

Dear Reader,

Dinner with Henry Miller, the inimitable writer, raconteur and octogenarian was unforgettable, if not life-altering, for anyone fortunate enough to share the table with him. For nearly three years he sat directly across from me serving up a satisfying feast of table talk on a myriad of topics along with the evening's meal. For Henry, conversation could be just as nourishing as the food itself. During his down and out days as a struggling writer in New York and Paris, it was sometimes the only thing that fortified him when his pockets and stomach were empty.

I'd come to live under his roof on two separate occasions, the second time as his cook and part-time caretaker at the request of his children in the mid-Nineteen-Seventies. Bypass surgery had caused him to suffer a stroke; he'd lost his vision in one eye and was considerably debilitated, but he stubbornly refused to give in to his aches and pains and made his way to meals with the aid of a walker. "When I'm forced to take my meals in bed, I'm a goner," he stated matter-of-factly.

I never knew which role Henry might choose to play when he showed up for dinner in his robe and pajamas. A mischievous glint of humor always shone from behind his mask. Would he act the part of a truth-seeking warrior, timeworn romantic, ex-patriot writer, lovesick schoolboy, encouraging mentor, enlightened sage, opinionated Dutch uncle—or a little bit of each?

He could just as easily display the colors of a full-blown sexist, or rail against the injustices women have endured at the hands of male chauvinists. He enjoyed playing the saint and the devil's advocate simultaneously, was rarely in a bad mood, and always seemed to rally at meal times even during his most difficult days.

Though admittedly a bit of a show-off, Henry wasn't pedantic or preachy. His style was irresistible and his stories thought provoking. Henry knew how to listen well and helped others to feel heard and appreciated. Conversation was a kind of performance art for him, an animated game of give and take. When well matched by a lively dinner companion, Henry's spirit would soar for days. Soon he'd be repeating their stories with embellishments uniquely his own.

His reminiscences were both plentiful and wide-ranging. He'd take us to the streets of Brooklyn at the turn of the century, making mischief with his beloved childhood pals, to the seedy dance hall where he met his first muse and second wife, June, or we'd relive his desperation at panhandling on the harsh streets of New York City during the Great Depression. We could be transported to Greece or 1930's Paris, or accompany him on walks through the forest as he lovingly described life in Big Sur with his children and the unique cast of characters who came to call on him in his own, magnificent, "paradise on earth." With his gift of gab, it's no wonder he was able to survive his days as a penniless writer. He'd been welcomed and fed by many an eager host because of his storytelling skill and a highly magnetic personality. Dinner with Henry Miller wasn't just dinner, it was an event.

Henry didn't suffer phonies or posers lightly. He found polite chit chat a total waste of time. Testing a new dining companion he might begin a conversation

with shocking or perverse statements. When Jerry Brown, the twice governor of California, came for dinner, Henry initiated the evening with: "If you'll excuse my honesty, I've always held the opinion that politicians are rather on the bottom rung, at the bottom of the barrel of humanity, so to speak." Brown, with good humor, shrugged off the statement with a smile as if he knew he was being tested. An intellectual (rare for a politician) and well-read, he found firm footing with his host for the rest of the evening.

For dinner companions who loved books, Henry offered an extensive and diverse list of writers and works which, in his opinion, ought not to be missed. The ones he raved about often (and got me to read) were Fritz Peter's *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries*, *The Heart of a Boy* by Edmondo de Amicis, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, and various works by Rimbaud, George Simenon, Mohamed Mrabet, Paul Bowles, Edna O'Brien and, strangest of all, the 19th Century romance novelist Marie Corelli who outsold the great writers of her day: H.G. Wells and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. When Henry was particularly excited by a certain book or writer, like Corelli's *Romance of Two Worlds*, he would seek out multiple used copies and give them away as gifts to his friends.

Those of us lucky enough to find ourselves in Miller's animated presence had much to gain from a wise and seasoned teacher. By his example, I learned to stay open and awake to the serendipitous twists and turns of fate, and to work hard and maintain discipline in my creative endeavors. I became less afraid of taking risks because Henry insisted there were always angels standing by ready to lend a hand; all that one needed to do was believe in oneself and one's mission. I was delighted to find that one

shouldn't turn off to the possibility of falling in love at any age and I, most certainly, learned about the art of listening both with an open ear and an open heart.

Knowing that at some point I would be moving on, I wanted a written record of his table talk in order to stir my memory in the years to come. One evening, after dinner, I penned six or seven favorite stories that came immediately to mind, writing them in Henry's voice, and finding great satisfaction in my attempt to recapture the essence of his animated tone and gesture.

