



## The World Below

*Sue Miller*

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## **The World Below** Sue Miller

From the author of **While I Was Gone**, a stunning new novel that showcases Sue Miller's singular gift for exposing the nerves that lie hidden in marriages and families, and the hopes and regrets that lie buried in the hearts of women.

Maine, 1919. Georgia Rice, who has cared for her father and two siblings since her mother's death, is diagnosed, at nineteen, with tuberculosis and sent away to a sanitarium. Freed from the burdens of caretaking, she discovers a nearly lost world of youth and possibility, and meets the doomed young man who will become her lover.

Vermont, the present. On the heels of a divorce, Catherine Hubbard, Georgia's granddaughter, takes up residence in Georgia's old house. Sorting through her own affairs, Cath stumbles upon the true story of Georgia's life and marriage, and of the misunderstanding upon which she built a lasting love.

With the tales of these two women--one a country doctor's wife with a haunting past, the other a twice-divorced San Francisco schoolteacher casting about at midlife for answers to her future--Miller offers us a novel of astonishing richness and emotional depth. Linked by bitter disappointments, compromise, and powerful grace, the lives of Georgia and Cath begin to seem remarkably similar, despite their distinctly different times: two young girls, generations apart, motherless at nearly the same age, thrust into early adulthood, struggling with confusing bonds of attachment and guilt; both of them in marriages that are not what they seem, forced to make choices that call into question the very nature of intimacy, faithfulness, betrayal, and love. Marvelously written, expertly told, **The World Below** captures the shadowy half-truths of the visible world, and the beauty and sorrow submerged beneath the surfaces of our lives--the lost world of the past, our lost hopes for the future. A tour de force from one of our most beloved storytellers.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## **The World Below Details**

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## From Reader Review The World Below for online ebook

### Barbara says

Some would classify Miller's book as "Summer Reading", but since I do not follow that trend, I would state that although in some respects it could be considered light, I enjoyed the ebb and flow of her writing. It soon becomes clear that the author has tapped thoughtful, reflective depths. Simply stated, it is about woman, who following two failed marriages and other life changes, goes to live in her grandmother's home in rural Vermont. While trying to find new directions for her own existence, she comes upon her grandmother's faithfully penned diaries. At this point, the narrative traverses the years of the older woman's youth and alternates with similar periods of her granddaughter's development. Miller was able to establish an interesting tension with this device.

This is a wonderful novel of personal discovery, family relationships and budding maturity. The Vermont countryside and the seasonal variations were vividly portrayed.

### ADDENDUM

Although I read this book some time ago, when reading my original review, I realized a feature of this story which I omitted and had recalled when I thought about the story of the "world below". I refer to the interesting history of the building of the Quabbin Reservoir in the 1930's in Western Massachusetts, which submerged towns. There have been tales and speculation about ghosts and remnants of previous civilization there. For an history, consult Wikipedia, or view [video.wgbh.org/video/2365046325](http://video.wgbh.org/video/2365046325) for interesting video coverage.

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### Brian says

In San Francisco fifty-two year old Catherine is attempting to remake her life after the collapse of her second marriage. When her aunt dies, Catherine inherits her grandmother's house in New England. Could this offer the chance of a new beginning? Catherine quits her job and travels across the country to the old house where her mother's mental instability meant that she spent many years of her childhood sheltering in the apparent tranquillity of her grandparents' world.

Here she begins a process of remembering her childhood while at the same time slowly unpicking the truth about her grandmother's life from a bundle of letters she discovers in the attic. It soon becomes clear that her grandparents' relationship, which had seemed so stable and unremarkable when Catherine had been a child, was far more complex and turbulent than she could ever have imagined.

This is a beautifully written book, full of reflection and with a luminous quality to the writing, particularly in those scenes set in the sanatorium where Georgia, Catherine's grandmother, is sent to recover from tuberculosis and where the imminence of death makes the inmates so hungry for life that they snatch at love with frantic greediness.

Immensely absorbing and wonderfully observed, this is the kind of fiction that does not merely entertain but seems to actually enlarge your world and increase your understanding of what it is to be human. I was filled with dismay when I found I had reached the end.

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### **Colleen says**

I found myself not liking the main characters in this book very much and either didn't think the novel had much to say or didn't care for what it did say. The women in the story had a frustrating way of blaming others or circumstances for the choices they themselves made. And they seemed to make a lot of baffling turns and sudden changes of direction that made no sense in the context of the novel to me. I couldn't relate to them and I couldn't appreciate them, either. Sometimes a novel with unlikable characters will still have something meaningful to say, but the significant message of this book (if there was one) was lost on me.

