



Miller, Neil (b. 1945)

by Victoria Shannon

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Neil Miller.
Image courtesy Neil Miller.

The author of four books about glbtq history, Neil Miller is a freelance journalist and lecturer in the English Department at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts where he teaches journalism and non-fiction writing. Miller says his motivation for writing gay and lesbian books is "to try to do my bit to create a better world for gay people, to portray them as average, ordinary people and, as a journalist, to bring alive a world that I knew pretty well."

Miller was born on August 16, 1945, in Kingston, New York. His father owned a children's clothing store, then went into the insurance business. His mother was a social worker. He graduated from Kingston High School and attended Brown University, where he graduated with a B. A. in English in 1967.

After a year in graduate school at New York University, Miller spent a year backpacking through Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and India. He lived in Israel from 1970 to 1972, studying at the Hebrew University and teaching English at an Israeli high school.

Upon his return to the United States, Miller came out to his family. He says, "Living in Israel really forced me to come out. Israel was much less accepting of homosexuality in those days than it is today--everyone seemed to be pushing baby carriages and trying to get me, a nice Jewish boy from the U.S., to marry their daughters."

Miller says his family was "relatively accepting" when he came out, but they were not thrilled that he was going to move to Boston to become the news editor (and later the features and managing editor) of *Gay Community News* in Boston, at the time the only gay and lesbian weekly newspaper in the country.

While *GCN*, which was established in 1973, began as the local paper of the glbtq movement in Boston, it soon became a national newspaper in which the most significant political and social issues facing the gay and lesbian rights movement were debated by some of the most influential gay and lesbian writers and activists. It was also unusual among early gay liberation papers in that its staff was approximately equally divided between gay men and lesbians and paid equal attention to the concerns of each group.

Miller also worked as a staff writer at the *Boston Phoenix*, an alternative weekly newspaper, from 1982 to 1985.

Miller's first book, *In Search of Gay America: Women and Men in a Time of Change* was published by the Atlantic Monthly Press in 1989, then in paperback by Harper and Row in 1990.

Miller calls the book, a sort of "sociological travelogue." He traveled all over the United States talking to gay men and lesbians about their lives in an effort to show what it was like to be gay in the U.S. in the late 1980s.

Miller says, "I always wondered what my life would have been like if I had stayed in the small town where I

had grown up instead of moving to a fairly cosmopolitan city like Boston, so I was eager to travel around the country, especially to small towns and rural areas, to see if some of the freedoms gays and lesbians were experiencing in cities like Boston were percolating down to the rest of the country."

In Search of Gay America won the 1990 American Library Association Prize for gay and lesbian nonfiction, as well as a Lambda Literary Award.

Out in the World: Gay and Lesbian Life from Buenos Aires to Bangkok was published by Random House in 1992 and by Vintage books in paperback in 1993. Miller traveled to twelve countries around the world, using the same approach he used in *In Search of Gay America*, talking to people about what it was like to be gay in various societies.

Owen Keehnen describes *Out in the World* as "a brilliant global time capsule of social and cultural attitudes towards gay men and lesbians," and praised Miller for showing "just how different 'gay and lesbian experience' is around the world. . . . The challenges of being gay or lesbian differ wildly--and to presume any differently is dismissive of any experience but our own. This book opens our eyes to some of those amazing differences."

As in his first book, Miller stayed away from gay urban centers to get a truer sense of gay life and cultural acceptance in countries like Argentina, Australia, Egypt, South Africa, Germany, and Denmark. Miller says his first two books were also an excuse for him to travel, something he loves.

Miller's third book gave him a chance to rest after traveling to research his first two. *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* was published by Vintage Books in 1995. It was republished, in an updated version, by Alyson Books in 2006.

Miller describes the book as "a lively, popular narrative of more than 100 years of gay and lesbian history, culture, and politics, beginning from the first time the word 'homosexuality' was ever used in print and continuing through the age of AIDS and the issue of gay marriage."