A few days later, and quite tentatively, I shared what I'd written after our evening meal. His response was overwhelmingly positive. "My God!" he exclaimed, "I can see my gab has had a profound effect on you! This is the highest compliment you could ever pay me." He expressed the feeling that, in collected form, these tidbits of conversation would make an interesting book, one he'd lend his energies to with delight. "I'll tell you what," he said, "let's come to the table each night and you can ask me questions, and I'll write a list of things to talk about too." This was typical of an unstinting generosity of spirit and a sense of enthusiasm when it came to encouraging his friends. When he believed in you, he became your unabashed cheerleader.

Faithfully, over the course of several months, I wrote down what Henry shared at dinner, and later he gave criticisms, additions, and corrections. He began referring to me as his "personal scribe," saying that I was writing his last words for posterity. When it was my time to leave him in the care of others, he made me promise to finish my project no matter what. I moved away, started a business, gave birth to a daughter, but I kept my promise as I worked away on the musings of my master. The book was

first published by one of Henry's publishers a year after his death, but contained few of my personal observations or anecdotes. I was told, and at the time believed, that my stories and reminiscences would be of little interest to a reader. All these years later, older and I hope wiser, I know this isn't true. In this Eio Books edition I've been encouraged to add new perspectives to honor Henry's profound and lasting imprint on my life, and the lives of others close to me.

This shiny new book then, longer, better, and full of love, is a memorial to a wealth of human experience, eighty-eight years worth to be exact, happily passed along to me by my dinner companion and mentor: Henry Valentine Miller, the most accessible, spiritually generous, trustworthy, and fascinating, person I've ever known.

May it help serve as another roadmap into the heart, spirit, and mind, of an eccentric artist, confirmed romantic, and enlightened human being—a citizen of the universe and a friend for all time.

Twinka Thiebaud  
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Photo by Mary Ellen Mark



## Meeting Henry Miller in Big Sur

When I first met Henry Miller in Big Sur over the Christmas holiday of 1962, I was seventeen years old. Henry was seventy-one.

I suppose most people are thrilled to meet someone famous. Even someone “infamous.” Actually, I’d bet infamous is even more thrilling. Henry Miller was as infamous as they come. He was a “dirty-old-man” and a “pornographer,” freshly minted in the public mind by a rapacious press thanks to his groundbreaking obscenity trials of the early 1960’s. But I wasn’t thrilled, even though I was the daughter of liberal and very artistic parents. I’d even read, like so many others surely did, most of the steamier passages of *Tropic of Cancer*—which completely turned me off. The raw nature of his prose shocked my romantically inclined nature.

So why was my mother forcing me to accompany her to Big Sur? It was her intent to secure the film rights to Miller’s short story, *A Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. To that end, she and Henry had been writing back and forth for months—although they’d never met in person. Anxious to leave his Pacific Palisades home during the holidays (I was to learn that Henry did not enjoy celebrating Christmas), he’d finally invited my mother to meet him in his old

Big Sur house to discuss the project—reasonable enough since we lived in the San Francisco Bay area, about three and a half hours away.

All this was my mother's business. Why did I have to give up my own precious holiday time with my friends in order to help her secure a deal? But she remained adamant, so off we went, stopping along the way for bags of groceries requested by Miller. He'd said the roads were a mess and getting to the nearest market was quite an undertaking. How right he was. Just south of the little town of Big Sur, the road was so bad, long stretches had almost washed out. Edging along the highway on the rugged cliffs above the stormy Pacific was hair-raising.

Relief doesn't describe how I felt leaving the treacherous coast highway and heading up the winding, narrow dirt road to Miller's Partington Ridge hideaway. Somewhere along the way, my mother finally told me why she was dragging me along. My stepfather had consented to her spending the weekend as the house guest of the "world-renowned pornographer" but *only* on the condition that I go along as chaperone.

That jolted me. What was my stepfather thinking? That the dirty old lecher could handle one woman, but two would tax him? Whatever his reasoning, the visions created by this confession made my skin crawl. Me, seventeen and a virgin, somehow holding off a salivating satyr while my poor mother bounded off into the forest primeval? And then? Then the infamous Henry Miller would turn on me? Irritation quickly turned to intense anxiety. By the time we reached the front gate, Henry was a werewolf, my mother was wandering lost and alone, and I was trapped in a bathroom, the door bolted against a ravening beast.