



The Senator's Wife

Sue Miller

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Once again Sue Miller takes us deep into the private lives of women with this mesmerizing portrait of two marriages exposed in all their shame and imperfection, and in their obdurate, unyielding love. The author of the iconic *The Good Mother* and the best-selling *While I Was Gone* brings her marvelous gifts to a powerful story of two unconventional women who unexpectedly change each other's lives.

Meri is newly married, pregnant, and standing on the cusp of her life as a wife and mother, recognizing with some terror the gap between reality and expectation. Delia Naughton—wife of the two-term liberal senator Tom Naughton—is Meri's new neighbor in the adjacent New England town house. Delia's husband's chronic infidelity has been an open secret in Washington circles, but despite the complexity of their relationship, the bond between them remains strong. What keeps people together, even in the midst of profound betrayal? How can a journey imperiled by, and sometimes indistinguishable from, compromise and disappointment culminate in healing and grace? Delia and Meri find themselves leading strangely parallel lives, both reckoning with the contours and mysteries of marriage, one refined and abraded by years of complicated intimacy, the other barely begun.

Here are all the things for which Sue Miller has always been beloved—the complexity of experience precisely rendered, the richness of character and emotion, the superb economy of style—fused with an utterly engrossing story that has a great deal to say to women, and men, of all ages.

The Senator's Wife Details

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Author : Sue Miller

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M says

The first word that comes to mind is 'uncomfortable.' This might have to do with reading it on the absolute most hellish plane ride ever, but it also had to do with the general content. This book was one of those - wow it would be so good if she would just x,y,z and the rest of the alphabet ...

The plot was set up well enough - couple moves next to aging woman who has been 'the senators wife' for ages, in that she has watched her senator husband cheat on her repeatedly and struggled with standing by him or bolting - meanwhile the couple is a lot younger and obsessed with the senators wife (she is so graceful, so beautiful, so classy yap yap yap ... personally i cant see me hitting it off with someone who says 'one' instead of you or me or we ... and tosses around cliches that sound like bad fortune cookies) and then, I dont know, nothing really happens until everything falls apart.

First of all, Miller has this incredibly annoying habit of writing the most mundane details - what, does this make her a more observant, perceptive and insightful writer? No. It makes the reader wonder, oh is this leading up to something interesting? No, she really is just putting the bread away, and I am just somehow supposed to care.

Second, her dialogue is painful - convenient turns of phrase to suit her purposes.

Third, and this is similar to number one, she is the queen of red herrings. Husband seems like a jerk and controlling in the beginning - a flag. But no. Nothing happens like that. So I dont know if I am supposed to like him or not because he just isnt explored.

As to the discomfort - this had the absolute most depressing and horrifying description of both pregnancy and labor such that I am happy to swear off both, and the way the book ends (Meri, the young wife, helps to take care of Philandering Senator who, after his stroke, is an old dried up bag of unresponsive bones but apparently still likes his women so while Meri is breast feeding her baby Senator watches and it is this aesthetic tableau that Wife walks in on and has a meltdown - ew ew ew ew ew) is just bizarre.

Now. Do I find it interesting that the Senators wife takes him in when he is down and out bc at last she has the upper hand, she can be the one he needs and not vice versa, but she calls it love and really believes it? Sure. But when the overall writing is such an incredible drag, I can't even really enjoy that. I'm still waiting for the nine other leads to actually come through. And I'm nauseous.

Joy H. says

Re: The Senator's Wife by Sue Miller

CAUTION: I think it's best not to know too much about this story before you read it. So beware of reading the reviews until after you've read the book. With that in mind, I've tried not to over-tell anything about the story in my review below. Instead I've given my over-all impressions of the story and the writing as a whole.

I wouldn't call this book compelling, but for some strange reason I wanted to keep reading it. I usually don't like books which describe the mundane details of everyday activities. The author, Sue Miller, does this throughout the book. In spite of that, I was still propelled forward. I kept wondering why. Perhaps it was a slight sense of mystery behind the words, a slight feeling of suspense. I don't know how Miller manages to project that atmosphere, but she does. Perhaps it's through her character development. The plot is very slow-paced. So I wouldn't say the story is plot-driven. I would say that the story is driven by the relationships between its characters. That might be the reason I kept reading. I do like to read about relationships between people, how they connect or don't connect.

The story deals mainly with the lives of two different couples. You see each life separately and then you see how they come together to affect one another. The author managed to make that interesting in a very gradual manner.

