

BOOK CLUB To Go!

The World Below

By Sue Miller

Introduction

When Catherine inherits her grandparents' house in Vermont, she takes a sabbatical from her teaching job in San Francisco and returns to the place she has always thought of as home. There, amid papers packed away in the attic, Catherine finds her grandmother's diaries--a careful, almost impersonal record of Georgia's role in keeping her family together as the oldest child in a motherless home, the bout with tuberculosis that sent her to a sanatorium at age nineteen, and her long, placid marriage to Dr. John Holbrooke, a man twenty-years her senior. It is the period of Georgia's stay at Bryce Sanatorium and the early years of her marriage that most engages Catherine, for it seems to hold answers to puzzles--including the mystery of her own mother's illness--hinted at in the stories Catherine heard from an embittered aunt and in conversations with Georgia. Piecing together diary entries, letters, and other papers, Catherine learns of Georgia's intimate relationship with a fellow patient at Bryce, where the rules of the "real" world disappear in the face of the needs and hopes of the sick and dying, and of the compromises Georgia and John make to accommodate their private desires and society's expectations.

As she uncovers the world below the loving surface of her grandparents' life together, Catherine comes to understand the impact of their secrets and of her mother's illness on the child she was and the woman she has become. Her discoveries transform her view not only of the past but of her future. When the friendship she forms with an older, retired professor in town takes a romantic turn, Catherine finds herself contemplating Georgia's sacrifices and regrets as she tries to decide whether to return to the familiar world of San Francisco or start anew in Vermont.

(Random House.com)

About the Author

Sue Miller was born in Chicago in 1943. She married shortly after graduating from Harvard and held a variety of jobs until her son was born in 1968. Her first short story was published in 1981 and, after teaching a number of creative-writing programs around Boston, she held a writing fellowship at Radcliffe from 1984-85. Her first novel *The Good Mother* was published in 1986 and was later made into a film starring Liam Neeson and Diane Keaton. Her sixth novel, *While I Was Gone*, was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's Book Club in June 2000. Now divorced from her second husband, she has recently moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts after living in Boston for many years.

(Bloomsbury.com)

Reviews

"A quiet, subtle story of longing, loss, and the compensations that, surprisingly, satisfy and endure." – *Kirkus Reviews*

"A beautifully crafted and supremely satisfying work of fiction." -- *Library Journal Review*

"Although this novel might not be a good starting point for those new to her work--her subtle explorations of emotional nuance sometimes border on the obscure--veteran Miller devotees will not be able to put it down." – *Booklist Review*

Further Reading

Behind the Scenes at the Museum by Kate Atkinson

Sights Unseen by Kaye Gibbons

A Short History of a Prince by Jane Hamilton

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Soon after Catherine arrives in Vermont, a real estate agent approaches her about showing the house to prospective buyers. The realtor compliments her on the house and adds that she is also enamored of the house's "story"- "in the family for generations, both your parents living here into their old age, and so forth." Catherine recoils. "The truth was I didn't want to think of any of us that way-my grandparents, my mother, me. Or to have our life here used as a selling point-all that pain and sorrow and joy-to make the house itself more appealing. We weren't the house's story, none of us." Catherine is objecting, in part, to the fact that the story is more complicated than the realtor could possibly know-more complicated than any of them could possibly know, in fact. What does she mean? How is this notion advanced throughout the novel?
2. The narrative switches back and forth from the first to the third person as Catherine reconstructs Georgia's life from her diaries and letters, occasional quoting from them directly. How successful did you find this structure? Why do you think Miller chose this way of telling Georgia's story rather than simply using the diaries themselves?
3. When remembering the silence that surrounded her mother's schizophrenia Catherine put forward her own philosophy on hard truths with the statement "I explained everything to my children, long before their questions could have been framed" (page 35). Is this philosophy reflected throughout Catherine's life?
4. Catherine and Georgia have lived very different lives yet the diaries reveal many parallels. What are they? Are there character traits that the two women share? How do the two women's lives differ?
5. Miller writes that as Dr. Holbrooke examined nineteen-year-old Georgia he was "already beginning to think in terms of rescue." Yet in the same chapter he reflects on the arbitrariness of fate-of death in particular-and of the bewildering weight of his power in relation to both. How do you think Dr. Holbrooke squares his discomfort with his decision to have Georgia sent to the san? How do you think the author views his actions?

6. Catherine speaks of rescue, too in the scene in which she first meets Joe. "What shall I say of Joe? That I felt rescued by him from something I hadn't been conscious of needing rescue from? That I trusted him? Both were true. I never considered that I might be rescuing him." How does this differ from Dr. Holbrook's rescue of Georgia? To what extent are all relationships, especially romantic ones, a form of rescue?
7. Shortly after receiving the news that her father is to be remarried, Georgia cuts her hair. Is this transformation an act of empowerment or of self-punishment? "She unpinned her hair and let it down-your crowning glory her mother had called it-and watched as the long bolts of it slipped and whispered to the floor?" What is Georgia rejecting? What is she embracing?
8. The novel takes its name from the image of a town submerged beneath the surface of a lake. Catherine glimpses this world one day while fishing on the lake with her grandfather: "I looked down again. It came and went under the moving water, the sense of what was there. There were long moments when I couldn't quite get it, when it seemed I must have imagined it. But then there it was again, sad and mysterious. Grand, somehow. Grand, because it was gone forever but still visible, still imaginable, below us." Discuss this image in relation to the novel's themes. How has the author woven it into the novel's narrative and the narrative of its individual characters? What is the "World Below"?
9. In chapter eleven, Georgia and Dr. Holbrooke have a heated argument in which it unfolds that their marriage has been built on a misunderstanding. Can true love ever emerge out of a falsehood, even an accidental one? How does the author shape our perception of their marriage through the course of the book?
10. During Georgia's argument with Dr. Holbrooke it is also revealed that Georgia did not have TB at the time she was sent to the san, and that Dr. Holbrooke misled her about the condition of her lungs. Dr. Holbrooke claims that he was justified in lying to her because her time at the san was beneficial-she rested, she gained strength, she was relieved of the daily burdens of caring for her family. "But it changed my life!" Georgia cries in response. What is your view of Dr. Holbrooke's decision to have her sent away? Was this an act of mercy, or a misuse of power, or both? Do we have the right to change one another's lives?

(Bloomsbury.com, Random House.com)