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The Male Mystique of Henry Miller

By JEANETTE WINTERSON

RENEGADE

**Henry Miller and
the Making of
“Tropic of Cancer”**

By Frederick Turner
244 pp. Yale University
Press. \$24.95.

What happens when the unreliable narrator turns out to be the cultural critic?

What we write about fiction is never an objective response to a text; it is always part of a bigger mythmaking — the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves. That story changes. George Orwell, writing in 1940 about Henry Miller, has very different

preoccupations from Kate Millett writing about Miller in 1970. Orwell doesn't notice that Miller-women are semihuman sex objects. In fact, his long essay “Inside the Whale” barely mentions women at all. Millett does notice that half the world has been billeted to the whorehouse, and wonders what this tells us about both Henry Miller and the psyche and sexuality of the American male.

Norman Mailer needed Miller to be like Shakespeare (this is plain wrong, but the need is interesting); Erica Jong wanted to be Athena to Miller's Zeus — born straight out of his head and saving him from the Feminist Furies in her book “The Devil at Large” (1993).

And now? It is some 50 years since “Tropic of Cancer” was published in the United States by Grove Press. First published in Paris in 1934 by Obelisk, a soft-porn imprint, it had been banned

as obscene in America until a landmark legal victory overturned the ban, allowing Grove to print it legally in 1961. The book became an instant best seller, and Henry Miller stood as the priapic prophet of sexual freedom.

Frederick Turner’s aim in “Renegade” is to explain how “Tropic of Cancer” came to be written, came to be banned and came to be an American Classic.

Turner, the editor of “Into the Heart of Life: Henry Miller at One Hundred,” tells a good story. Some of it we know: Hopeless Henry, the literary failure nearing 40, is packed off to Paris in 1930 by his wife, June, now tired of supporting him via low-paying jobs and selling her body. In Paris he becomes Hungry Henry, still living off his wife’s erratic handouts wired to the American Express office. He sleeps on office floors or in windowless hotel rooms.

He free-falls, hits bottom and remakes himself as Heroic Henry, who has the courage to say “[expletive] everything” and write a great book. The book is so great that it takes the world nearly 30 years to face up to it.

The Miller story told this way beats in time with the story at the heart of America’s self-image: Can-Do/Rags to Riches/ Boy Makes Good. That Miller was mostly an unemployed and unemployable dropout is at odds with the Puritan New World work ethic, but in line with America’s pioneering frontiersman mythology, where the fast-talking huckster has a six-shooter mouth.

Turner cleverly places Miller in a line of American folklore heroes, real and invented, like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Like Huck Finn, Miller the man wants to avoid growing up. Like Mark Twain, Miller the writer wants the flavor and feel of “brawlers, outlaws, gamblers . . . whores.”

Turner makes the point that while it took America about 60 years to catch up with Walt Whitman, Twain's impact was immediate. "Here . . . was America *talking* — not writing — in the outsized, colorful monologue mode that had been a century and more in the making."

Turner repositions Miller alongside Whitman and Twain as an innovator who is anti-literature, not because he is a philistine but because the new world that is America needs a new literature. This must be vivid, not refined, made on the docksides and in the sweatshops, not in the study or the university.

Here's Miller the German-American Brooklyn boy, dragged to work in his father's failing tailoring business, entertaining himself at night at the burlesques, where the bawdy tawdry comic and cruel sexualized humor are as alive and real to Miller as the riverbank was to Twain and the workmen stripped to the waist were to Whitman.

When Miller sailed for Paris, he had a copy of "Leaves of Grass" in his luggage.

He left behind him an ex-wife and small daughter for whom he had made no provision, and a current wife, June, who was his lover, muse and banker, until Anaïs Nin in Paris was able to take over those essential roles.

Turner never troubles himself or the reader with questions about Miller's emotional and financial dependency on women. Miller was obsessed with masculinity but felt no need to support himself or the women in his life. Turner sympathizes with the Miller who must sell his well-cut suits on the streets of Paris for a fraction of their worth, but is apparently indifferent to the fact that June was selling her body on his behalf.

