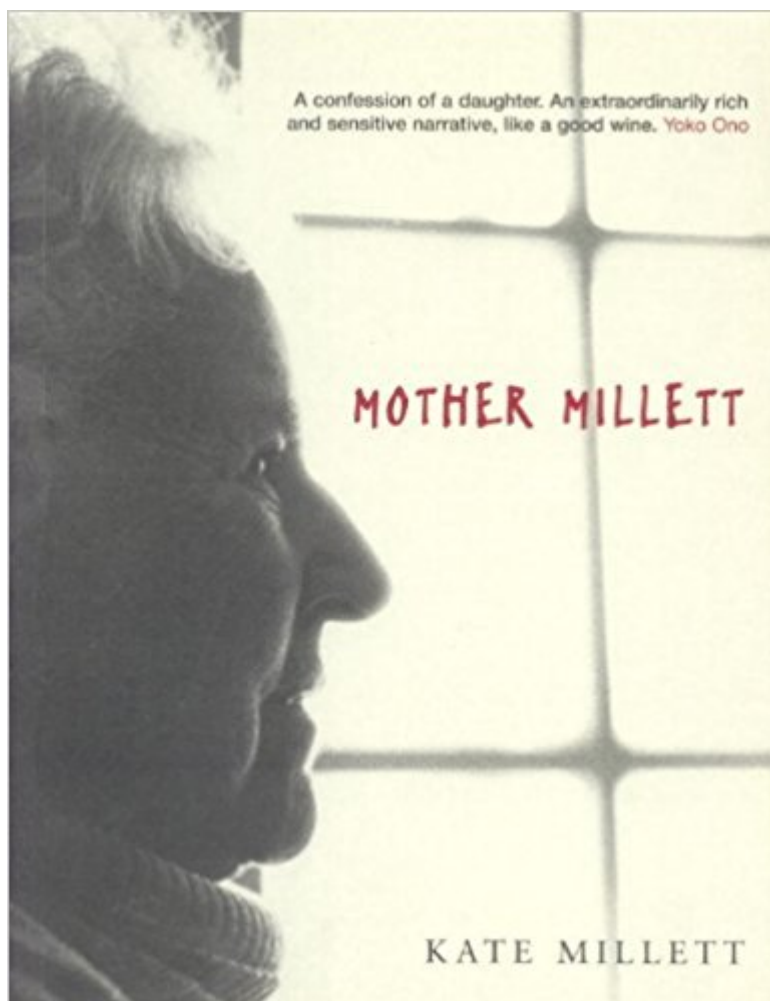


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# Mother Millett



## Synopsis

Kate Millett's tremulous and hauntingly beautiful memoir begins with a telephone call from Minnesota where her mother is dying. Her return home to a severe, intelligent, and controlling matriarch is the catalyst for a meditation on her upbringing in middle America and her subsequent outcast status as a political activist, artist, and lesbian. *Mother* Millett is an intensely personal journey through the author's interior life, a subject she has visited over the years in such classic texts as *Sita* and *The Loony Bin Trip*. In these pages are reflections on a life of political engagement, beginning with the sexual politics of the feminist movement, proceeding to the struggle for gay liberation, and culminating in her campaign for housing rights on the Lower East Side of New York where she and her neighbors currently face eviction. Throughout, Millett confronts her fears of losing her mother, the anchor to a world she has long ago rejected but which continues to define her. Echoing Philip Roth's *Patrimony*, Millett writes with great poignancy about caring for the person who brought her into the world, a role reversal that brings with it both devastation and grace.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When feminist icon and writer Millett (*Sexual Politics*, etc.) was summoned home to St. Paul to attend to her dying mother, she thought it might be her last such journey. Instead, it was merely the beginning of a fervent attempt to reclaim her mother from infirmity and dependence, to liberate her from the highly rated, wholly pitiless nursing home she detested. There is ample irony here. *Mother*

Millett had, after all, signed the commitment papers that had placed daughter Kate in a psychiatric ward years before. It was that experience, documented in Millett's *The Loony Bin Trip*, that made it impossible for her to agree to her mother's incarceration in St. Mary's, with its ever-present threat of medicated confusion and physical restraint. As she struggles to redeem her mother and return her to her beloved Manhattan apartment, Millett's conflicts with nursing-home managers, her own family and her sense of failure and self-doubt become a kind of universal history of children and aged parents in an America where the needs of the elderly commonly take second place to those of their families. Determined to be a better caretaker of her mother than her mother was of her, Millett sometimes claims the moral high ground too readily, though her rueful recognition that she will herself soon enough be old and facing financial circumstances far less secure than her mother's provides a sobering balance. (May 13)Forecast: Millett's reputation should draw review attention to this passionate rejection of the institutionalization and infantilization of the old and ailing, which, via Mother's Day displays, has the potential to appeal to a wider audience than Millett's core readership of boomer feminists.Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Modern literature has often portrayed mothers as both nurturing and domineering self-sacrificing yet adamant characters who at once build and destroy their child's sense of worth. In more ways than one, Helen Feely Millett is such a mother. Like Mersault's mother in *The Stranger*, she was responsible for much of her child's anguish but was also the driving force behind her victories. And despite the occasional lapses, she was fiercely independent and valiant. Unsurprisingly, then, her death should not symbolize the beginning of pain but a celebration of an extraordinary life and her child's realization that she is deserving of so much more than tears. This deeply personal and brooding memoir about Millett's mother's last days may not intrigue those who have an insatiable appetite for Millett's ideas on feminism (see *Sexual Politics*), but her writing is so impeccably fluent and her thoughts so articulate despite the lack of linear narrative that Millett's openness should appeal to anyone who values the technique at least as much as the theme. And since the memoir is as much about the daughter as it is about the mother Millett says so at the onset it is really a unique mix of autobiography and biography. An essential purchase. Mirela Roncevic, "Library Journal" Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This novel was troubling, because I know how hard it is to see a parent dealing with old age. It was