The two wives are an older woman, Delia (the Senator's wife), and Meri, a younger woman. The chapters alternate between the lives of the two women and tells how they come to get to know each other and affect each other's life.

If you can keep reading despite the mundane details of everyday life which you have to endure throughout the book, it's worth staying with it until the end. There's some thought-provoking stuff in there.

Connie N. says

There were many unflattering reviews for this book but I enjoyed it (after a bit of a slow start). The characters were compelling even if I didn't like them very much sometimes. The book went back and forth between Meri a young newlywed and Delia an elderly woman, both living in a duplex. I felt invested in the characters and their lives and found the relationships fascinating. The story seemed to be about life choices that everyone makes and the reactions of those around you to those decisions as well as the results of those choices. Many of the reviews I read were quite adamantly against the characters and their lifestyles, but I thought these reviewers were missing the point, which is that each person makes their own decisions and chooses what works for them. No one else can make that judgment. It was a story about growing and changing and dealing with life, both good and bad. The climax was a bit abrupt but then I realized it was appropriate because the actions taken would most certainly have caused a sudden change in the relationships. Overall a good read that kept my interest. Good book. I'll definitely read more of this author.

One particular quote I liked was: "This is how it is with your children, she thought. You hold all the versions of them there ever were simultaneously in your heart."

Another one: She's referring to playing with Barbie and Ken dolls..."Her Ken was a movie star, or a cowboy, or a guy who raced motorcycles. Meri's Ken, she said, was a dult. This was a word they both used well into their teens. It was born of Meri's childhood misunderstanding of the word adult, which she heard as two words, article and noun. Lou had co-opted it to simultaneously point at, and offer judgment on, the world of the grown-ups. Dults, almost all of them."

Alison says

It's never a good thing when you finish a book and your first thought is to wonder what was the point? This book meanders slowly and tediously through the lives of two women I thought would be interesting but turned out to be pathetic characters. The needless details the author included in this book made it twice as long as it needed to be. I listened to this in the car and finished only out of pure stubbornness.

Michele says

Life Doesn't Change in its Fundamentals"

I've read enough work by Sue Miller to say with complete confidence that she's a brilliant writer, and a master at character development. *The Senator's Wife* is a gray tale of two couples, neighbors sharing an east coast duplex in an upscale neighborhood. In the story, Miller brings in the focus so tightly, that it feels a little voyeuristic prying into the everyday thoughts, feelings and actions of these characters. Said characters are ordinary, but at the same time fascinating because of their mundane circumstances. Given this, one may wonder how the author manages to keep the reader interested for 306 pages. Again, I attribute it to the brilliant writing.

Alternating chapters from the perspectives of Delia, a grandmother who is the "Senator's Wife," and Meri, a woman in her mid-30s who is fascinated by the quiet glamour of Delia, move the story from 1993 to present day. Meri and her husband Nathan, a college professor, move to the split house. The decision to purchase their portion of the dwelling is based on his fascination with Delia's husband, a notorious senator, now retired. The senator is mysterious and although he is rarely seen, he is very much a part of the story. Delia's excerpts explain their complicated relationship in detail. But the thrust of the story centers on Meri's fascination with Delia, hence the title, and how the relationship between the women leads to the climax.

The Senator's Wife is a fundamental look at life. It's a look at young marriage and an aged marriage lived side-by-side. It's a look at long process of raising children from birth to middle age, and at finding one's place as a caregiver. It's not action-packed or even very exciting, but for fans of Sue Miller and for those readers who appreciate strong character development, I do recommend reading this novel.

Leslie says

I enjoyed the overlapping stories of two women addressing conventional problems in their own ways; their lives are at the heart of this novel. Delia and Meri, through whose voices the story is told, are complex and believable characters who face external marital and familial issues while also dealing with questions of their own identities--how much of themselves is defined by the people in their lives, and what do they determine about themselves? The quirky relationship between the two women is a creative and intriguing plot thread.

The unfortunate thing is, the ending to this novel nearly retroactively ruined the whole experience for me. I hated the author's choice in the end. In an attempt not to give away secrets, I'll say only that the final plot point is not entirely outlandish in terms of the storyline, but it nonetheless left me feeling tricked and that some of the book's messages were suddenly and sharply undone. Yes, I know...that's probably the point. But I still think it was cheap, and I hated it. I'm giving a three star rating because I liked most of the book, but the end almost knocked it to a two star.