Out of the Past is one of most accessible gay and lesbian history books in print, and it is used frequently in gay and lesbian classes all over the country. The narrative is punctuated by portraits of numerous obscure men and women as well as of such well known figures as Walt Whitman, Eleanor Roosevelt, James Baldwin, T.E. Lawrence, Langston Hughes, and Martina Navratilova.

When Miller heard about 20 gay men who were committed to a state mental hospital in Sioux City, Iowa after the murder of two children during the McCarthy era, he set out to investigate the incident. This led to his fourth book, *Sex Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s*, published in 2002 by Alyson Books.

Miller discovered that the men, who had nothing to do with the crimes, were classified as "sexual psychopaths" and incarcerated in a locked ward of a state mental hospital as a way of reassuring the public that the authorities were actively addressing the problem of sexual perversion.

Miller says, "This was my most challenging and exciting book to work on, involving 'detective work' and attempting to unearth long-buried secrets of one of Iowa's most deplorable historical incidents." *Sex Crime Panic* received the Publishing Triangle's 2003 Randy Shilts Award for Nonfiction and a 2003 Lambda Literary Award.

Publishers Weekly described *Sex Crime Panic* as "a cross between a fast-paced true-crime shocker and a biting exposé of 1950s sexual hysteria." Whitney Scott in *Booklist* commented that Miller's "account of the

homophobic panic that touched off the lamentable events is chillingly relentless." And Jonathan Shipley in the *Boston Globe* observed that Miller paints a vivid picture of a city in the grip of antigay hysteria and "constructs a taut narrative that keeps the reader turning the pages of a story that involves the most unfortunate of circumstances: fear, sadness, misunderstanding, death."

In his latest book, Miller explores an entirely different subject, but prompted by the same desire to travel and explore as his first two books. *Kartchner Caverns: How Two Cavers Discovered and Saved One of the Natural Wonders of the World* was published by the University of Arizona Press in 2008.

The book describes the true story of the discovery of large underground limestone caves in Southern Arizona by Gary Tenen and Randy Tufts, two amateur spelunkers fresh out of college. The caves were opened to the public in 1999, transformed into the popular Arizona state park called Kartchner Caverns. But *Kartchner Caverns* focuses on the 14 years prior to that when Tenen and Tufts went to extreme lengths to keep their discovery a secret for fear of looting and destruction.

Miller was inspired by the characters of Tufts and Tenen. "They were so committed," Miller says, "with a sense of responsibility to preserve [their finding]." In addition, Miller says he enjoyed writing the book because he "always loved the Southwest and spent much of my time out there."

Miller is currently working on a book provisionally called *Banned in Boston* about the history of Boston's Watch and Ward Society, an influential censorship and anti-vice organization that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Society was responsible for banning books and magazines, closing down plays and burlesque houses, and raiding gambling dens and houses of prostitution. Beacon Press will publish the book.

In his first two books, *In Search of Gay America* and *Out in the World*, Miller says he wanted to "widen the public's understanding of gay and lesbian life, moving away from the metropolitan areas and traditional 'meccas' to try to give a larger sense of everyday gay life and gay progress. At the time, only 20 years after the beginning of the gay movement, I felt it was important to turn a reporter's eye on the richness of individual gay and lesbian lives and experiences and to humanize gay life as much as possible."

In *Sex-Crime Panic*, Miller says he "tried to bring to life a forgotten and frightening event in gay history, which has echoes and ramifications today."

In addition to his four books, Miller has also published widely in magazines and journals such as *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Advocate*, and *Out*.

Miller lives in Somerville, Massachusetts with his partner, Paul Brouillette, an architect.

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About the Author

Victoria Shannon is an adjunct faculty member at DePaul University and Columbia College Chicago. At Columbia, she develops glbtq-related courses and teaches "Gay & Lesbian Studies," a course she created several years ago.