



Miller, Merle (1919-1986)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Merle Miller was one of the first mainstream American writers to discuss his homosexuality publicly. The best-selling author came out as a gay man in the pages of *The New York Times Magazine* in 1971 with an article titled "What It Means to Be a Homosexual." He was 51 years old. He was writing in response to a viciously homophobic article by Joseph Epstein that had appeared earlier in *Harper's Magazine*.

Later that year, Miller's piece was expanded and published as a book, the groundbreaking *On Being Different: What it Means to Be a Homosexual*.

Penguin Classics republished the book in 2012 with a new foreword by Dan Savage, founder of the "It Gets Better Project," and a new afterword by the journalist and historian Charles Kaiser.

David Carter, author of *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, notes that "*On Being Different* is a searing indictment of social hypocrisy, written with a quiet but burning passion," and goes on to say that the book "is not only a valuable historical document about the gay civil rights movement, but it is an American classic because of the beauty it achieves through its unflinchingly honest portrayal of the raw pain of rejection."

Miller also wrote best-selling oral biographies of presidents Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Lyndon B. Johnson, as well as other highly regarded nonfiction books, including *We Dropped the A-Bomb*, about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, and *Only You, Dick Daring!*, about the making of a television series.

Miller is also the author of more than a dozen novels, including *That Winter*, considered to be one of the best books on postwar readjustment for returning U.S. veterans, *The Sure Thing*, *A Day in Late September*, and the autobiographical *A Gay and Melancholy Sound* and *What Happened*.

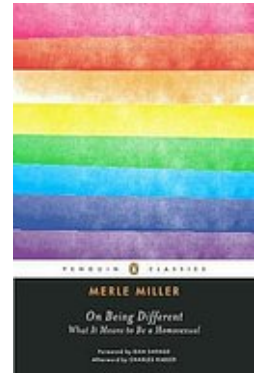
Early Life and Career

Merle Miller was born on May 17, 1919 in Montour, a small town in central Iowa and grew up in the larger city of Marshalltown, Iowa where he spent an unhappy childhood.

He was an awkward and unathletic boy who wore thick glasses and played the violin and piano. He was called a sissy when he started school at the age of four, and "I heard that word at least five days a week for the next 13 years," he recalled, until he went away to college.

"It's not true," he later wrote, "that saying about 'sticks and stones'; it's words that break your bones."

Growing up, he had three close friends, all misfits in his narrow-minded community: a Jewish boy, a girl who had survived polio but was confined to a wheelchair, and a middle-aged woman with a clubfoot who



Merle Miller's *On Being Different* as re-released in 2012.

sold tickets at the local movie theater. The three hung out together and tried to protect one another.

Miller recalled heading to the local train depot for his earliest sexual encounters, picking up boys travelling surreptitiously through Depression-era America. "They were all lonely and afraid," he reminisced. "None of them ever made fun of me. I was never beaten up. They recognized, I guess, that we were fellow aliens with no place to register."

In 1936, Miller enrolled at the University of Iowa. He was later awarded a scholarship to study at the London School of Economics for a semester.

At the University of Iowa, he became editor of the student newspaper, *The Daily Iowan*. He later recalled, not without a certain amount of shame, how he had turned his years of taunts and ridicule for his effeminate mannerisms outward, demeaning and denigrating the "theater queens" in newspaper articles.

Miller did not graduate from the University of Iowa, however, having refused to take the mandatory swimming and Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) courses that, in the 1930s, were prerequisites. After leaving school, Miller was hired as the Washington correspondent for the daily newspaper *The Philadelphia Record* (which subsequently went out of business in 1947).

With the entrance of the United States into World War II in 1941, Miller enlisted in the Army Air Corps and served in both the European and Pacific theaters as a war correspondent and editor for *Yank, the Army Weekly*, a weekly magazine published by the United States military and made available to soldiers, sailors, and airmen serving overseas from June 1942 through December 1945.

He was awarded two Bronze Stars for bravery displayed in combat, but returned them in 1968 to General William Westmoreland, then commander of U.S. military operations in Asia, in protest of the war in Vietnam.

Following his discharge from the Army, Miller found employment in the publishing industry. He worked as an editor at both *Harper's* and *Time* magazines; as a book reviewer for *The Saturday Review of Literature*; and as a contributing editor for *The Nation*. His writings also frequently appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Miller wrote numerous television scripts as well, but his career in television was interrupted in the 1950s when he was blacklisted, mainly due to his work with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

As a member of the Board of Directors of the ACLU, Miller was asked to head an investigative team to learn about anti-communist blacklisting being conducted covertly in the radio and television industries. He attended Congressional hearings and wrote a report of his findings, which was later published as *The Judges and the Judged* (1952).

It was not until the early 1960s that Miller was again able to find employment in television, when he was commissioned to create an ultimately unsuccessful series that was to air on CBS-TV during the 1963-1964 television season and starring the actor Jackie Cooper. Miller was required to rewrite the show's pilot script nineteen times during a struggle for power between CBS, Cooper, and the show's producers, United Artists.