Nicholas says

I'm not totally sure why Sue Miller doesn't get the credit she deserves. Or maybe she does and I'm unaware of it? I feel like she gets classed in that genre of books that includes Maeve Binchy and Rosamunde Pilcher and Jodi Picoult. Snob that I am, I've never actually read any of these authors. They are published as mass market paperbacks and their covers always involve a lot of pastel and flowers and seem destined for airport bookstores. (There is, of course, a related genre that is directed at men in airport bookstores that uses more of the color blue and features spy symbols.) Sue Miller's covers -- this one excluded -- put her in this genre, but her fiction doesn't: it's excellent, tackling really difficult questions with nuance and subtlety. That said, it is

almost always about women, though clearly also women's interactions with men, and that alone probably destines her not to be taken as seriously as she should be.

The Senator's Wife is about Meri and Nathan, who move in next door to Delia, the married-but-separated wife of an ex-senator. Delia is in her 70s and she and Meri, in her mid-30s, strike up a friendship. The novel is also as much about their respective marriages as it is about the friendship itself. And that's where Miller is great, exploring Delia's marriage to Tom: he cheated repeatedly and while they live apart, they do not divorce, and remain occasional lovers. Miller complicates our picture of sexual infidelity and the fidelity of feeling that might continue on despite it. The twist at the end, while hovering at the line of implausibility, manages to pull itself off. All in all, the book is a testament to Miller's ability to grapple with difficult and vexing questions without giving pat answers. Her characters are flawed: they do bad things while still being good people, much in the way we all do.

Jackie says

The senator's wife, Delia, is faithful to a fault. After her adultrous husband has embarrassed and humiliated her numerous times, she still lives in a la-la, fairy tale land of denial. Delia is delusional in thinking that by running away to Paris for a few months, it puts everything into perspective. Add to that, the fact that she is a raging alcoholic. Her three kids, in varying degrees of disgust, offer some advice to Delia, which she categorically ignores. Meri and Nathan, Delia's next door neighbors, try to help Delia with her problems of caring for Tom (the senator) when he is incapacitated due to a stroke. But, once again, Tom is back to his womanizing ways and destruction is in the cards for everyone's life...even Nathan, who is clueless. This story shows the ugly side of being female and does nothing to encourage women to be strong and stand up for what is right.

Jenny says

Disregard all my other 5 stars for this one. It was amazing. If you are a woman, read it! It was my first Sue Miller book and she is a very talented writer. I felt that the characters were very real. It was an extremely peaceful read and sometimes when something catastrophic is about to happen, an author will go into ridiculous detail right before it happens (ever notice that?) And a couple times she goes into extreme detail and you find yourself holding your breath and then you slowly let it out when nothing happens. And then BAM! Something happens and you didn't even see it coming! The book is very theatrical in that sense.

Ok, so aside from all that, it was so good, I want to sum up the whole story right here in case for some reason you don't take my advice and read it. I want you to get a glimpse of a good book if your stack of 'to-reads' are too high and you don't think this should make the cut. But I won't do that, but will tell you some of the wonderful themes to pique your interest.

I only recommend this book to women, but if you are a man and read it, my hat goes off to you. You will undoubtedly benefit from a woman's perspective, albeit maybe not the most important woman in your life's perspective. I digress. One theme is women as caretakers. I never saw myself in this role before this book. It is as if our whole lives follow a circuit of care taking, from a little girl and caring for your dolls, cats, dogs, friends; and then you become a woman and take care of your children for at least 5 years, and then just when you think you have time for a career of your own, it is time for your parents. Once you give all that, then you become a grandparent yourself and now you thoroughly enjoy caring for your grandchildren. This was not expressed in the book, but I came to all these conclusions on the side.

Lastly it makes you appreciate the relationship between one generation of women to another. It makes you appreciate the wisdom of the older women in your life and the sacrifices they made.

Alex Templeton says

Oh, literary women's fiction. So much of you feels so much the same. You drip with relationship drama and way overly descriptive language. The way someone peels an orange and then sits on a chair and feels the wood beneath her and smells the air and etc etc etc does not tell me much about her character. But I tend to devour you anyway, you literary comfort food, you. You are a cup of tea in bed on a cold day, or maybe those Oreos I treat myself to after a healthier dinner.