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### **Claire says**

I just finished this book. It was passed on to me, which is the only reason I read it. After reading it, I was mad at myself for wasting as much time as I did reading this book. It was poorly written and really had no point. It was about a woman, who was trying to figure out her place in life, who goes back to her grandmother's house for a few months. It was boring, and just seemed to go on and on, leaving the reader to think that the ending must be REALLY good and a REALLY good surprise to make up for the rest of the book. Unfortunately, the ending is just as boring. If you need a book to help you sleep at night, this is the book for you.

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### **Margritte says**

I'm not sure what my final impressions of the book must be. The parallel between Cath and her grandmother Georgia did not work for me that well. I might have missed something.

The grandmother's story could have been told on its own and it would have been a very strong, unusual and powerful story. It was watered down by both 1) trying to add Cath's (mundane) story to it and making her the main character instead of Georgia, and 2) using sexual innuendos to 'enhance' the story, which did not work at all.

However, I see the desperate sexual intercourse between the eight-month pregnant Georgia and her husband, which he initiated after she confessed the love affair in the sanitarium to him, not as an act of forgiveness, but as an act of control.

He kept her locked up in the San, way longer than she should have been there, and then married her shortly after her release. He not only robbed her of her choices, but kept control over her for the rest of his life. But she did make her choices where he could not control it and it left her with beautiful memories of a first, although sad, love affair. Her bravery to oppose the control, allowed her to find closure at her first love's grave.

I see a connection between the baby, Jessie, born way too early and being kept in ICU, connected to machines, and her great-grandmother Georgia's 'incarceration' in the sanitarium, in the sense that they both were fighting for their survival without any control over the decisions that was made on their behalf to save their lives. But the strength of the great-grandmother came through in the little helpless baby with Cath as the

mediator to connect the two stories of the two generations.

The plot just did not rock my boat at all. There were unnecessary additions in the form of too many side characters. Cath's story should have been told on its own. Her life choices however, changed after she studied her grandmother's diary. It helped her to find her own independence and look for love in totally different places than she previously tried to and constantly lost.

The novel was written for another kind of reader. Sue Miller, has a beautiful, gentle, writing style. She is a talented builder of word castles and will reach the audiences it was intended for without a doubt.

The book was a gift to me. I am not one of her chosen readers. And that's probably sad too! I obviously missed the boat on this one and my interpretation might be totally wrong. But goodness it almost bored me to tears, to be honest. Perhaps I will one day try to read it again and find something different in it.

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### **Alan says**

Sue Miller's characters read; this makes them far more interesting, more complex than most American characters. In this novel, the central character reads letters of her great-grandmother who had been institutionalized at nineteen. This led to a lifetime, a marriage, of unsuspected depths and doubts.

Such reading characters should also interest Goodreads afficianados. In the World Below, the life of the TB asylum is exposed, in a sense. All that time, nothing to do: of course relationships developed, sex happened. The main alternatives to sex may have been meals and reading. Asylum meals never made five-star ratings, so that left sex and reading.

For nearly forty years I taught at a small college where my Division Chair had been diagnosed with TB in the fifties. He claimed it was sheer chance that he went not to a surgeon, but to an internist. He felt a surgeon might well have killed him. The internist sent him to an asylum--where he read three to five books a week for over a year. One would be hard pressed to achieve such a literary education at a four year college. Was TB God's gift to literature?

Perhaps I should not add, my paternal relatives populated the town below the lake, below Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts. As a child I fished on Quabbin, and in many sections of the northern part where fishing was allowed you could see stone walls running under the lake, fifteen feet down, to where the depth obscured them.

I invited Sue Miller to read at my Bristol Community College, which she did, in October, 2006, in our largest room, filled with a hundred students and colleagues. In a black jacket and with hair curly, she could not stay for lunch because she took her god-daughter out to lunch. A wonderful reading, from this book, the longest passage some twenty minutes. She engaged my students, many returning women and mothers in their twenties. She answered questions articulately; for example, she has a small diary, 6" by 2.5", of her grandmother's, mostly banal, but: "I would like to lie in the earth. Today I seemed doomed to disappointment."

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## **Jan Priddy says**

This novel came out just as I was revising a novel of my own. A woman is left by her husband (and not even for a younger woman), divorces, and moves from Vancouver, WA, to her grandmother's broken down house in Astoria where finds the grandmother's diary in the attic, her grandmother's secret out-of-wedlock pregnancy at age 15 in East Tennessee, and so forth.

If it sounds familiar that's because *The World Below* by Sue Miller is pretty much the same story. When I read a review of this novel, I might have cried. I waited for the paperback to read it. Like mine, hers has many parallel experiences between generations. I read the novel in complete despair, trying to convince myself that this was a quite different novel. It isn't. It is not a bit funny (and mine was), but Miller is a fine writer and I confess I liked her book.