Miller later wrote a trenchant and darkly comic account of working on the show in his best-selling nonfiction book *Only You, Dick Daring! Or, How to Write One Television Script and Make \$50,000,000, A True-life Adventure* (1964).

Miller was married for more than four years to Elinor Green. According to him, in all the years they had

known one another, even after their divorce, they never discussed his homosexuality.

On Being Different: What It Means to Be a Homosexual

In September 1970, *Harper's Magazine* published a 10,000-word polemic (that took up 11 pages in the magazine) by the academic and essayist Joseph Epstein titled "Homo/Hetero: The Struggle for Sexual Identity."

The magazine's cover brazenly promoted the article with a picture of a muscular male torso clad in a conspicuously tight red feminine blouse.

Among numerous homophobic remarks, Epstein wrote, "If I had the power to do so, I would wish homosexuality off the face of the earth." He went on to explain, "I would do so because I think that it brings infinitely more pain than pleasure to those who are forced to live with it, because I think there is no resolution for this pain in our lifetimes."

He also condescendingly remarked, "One can tolerate homosexuality, a small enough price to be asked to pay for someone else's pain."

Perhaps the most offensive remarks, however, occurred at the conclusion of the article, when Epstein noted, "There is much that my four sons can do in their lives that might cause me anguish, that might outrage me, that might make [me] ashamed of them and of myself as their father. But nothing they could ever do would make me sadder than if any of them were to become homosexual. For then I should know them condemned to a permanent niggardom among men, their lives, whatever adjustment they might make to their condition, to be lived out as part of the pain of the earth."

The article sparked a lively public debate, with some readers blithely agreeing with Epstein's assertions, while others seethed with anger and indignation.

Epstein's casual bigotry prompted a sit-in at the offices of *Harper's Magazine* on October 27, 1970 by members of the Gay Activists Alliance, whose goal was to "secure basic human rights, dignity and freedom for all gay people."

The magazine's editor-in-chief at the time, Willie Morris, downplayed the event, simply recounting years later that "several dozen homosexuals arrived en masse . . . to demand redress for a paragraph in an article by Joseph Epstein which they considered unsympathetic to homosexuality."

The writer and gay activist David Ehrenstein, one of the members of the Gay Activists Alliance who participated in the *Harper's* sit-in, remembered the events very differently and more accurately. In a 2002 article, he recalled that 40 activists arrived at the magazine's offices that day, along with a camera crew from WOR television, a local New York channel, which later ran a three-part series on gay life and activism incorporating filmed footage from the event.

Ehrenstein contends that Morris knew they were not protesting over "a single paragraph" in Epstein's article, and that "it came not out of the blue but after numerous attempts to have a rebuttal to Epstein published in *Harper's*." Ehrenstein recalled that Morris and the magazine's executive editor Midge Decter vetoed every single suggestion for a refutation of Epstein's remarks.

Ehrenstein also remembered Arthur Evans, another member of the Gay Activists Alliance, discrediting Decter in front of the WOR cameras, claiming, "You knew that article would contribute to the suffering of homosexuals! You knew that! And if you didn't know that, you're inexcusably naive and should not be an editor. . . . You are a bigot and you are to be held morally responsible for that moral and political act!"

[Evans's charges of bigotry against Decker were validated later by her subsequent writing about homosexuals, such as the despicable *Commentary* article "The Boys on the Beach" (1980), which was brilliantly deconstructed by Gore Vidal in his classic essay, "Pink Triangle and Yellow Star" (1981)].

The *Harper's Magazine* sit-in has subsequently been identified as a significant turning point in the gay rights movement of the early 1970s.

Merle Miller, who had once been an editor at *Harper's*, also felt "outraged and saddened" by Epstein's article, which had been published, in his opinion, in "one of the best, maybe the best, magazines in the country."

Consequently, he telephoned Bob Kotlowitz, a friend and editor at *Harper's*, to express his anger over Epstein's article and his disappointment in the magazine for publishing it. Kotlowitz responded that he, like "a great many intelligent people . . . more or less" agreed with Epstein.

Miller was stunned by Kotlowitz's insensitive remark but said nothing.

Then, several days later, Miller had lunch with two staff members at the *New York Times Magazine*, Gerald Walker and Victor Navasky. Epstein's piece again came up in conversation. Both Walker and Navasky praised what they described as the unusual power of Epstein's writing.

Miller was aghast. He finally exploded: "Epstein is saying genocide for queers!"

And then, as he later recounted, "for the first time, in broad daylight, before what I guess you would call a mixed audience . . . I found myself saying, 'Look, goddamn it, I'm homosexual, and most of my best friends are Jewish homosexuals, and some of my best friends are black homosexuals, and I am sick and tired of reading and hearing such goddamn demeaning bullshit about me and my friends.'"

Miller later reflected on that moment. "There it was, out at last, and if it seems like nothing very much, I can only say that it took a long time to say it, to be able to say it, and none of the journey was easy."

Navasky was astounded that Miller, a respected editor and best-selling author, and perhaps more important, a business acquaintance, had just come out as a gay man. Several days later, he telephoned Miller and asked him if he would express his reaction to Epstein's piece in an article for the *New York Times Magazine*.