Anne says

I think the book cover for The Senator's Wife says it all - boring and unimaginative. Miller's latest tells the story about Delia, the wife of a former Washington senator, who hasn't lived with her philandering husband for decades. But, it is also the story of Meri, a newly married 38-year old who is pregnant with her first child. Meri and her husband Nathan move in next door to Delia, and Delia and Meri strike up a seeming friendship. My initial difficulty with the characters is that Meri is written as if she is a naive 22-year old. Miller says she is in love with her husband, but they've known each other for less than a year, he makes the decision to buy a new house without consulting her, and they seem to communicate about nothing from Meri's new job to her true feelings about having a child. She seems childlike in her interactions and reactions to situations. Meri has an unnatural obsession with Delia, whose story is told through flashbacks, but focus only on her reaction to the senator's cheating scandals - and tell nothing at all about how she has truly lived her life in the 20 years since. Eventually, there is a turn of events that brings the senator home, and which reveals Meri as a disgusting self-centered person with no care for how her actions affect others (much like the character of the senator himself). I was eager to read this novel, as I have enjoyed Miller's writing in the past. But, this one just seemed to fall flat - with unlikeable characters all around.

Kim says

This book was so depressing, I couldn't even finish it. The women in it are either harpies, idiots, or so selfish that I didn't care what they were. I stopped reading it right after Meri had her baby--all I could think of was, if you didn't want a baby that badly, use a condom, sister. The plot was too lame to even try and follow, and who cared anyway? Not one character was marginally likeable. Awful, awful and awful.

Debby says

My initial reaction to this book when I finished it was VERY negative! The final line in the book is something close to "What she did, she did for love." Are you kidding me? That's CRAP!!!! That's like saying Judas' betrayal of Jesus was done in love.

I admit I am having an emotional (over)reaction to this book. Yes there are triggers in this book that hit home for me. Maybe in a while I "might" come back and at least give this a 3 star rating b/c this story definitely

pushed buttons and probably was written to do just that; prompt reaction and discussion. This book would be a great one for a book club discussion, I will say that. Just don't invite me to sit in on the discussion....I need some time to process (gag!).

Shannon says

God, this was depressing. Do I really have to summarize? Meri is married to Nate, and they buy a house next to Delia Naughton, who has been married to Senator Tom Naughton for decades. Tom is unfaithful, again and again, and though Delia loves him and continues to spend time with him, they live far apart: him in D.C. and her in New England. Then the senator has a stroke and, rather than live in an assisted living facility, moves back in with Delia.

This is a commentary on marriage, but otherwise it's hard to describe. How do we define love? Is marriage something to celebrate, or is it a burden? Is marriage simply what we make of it? What role does honesty and forgiveness play in a working marriage?

Then there's the ending. Senator Naughton has had a stroke, and Delia has taken him into her home. Meri "babysits" while Delia is out and, as a new mom, brings her baby with her. She nurses and, you guessed it, the senator ogles her breasts while she feeds her baby until, finally, she gives up any pretense of it being about nursing and just straight-up flashes him, gushing breastmilk and all. I was appalled that something natural and lovely became perverted and sexualized. Absolutely appalled. And, of course, Delia discovers them and storms out, finally. At the end, several years later, Meri is thinking back on what happened. Her last words: "I did it out of love." Wha???????

I'll give this two stars, since the book occasionally had me thinking about how I define marriage and parenthood and forgiveness. But all that's left to say is that I'm glad this was a library book and that I didn't spend money on it.

Emily says

Sue Miller honestly drives me crazy. I love her writing, it's very personal and raw. This is the third book I have read of hers, and while the books have all kept my interests, their endings either leave me unfulfilled, or freak me out. The Senator's Wife falls into the latter category. I didn't really know what to think of this book. What was it trying to say? You have poor dedicated Delia, stuck in this love trap with her philandering husband. You have Meri-who I just couldn't figure out. Who did she want to be? She was not a born mother, or even a born wife. She seemed so selfish, and twisted. Freaking out about not having her husband find her sexual while nursing their son. So instead gets that feeling from giving the invalid neighbor a peep show? The conclusion of the books, puts Meri in the present. She reflects on her relationship with Delia and its eventual end when she sees her obit in the paper. But through it all she says she did it out of love. Love for herself? For Delia? So she could finally see that her husband was never going to love her the way she wanted? That he would be a cheater till his dieing day? Overall an interesting read, with characters that make you want to tear your hair out!

Abbey says

I always like Miller's writing style and this was book was no exception to that. Also, I've always liked her perspective on the minds of women who are disinterested in traditional women's roles/expectations.