especially difficult for Millett, I think, because of the distance between her mother and her work, and maybe because of the lack of resources she had to travel comfortably. Luckily, my siblings are amazing and work diligently to keep my ninety-one-year-old mother independent, healthy and happy. Millett clearly had to constantly compromise with her family to keep her mother out of a Catholic facility that sounded like an absolute nightmare. It's ironic but wonderful that Millett fought for her aging mother after everything she had been through herself. I've just gotten to know Kate Millett's work in the last couple of years. So glad to connect with her literature.

A very honest and open examination of Kate's relationship with her mother who was a role model in independence and making a career for herself while supporting her children as a single parent. A very moving account of a rich life ending.

"Mother Millett" is distinctly personal, distinctly political, and distinctly Kate Millett. It speaks to the who of mother through daughter Kate, and to the question of who gets to speak for her when she is presumed (by hospitals and family members) incapable of speaking for herself. Nursing homes, confinement, age-ism, human rights all arise--in this symbiotic relationship between Kate and her mother--as issues here. The family tensions that drive these issues make MM an absorbing read. Kate's radicalism, lesbianism, and mental patient activism are up against the liberal positions of her professional married sisters Sal and Mallory. And also against her mom, who having raised her three daughters as a single mother, and embraced both stances, is caught in the middle. Mother Millett is the focus, though. She is mother in a culture of motherlessness. Not the visible mother honored once a year, but the invisible mother that is kept from all of us. The one whose acts and works are minimized or unknown, whose identity is unheroic and obscure, whose ideas and values remain unfathomed. For how many mothers did Anita Hill's televised testimony strike up a bond or realization with their daughters, or in this case renew an existing, if often strained, bond? Yet Kate's mother was an introductory force in her own early radicalism; she fully supported, after some resistance, her lesbianism, and she set the model for Kate's unmarried independent state with her own. I think the key to Kate's connection to her mom during these several weeks of crisis care is her insistence on her mom's social/public identity and her full human rights in a culture which would otherwise deprive her, and prey on her incapacity and lowly old woman status. Mother Millett will not join the community of ghosts at St. Ann's Nursing Home. Nor will she permit her family to make decisions for her, no matter the established norm, nor their good intentions. Her rights are endowed on her for her civic existence, not her private status. When Kate speaks up for her mom, she does

not speak for her. She certainly engages in way too much self-criticism and self-questioning to permit this to happen. Which is also why her sometimes seeming harsh criticism of the married half of the family seems so strikingly to the point. In fact, she almost embraces their opposing stances as often as she does her own in the long flux of emotional and philosophical inner and outer debate that constitutes the impact of a Millett's persona. "Mother Millett" might not be the high wire act of some of other Millett works, which is not to say that it doesn't crackle, but it moves right along, giving a boost to one's awareness of age-ism, disability, human rights and the limits of liberalism. And let's not forget the convincing sense of place in this work because St. Paul, the Wellington, the parks along the river, the old family home on Selby St. (as I recall) combine to drive home this in depth portrait.

This book is really gripping. I started it late at night and couldn't put it down until I finished. Millett's description of her mother and the differences in perception (what the hospital thinks about her mother, what her sister thinks, what she thinks) are fascinating, as is the way that she details how nursing homes aggregate power to themselves. If you are thinking of nursing home care for aged parents, this would be a good book for you to read; it is well written and baldly presents some of the real dangers involved in powers of attorney for the elderly. I have to say, though, that as the book went on I liked the author less and less. She is so uncompromisingly extreme--and I disagree that she earned our respect by what she did for her mother. What she basically did was, come home for a month and pre-empt her mother's care, after her elder sister had been doing it for years. Classic case of the child who is completely not involved in the ongoing narrative of care rushing in at the end to disrupt all of the arrangements. Frankly, if I were her sister or cousin who had been doing the care of their mother I would have wanted to run her out of town. NOthing is ever half way with Kate: the Reagan gov't is evil, the Golf War was an imperialistic measure by the oil interests, etc., etc. Unfortunately she contradicts herself at the end of the book; she spends the first 100 pages bemoaning how little money she earned in her life and then begrudges the fulltime care taker for her mother the measly \$1100 she wants to babysit 40 hours a week; in other words, she complains about her financial situation and is hesitant to pay her mother's caretaker the very lowest living wage--and it's not like Kate is stopping her life to take of her mother, oh no. She criticizes anyone and everyone in the book who is concerned about individual success, arguing for a socialist collective, but in the end, it's Kate Millett's individual wants and needs, no matter how carefully they are formulated as an argument for her mother's independence, that take precedence.

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