Miller agreed, reluctantly. "I have no taste for self-revelation," he later wrote.

What Miller turned in, Navasky said in a 2012 interview, was "so beautiful, so spectacularly different, so compelling, that it had to run."

Just before its publication, Miller wrote to his former wife to inform her about the essay. *The Times* had just notified him that it was to be titled "What It Means to Be a Homosexual."

"Now you really can't get more direct than that, can you?" he wrote to her. "At least it's not cute." Miller enclosed the uncorrected galleys of the article for her to read. "So that you will know," he explained.

The article was published on January 17, 1971. In it, Miller detailed his life-long struggle with his sexuality, including his failed marriage, and what it means to come to terms with the truth of one's sexual orientation in an exceedingly hostile social environment.

"I dislike being despised," he wrote, "unless I have done something despicable, realizing that the simple fact of being homosexual is all by itself despicable to many people, maybe, as Mr. Epstein says, to everybody who is straight."

It was a landmark piece of journalism and later described as "the most widely read and discussed essay of the decade."

The New York Times received over two thousand letters in response--more than the newspaper had ever received for a single article.

Letters from gay readers noted, for example, "Nothing I have ever read has helped as much to restore my own self-respect." Others wrote to say that after reading his essay they realized for the first time that "homosexuals were people, too, with feelings, just like anybody else."

Miller's piece was expanded and published later that year as a book, the groundbreaking *On Being Different: What it Means to Be a Homosexual* (1971).

Miller subsequently became a spokesperson for the nascent gay rights movement.

Penguin Classics republished the book in 2012 with a new foreword by Dan Savage, founder of the "It Gets Better Project," a channel on YouTube that features videos of adult glbtq people who were bullied as teenagers reassuring young people that, however awful their predicament might seem at the time, "it gets better." The journalist and historian Charles Kaiser also wrote a new afterword.

Paul Morton, in an assessment of the book, notes, "Miller had endured many insults by the time he told his story and a quiet anger permeates his prose as he asserts his dignity and refuses any further humiliation."

"If Miller's book is an argument for dignity and acceptance," Morton continues, "it is also an argument against politeness. It is an argument against letting stray homophobic remarks from your liberal friends just go in the interest of keeping the evening pleasant. . . . It is an argument for demanding the part of the territory to which you are entitled. . . . There's a wounded rage in Miller's piece, a fury at having to negotiate this territory in the first place."

Other Works by Merle Miller

During the course of a writing career that spanned several decades, Miller wrote numerous novels, including *That Winter* (1948), considered to be one of the best books about the postwar readjustment of World War II veterans. His other novels include *Island 49* (1945); *The Sure Thing* (1949); *Reunion* (1954); *A Secret Understanding* (1956); *A Day in Late September* (1963); and the autobiographical *A Gay and Melancholy Sound* (1961) and *What Happened* (1972).

A Gay and Melancholy Sound tells the story of Joshua Bland, a former child prodigy, World War II hero, and theatrical producer, who at age 37 decides to commit suicide. But before doing so, he tells his story largely in flashback. A character plagued by self-hatred, he believes himself unlovable and incapable of love.

What Happened, the only novel Miller published after publicly coming out, shares the theme of self-loathing that permeates *A Gay and Melancholy Sound*, and is similarly autobiographical. But whereas the earlier novel presents its protagonist as heterosexual, the narrator of *What Happened* is gay. Like Miller, the narrator George Lionel grew up in Iowa during the Depression and fled in search of fame and fortune. Also like Miller, he married briefly and unsuccessfully, and during the McCarthy era was blacklisted.

What Happened offers a vivid picture of the pain of the closet and depicts movingly how oppressive attitudes warp the lives of sensitive people, but it also affirms the beauty and love and courage that can be found in the stubborn desire to resist injustice.

Miller also wrote the influential and best-selling *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*

(1974), which began as a series of filmed interviews with the former president for a proposed television series that was never made. Although the book has been attacked for containing allegedly fabricated passages, it nevertheless offers a compelling portrait of President Truman.

Miller wrote two other best-selling presidential biographies, *Lyndon* (1980), an oral biography of Lyndon B. Johnson, and *Ike the Soldier* (1987), a biography of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, which was published posthumously.

His other works of nonfiction include *We Dropped the A-Bomb* (1946), written in collaboration with Abe Spitzer, a radio operator on the B-29 bomber "The Great Artiste," the only aircraft to participate in the atomic bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in 1945.

In addition to numerous television scripts, Miller wrote the screenplays for the feature films *The Rains of Ranchipur* (1955), directed by Jean Negulesco and starring Lana Turner and Richard Burton, and *Kings Go Forth* (1958), directed by Delmer Daves, with Frank Sinatra, Tony Curtis, and Natalie Wood.

Miller died on June 10, 1986, in Danbury Hospital, Connecticut, at the age of 67, from peritonitis following surgery to remove a ruptured appendix.

He was survived by his partner of 22 years, writer David W. Elliott, and his ashes were interred near the home they shared in Brewster, New York.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.