In terms of the story, though, several parts of it were left unresolved, in my mind at least. For example, Meri struggles with the above throughout the story, but by the end is enjoying domestic bliss and is seemingly a different person---how or why this transition took place isn't clear to me.

I also didn't really like many of the characters, for different reasons. Meri was bizarre and ultimately selfish, Nathan self-involved and uppity, and Tom weak and disloyal. Disturbing ending, as well.

I don't mean to say that this was a poor or uninteresting story---just not my favorite by Miller.

Donna says

Ok, let's just skip to the parts that take this book from 3 stars to one.

1) It drove me CRAZY to hear about how Tom cheated on Delia over and over and over and she always accepted him back into her life (and bed). He had a long-term affair with their daughter's friend! Gross! Delia's character was portrayed as so wise, worldly, and independent, so why on earth would someone like that allow themselves to be used like a doormat?

2) The graphic pregnancy and labor scenes. Oh.my.god. As if I wasn't horrified enough about pregnancy and labor before. This, quite literally, made me cringe.

3) The part at the end (spoiler here) where Meri starts getting off on letting Tom watch her breast feed her baby. EWWWW! The man was in his late '70's or early '80's, wrinkly, with sagging facial and body muscles and severely slurred and impaired speech due to a stroke (made that much more graphic because I listened to the audio book). And this is erotic??? The last time, he grunted (or mumbled or whatever other version of speech he still had) to her to just whip out her breasts for him since the baby had already eaten...and she did! Whipped them out and fondled them with milk pouring from them while he ogled. Oh.my.god. I think I threw up in my mouth a little. And then Delia walked in...

4) And, I think just as bad as Meri doing that, I was once again completely repulsed by Tom's character, or lack thereof. His kids tried to put him in a nursing home but Delia once again wouldn't turn him away and takes him in as a full-time project now that he's had a stroke and is largely incapacitated. She's even excited that they will get to spend forever together now without the possibility of him cheating. Only, even in his deformed state, after she's forgiven him all his sins and taken him back to care for him, he once again completely disrespects her and all she's done for him. Wow, does it really get much lower than that? I was so happy to hear that his pathetic butt got immediately thrown in a nursing home after that, though I'm not sure why as she'd forgiven him all those other affairs. What's one more?

5) The last line. Seriously? I was so underwhelmed by the end I don't exactly remember it, though it was something about Meri doing all of that (the fondling maybe?) for love. Ugh.

So, I guess the rating for this book depends on the point. If it's to evoke strong emotions, it should get a 5. I experience boredom, disgust, annoyance, and horror during various parts of this book. It seemed to go from

excessive mundane detail to disturbing or annoying parts I could have lived without. Overall, probably without the disgusting ending, it could have gotten 2-3 stars. But that, along with the super cheesy ending line about love, earned it a good, solid one.

Amanda says

Apologies for stating this bluntly, but this was a dumb book. None of the characters were likable at any point, and while that shouldn't be the basis for my opinion, they didn't even become slightly more likable as the book progressed. The two women in the book are just plain stupid and the senator is a caricature of a slimy politician who becomes more and more repulsive. Dumb.

LaDonna says

I've had the same experience with both of the Sue Miller books I've read... this one and *While I Was Gone*. It starts out great, and I really do like Miller's handling of language, and then it all just goes wrong.

Another reviewer put it best... "uncomfortable". That's where these books take you -- to an uncomfortable place. And not the kind of uncomfortable where you think, "Oh, this is good for me, I need to learn something." No. It's just wrong somehow.

In both cases I've ended up completely disliking the protagonist, and closing the book with a deep feeling of dissatisfaction, like I took a vacation that started well and then ended with cockroaches on the walls and hair in my food.

Pam says

After finishing this book, I realized I didn't really like any of the characters. At first Delia, the senator's wife, seems to be an interesting person. She appears to be a graciously realistic, secure older woman. As the book progresses, she becomes less so. Cracks appear in her seemingly flawless presentation, and in the end, she crumbles.

Meri never seems to have it all together. She is more real with her doubts and insecurities, but after what happens in the end, it's hard to like her. She idolizes Delia and learns so much about her, but then does something stupid that really hurts this woman she admires.

The men in this novel are caricatures. Nathan, Meri's husband, is perfect. He's gorgeous, can bring home the bacon and fry it up in the pan. Tom, the senator, is terribly handsome, wealthy and a cad to the end.

This book was okay, but left me wondering why I stayed up late on a work night to finish it. It wasn't worth losing sleep over.
