

# Bad Subjects

Political Education for Everyday Life

BAD REVIEWS 

## Mother Millett

Kate Millett

Martha Bridegam

Thursday, July 5 2001, 9:25 PM

---

There must be dozens of feminist meditations on the traditional woman's burden of caring for frail elderly relatives. *Mother Millett* is an unusual entry in this category because Kate Millett, the dutiful daughter in question, is also a ferocious longtime critic of institutionalization from a human-rights perspective. Here she tells how her mother's placement in a nursing home provoked her own refusal to join any authoritative "us" in disposing of a troublesome, unfit "them."

Kate Millett has been on a comeback since a 1999 [article](#) appeared in *Salon Magazine* expressing shock that Millett's feminist classic *Sexual Politics* had dropped out of print. Others in the publishing world were shocked too. Millett seems to have risen to the occasion. The [results](#) have included a professorship for Millett, new editions of her books, and the publication of *Mother Millett*.

Millett is sometimes excessive but always interesting. She takes extreme positions as an intense advocate for the perspective of the underdog -- "as if there were another dog to root for." She's the utter opposite of Camille Paglia, a sympathizer with overdogs, who in *Sexual Personae* mocked Millett's literary analyses while refusing to mention her by name.

In this latest memoir Millett is, as usual, egotistical, prone to paranoia and fascinated by clinical atrocity -- but also, as usual, worth reading for her challenges to the less commonly questioned forms of dehumanization. She says old ladies dread nursing homes with the instincts of political prisoners. She labels St. Anne's Home "a total institution." Is she wrong?

The story of *Mother Millett* begins with the rebel daughter's attempts at before-it's-too-late reconciliation with her increasingly frail mother, who persistently sticks to the upbeat and everyday. This is the mother who herself took part in a family attempt to have Millett involuntarily committed to a mental

hospital and who once threatened to sue her over a book dedication. Mother and daughter are superficially friendly enough, but real attempts at understanding fail so long as Mother controls her own environment.

Then debilitating surgery leaves Mother apparently unable to stay in her supported-living apartment and Millett's voice-of-reason big sister places her in a nursing home. She becomes the weakened captive of a coercive institution -- just the type of victim Kate Millett is used to championing.

So the difficult daughter ironically becomes her mother's defender against the elder-care medical establishment and the for-her-own-good thinkers within the family. Millett brings her mother back from the nursing home to care for her in the apartment she has been expected to give up.

Even as a lifelong advocate against institutionalization Millett wonders if caring for her mother at home was the right thing to do -- but only until she sees St. Anne's nursing notes that labeled her mother a "behavioral problem" and suggested asking relatives' permission to tie her to the bed.

In Millett's mind at least, she and her mother are *Thelma and Louise* on the lam. She's thrilled to have her mother as a partner in crime.

There's a little unattractiveness to this obvious pleasure at being finally on the same side with her mother against Big Sister and the institutional authorities. Does she like her mother better as an oppressed prisoner than as a successful retired insurance agent?

Well, maybe that, but also she's touchingly grateful for her mother's gratitude. Yes, and Millett only trusts the truths a society reveals by mistreating people.

A little disturbingly, Millett often uses courtship vocabulary in her talk about attempts to please her mother, as when she brings tulips to a visit "feeling like a suitor," and calls their relationship over the long days of her mother's recovery "this strangest love affair." This story is in fact about courtship -- Millett initially trying to make peace, and later, helped by events, seducing her mother to her own "outlaw" mentality.

But the persuasion is not only on one side: Millett comes to admit that her own Foucauldian obsession with defending victims has plenty in common with her mother's sunnier but equally resolute sense of "what is fair." They agree on the Gulf War and Anita Hill. One day Millett realizes "that the grudge is all gone."

Mother is still bossy, "telling me to see visitors to the door as if I might not, instructing me. I become a clod, a disgruntled teenager being taught manners." But Millett loves her mother's authoritative character now that it's part of her self-defense against being put away.

Millett has chosen to write this book not in the polished Oxford academese of *Sexual Politics* or in the dense polemic of *The Politics of Cruelty*, but in unbuttoned memoir prose that dares the reader to like her warts and all. She indulges in old-fashioned poetic syntax -- "a luxury of gray Oldsmobile" -- and in portentousness about the perfectly ordinary -- "I am here to see her off in a

cab: it is the day for the hairdresser." She uses her "writer" and "artist" (interestingly, more than "lesbian") status as an armoring identity to excuse her moments of surliness on family visits. She likes to make lists of things, likes commas better than periods, fails to choose between two phrases and uses both instead, and as you can see from this sentence it does tend to get on one's nerves.

But Millett's sharp underdog eye notices important things. For example, social Darwinism among old ladies who watch each other unforgivingly for signs of slipping -- "you're either with it or you're not." A familiar notion from Millett's *The Loony-Bin Trip* recurs: how medical authorities judge mental and physical soundness by appearances. It's a mistake to bring Mother into the dining room in a wheelchair she doesn't really need. Someone might think she belongs in a nursing home.

We do also get the kind of reflections that turn up in more typical memoirs of caretaking: frustration at the patient's neediness, guilt over the frustration, worry about whether difficult physical therapy will help, self-questioning: "Do I contribute or only disrupt?"

Millett's is not, however, a soft feminism that shudders at every jolt. We learn only parenthetically that Mother Millett had a double mastectomy years ago. Mother Millett is a tough Minnesotan. If she suffers from body image issues on the subject she doesn't discuss it.

In among all of this are Millett's thumbnail essays about politics, baseball, heartland virtues, political torture, commodified art, her variously ornery and sleek-professional relatives, artists' need for cheap urban work space, and her own efforts to save her loft on the Bowery, which she inhabits while also maintaining an artists' colony on an upstate Christmas tree farm.

The Verso hardcover edition is handsomely presented but could use better proofing -- there's a New York mayor named "Denkins," a Haitian president spelled "Aristede," the town of "Binghampton, New York" (extra "p"), and a weird Emily Dickinson overuse of capital letters.

Warts and all, this book belongs in your brain. You'll argue with Kate Millett as you read, but the important part is, you'll think.

Mother Millett is available from [Verso](#)

Copyright © 2001 by [Martha Bridegam](#). All rights reserved. Permission to link to this site is granted.