, and set off for England, where she wrote a series of refugees' profiles for Al Jazeera News while also serving as Distinguished Chair of the Humanities at the University of Manchester.

The now-retired Professor Miller has no plans to give up the "glamorous writing life." She's picked up a writing project—a novel—that she'd set aside twenty years ago. She felt it was the perfect segue for this time in her life, saying, "It's a biographical novel about the photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who spent his life criss-crossing the pond, spending time in California and England—two places close to my heart."