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## **Kim says**

I like Sue Miller. I have read a few of her books and rub my hands in excitement at the fact that I have unread offerings on my bookshelves.

The story of this book revolves around two women, Georgia the grandmother and Catherine her granddaughter. Catherine is all grown up and becomes a grandmother herself by the end of the book.

The book very easily and clearly moves between the stories of the women. Georgia's grandmother is also a character, briefly, as is Catherine's granddaughter. And yet this is not an epic in any way. It is the story of women. It is the story of the things women have happen to them. It is the story of the secrets women keep.

It is also the story of the discovery of one's roots; of the randomness of existence. But for a single event none of us may exist - our grandparent's grandparents had to meet in order for us to be. And maybe as the end we justify any means.

I got this off another review because I could not have said it better: Miller is a remarkable writer; her ability to give you immense detail in quick and easy segments is a true gift. Her characters are drawn so masterfully that you will feel like you have met them before, in real life. Georgia, whose story is relayed to us bit by bit, is as perfect a literary creation as any character can be --- and Miller, because she takes her time to reveal little by little Georgia's haunted past, keeps the reader so completely involved that they won't be able to put this book down for a moment.

The stories of the two women are gripping in their apparent simplicity. But the depth of their stories slowly becomes evident, sucking the reader further into the story and the interlinked lives of the generations of women in the book.

Men appear in the book too and Miller's acute sense of the lives of women does not exclude men at all.

The last paragraph of the book will knock your socks off.

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## **Roger Brunyate says**

### **Grandparents**

Sue Miller's 2001 novel begins with a chapter that is stunningly beautiful in its simplicity. An old lady drives with her husband in a horse and buggy to visit her recently-widowed son in law with the offer to take her young granddaughters off his hands, so they could grow up in a real home. The son-in-law politely refuses, the girls even laugh behind her back, but none of this matters because the chapter is so full of human truth that it shines in its own beauty.

I thought it merely a prelude—and so it is; that particular grandmother never reappears in the story. But I soon came to realize that Miller's entire novel is constructed on a scaffold of grandmother-granddaughter relationships. Georgia, the elder of the girls who refuse to be rescued in the prelude, is revealed as the grandmother of the contemporary narrator, Cath, who by the end of the book has a granddaughter of her own. Seven generations in all, a regular family saga, except that the novel is not told linearly and the intervening generations play little part in the story. The main emphasis is on the parallel lives of Cath (surely the author's alter ego) and her grandmother Georgia.

Parallel, but different in so many ways. Georgia lived a long and largely uneventful married life in a small Vermont town. Cath, twice divorced, returns from San Francisco to take possession of her grandparents' old house and decide whether to move in or sell it. Much has changed, but she comes upon old diaries and of course she has her own memories. The downside of the book is that not much happens, and even the long-buried secrets do not seem all that shocking. The upside of the book is that not much happens, but that fact alone brings it closer to everyday truth. The secrets do not need to be shocking; all they have to do is to have us leap the generations and see these older men and women as people like ourselves. And in this, the author succeeds with quiet assurance. At times, this even reads like a memoir; whether biographical or not, one feels that Sue Miller must have had remarkable grandparents herself to call forth such an act of love.

The title, incidentally, will not be explained until close to the very end. It will emerge as a beautifully evocative image of how the lives of one generation lie quietly below the lives of those that follow, hidden unless one cares to look, the past a silent partner to the future.

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### **Wendy says**

Sue Miller does such a beautiful job of showing the relationships of women from the same family and how they understand one another! Her writing is impeccable. She shies away from over sentimentality as this lovely story unfold as a set of grandmother's diaries are uncovered.

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### **Chrissie says**

This is about a grandmother and her grandchild. The parallels drawn between their two lives were, for me, too similar.

The plot touches upon life in a TB sanatorium. This I found to be remarkably well done, particularly how it might have felt to be consigned there. Guilt and fear. The horror of seeing others die. The need to grab

whatever you can of life before it is gone.

The 1930s construction of the Quabbin Reservoir and the subsequent submerging of several towns in Massachusetts plays into the tale too. To get a better understanding of these events, I read this article on Wiki: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quabbin>... I found it difficult to know what or who's version to believe.

The audiobook is very well narrated by Judith Ivey.

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### **E says**

Comparing professional reviews of Sue Miller's books (from such eminent places as the New York Times, LA Times, Publishers Weekly, Booklist, etc.) to the reviews and ratings that she tends to get on Goodreads makes me think that perhaps she is not getting the audience or kudos she deserves on this site. But I really enjoyed and admired Miller's weaving together of the two stories that dominate this book. Perhaps because my grandmother was also in a TB sanitarium after World War I, I was fascinated by the unfolding of Georgia's story through the perspective of / contrast with her middle-aged granddaughter Cath as Cath finds diaries and letters to augment stories she has heard from the past to quilt together her grandparents' story.