Indeed, Turner tells us that Miller had to endure "the most awful humiliation a man might suffer." This, presumably, is June's

lesbian affair, one she brought home to their apartment, so much so that Miller wrote a novel, “Lovely Lesbians,” one of his lifelong rants against women, written around the same time as “Moloch,” his rant against Jews.

Miller realized with these failed novels that hatred alone was not enough to sustain a work of fiction. He had plenty of hatred, toward Jews, foreigners and especially America, the newfound land that had spoiled itself and a once-in-a-species opportunity to really begin again.

For Miller, Turner writes, America was “more mercenary than the meanest whore.” This is an ugly image, and while it is certainly true of Miller’s mind, it seems indicative of Turner’s own unconscious thinking. But it usefully presents us with the fused object of Miller’s hatred: the body politic of America will be worked over and revenged through the body of Woman.

Miller had attended political meetings as a young man, but he was uninterested in political activism — and when the war broke out, he left Paris to return to America. Not for him the heroics of Resistance. Yet his lifelong pose was as a warrior fighting with homemade weapons against an indifferent, crushing industrial machine for which nothing mattered but profit and everything was for sale.

It never occurred to him that no matter how poor a man is, he can always buy a poorer woman for sex. It does not occur to Turner either, who calls Miller throughout a “sexual adventurer.” This sounds randy and swashbuckling and hides the economic reality of prostitution. Miller the renegade wanted his body slaves like any other capitalist — and as cheaply as possible. When he could not pay, Miller the man and Miller the fictional creation worked out how to cheat women with romance. What they could not buy they stole. No connection is made between woman as commodity and the “slaughterhouse” of capitalism that Miller hates.

Turner loves Miller's "war whoop" against modern industrial America. Hope is hopeless, but the lone voice of the prophet cries out like a Jeremiah among the brothels. Confusingly, Turner asks us to believe in both the war whoop and Miller's Buddhist-like acceptance of the world as it is. The last chapter is written as a rapturous riff on "what if" we could shed our illusions and live in the "moral" Miller universe, with its "realities," "learn how to love it?" "Le bel aujourd'hui."

Well, what if we accept Turner's assertion that "Cancer" has traveled from banned book to spiritual classic that tells us "who we are"? A reasonable objection is that "we" cannot include women, unless a woman is comfortable with her identity as a half-witted "piece of tail."

The major lost opportunity in Turner's book is any serious discussion of "Tropic of Cancer" and the sexual revolution. The overturning of obscenity laws in the United States and Britain and the defiant rise of the porn industry are part of the extraordinary 1960s zeitgeist, but also part of a new sex war.

"Cancer" was published around the same time the pill was approved for use (1960) and Valium hit the market (1963). Drugs that rendered women more sexually available and more docile were in the service of the '60s sexual revolution, which was not about equality for women. Women would have to claim that for themselves. Miller was a useful weapon — something to drop into the water supply — against the likes of Betty Friedan ("The Feminine Mystique," 1963) and a very different kind of war whoop.

"Renegade" offers too little social or political background. It seems to me that if part of your mythmaking is to place a writer ahead of his time, we had better know something about his actual world — the world of the 1930s in New York and Paris. In Paris, for instance, brothels were legal, but women couldn't vote — the exact reverse of the America Miller had left behind.

There is beauty as well as hatred in “Cancer,” and it deserves its place on the shelf. Yet the central question it poses was stupidly buried under censorship in the 1930s, and gleefully swept aside in the permissiveness of the 1960s. Kate Millett asked the question in the 1970s, but the effort to ignore it is prodigious. A new round of mythmaking is ignoring it once more. The question is not art versus pornography or sexuality versus censorship or any question about achievement. The question is: Why do men revel in the degradation of women?

Jeanette Winterson’s memoir, “Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?,” will be published in March.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 31, 2012

An earlier version of this review misspelled Kate Millett’s surname as Millet.