I was reminded somewhat of Anne Tyler's books in that there is no great conflict to drive this narrative forward--mostly just the unfolding of everyday life--and it is focused on family relationships across time. But, while I like Tyler, her writing sometimes seems a bit pedestrian to me (and her characters overly crotchety and self-serving), while Miller's lovely imagery, descriptions, and symbolism provide a lyrical, thoughtful storytelling that makes her writing sing in this book about how memory works, how we read and learn from the past, how we figure out – step by step – how to live meaningful lives. Several times while I was reading, I was arrested by a particularly evocative sentence or paragraph and had to read it several times because it felt so good to hear it in my head and see its picture in my mind.)

Perhaps one needs to have been through a certain stage/age of life to appreciate twice-divorced-and-somewhat-unsettled Cath as a character and narrator. I liked her relationship to her adult children, and while I didn't necessarily want to be part of their family, there are times when I wished I could be part of this book: crunching through a swath of fallen golden leaves in a New England autumn, peering into rippling Maine lake waters to try glimpsing the buildings of a long-ago buried town, wandering outside to stand in an angle of sunshine on a warm San Francisco Christmas day, strolling through snow as it falls on the village green on a dusky winter Vermont evening, snuggling into a dark corner booth in the local Babcock Inn to have a burger and a glass of "raw Chianti." The images from these scenes and the feelings that they evoked will stay with me for some time.

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### **Mary says**

I really enjoyed the book this second time around. And as I read it, I found that they were certain things about the story that were familiar though it took a while to get to that point. There were only a couple of things about it that I wasn't crazy about but the rest of it makes up for it. I love the descriptions. Sue Miller has a talent for writing that I envy. It makes me feel that if I could write, this is how and what I would write about. We get to go on a little adventure of sorts. Solving a mystery about someone's personal life that we uncover as we turn the pages. It's a little exciting and what's more you're being shown the things you might

have overlooked if you were on this journey alone. I'm so glad that I did not carelessly toss this book into the donation box without giving it a second chance. As I read, I came across so many pages that I had dog-eared and for the most part, it was obvious to me what made an impression on me as I came across it. But the other pages that I dog-eared, I'm going to have to let it come to me, as I know it will when I read such a book. Maybe a week or two will go by and I'll be all absorbed in something else and suddenly the words I read will come back to me and I'll have realized something. Something that was almost "on the tip of my tongue" significant at the time I'd read it. I love books that do that for me. That is probably why I held onto this book in the first place after having read it in 2004 and I realized that the reason I had not made a note (at that time) in my little record of books that I've read was because I could not pick just one line or phrase that I usually can pinpoint as the "idea" behind the whole story - what I refer to as THE essence of the book (as I see it). I will hang on to a book until I feel like I have made that discovery of "the essence". I rarely read other's opinions of books until after I read the book for myself. I do not want to be discouraged from reading something I have selected from the books that I have stock-piled over the years. But I do enjoy finding and reading the opinions of others who feel the way I do about a particular book. I prefer the comradery of enjoyment of a book. I hope to find many "good or great" Goodreads reviews of this book.

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### **Shauna says**

A good book about relationships through generations of time. I prefered the storyline of Georgia and her life rather than that of present day Cath. At times I felt the author was forcing the parallels between the two characters. They both lost their mothers in their youth, they both were given a chance to live with their grandparents after the death of their mothers, they were both able to have their lives changed by being away from family for a time; Georgia in the sanitorium and Cath in Paris. I really would have liked the diary to be a bigger part of the story. Also, I would have liked to know how Georgia's relationship with her grandmother was changed after her choice was made on where she wanted to live. I really liked the way the author transitioned from Cath's story to Georgia's story, it wasn't always at the end of a chapter like in most books that switch time frames so often. An example: Cath will be thinking to herself of a memory of a story her grandmother had told her in the past and then all of a sudden the perspective was being told by Georgia. The only thing that really bugged me about this book was all the sex. Way more than The Time Travelers Wife. There was teen sex, sex in a sanatorium, affair sex, masturbation, and much more all described in way too much detail. The story would have been fine had the details been left out of some of the sex scenes.

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### **Candice says**

About a schizophrenic wife: "He hoped, he always hoped this; it's the disease that affects those who love people who are ill - that this would be a turning point for her, that things might be different from now on. She would make friends, she would have a life in the world that compelled and occupied her." Boy, aint that the truth. There's also an interesting discussion about keeping a diary, why, and why one would not destroy it. Haven't read Miller in a long time and I remember now why she impressed me so much - she's very relatable, realistic and wise.

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