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## **FOR LOVE**

By Sue Miller

HarperCollins, 320 pp.

It has been said that while failure is painful for a beginning writer to endure, very few can manage the shock of early success. Fortunately, Sue Miller has been too tough, too adult to have been stunted by the deserved but occasionally unbridled acclaim heaped upon her debut bestseller, *The Good Mother*. Deeply affecting, that novel suffered from a bloated prose that appears mere journeywork beside the masterful mingling of crisp clarity and controlled ambiguity Miller has ripened into in her third novel, *For Love*.

Which is not to say *For Love* is a uniformly better book. As Miller's intent here seems no less than to define love itself and decide whether love is possible in our time, her reach may exceed her grasp. But her ambitious design provides much to make readers probe and deepen their own understanding of love.

Lottie Gardner, a free-lance writer, has left a new and troubled marriage to a Chicago oncologist named Jack and returned to Cambridge, Mass. to help her brother Cameron prepare their family home for sale. Joining her is her 20 year-old son, Ryan, a handsome and self-assured young man sensitive enough to read Calvino and bright enough to analogize infatuation vs. marital love to the grace/works paths to salvation. Also back in Cambridge is Elizabeth Harbour, the chic and patrician but vacuous and histrionic friend of Lottie's girlhood whose affluent husband has been having an affair.

Elizabeth returns also to a recurring passionate lust affair with Cameron which began in high school. When Elizabeth's husband comes for her, Cameron drives through the rain to claim her, but his car hits and kills the college girl babysitter waiting in Elizabeth's driveway to intercept her. It is around this death that Miller seems to hope her characters' epiphanies about love will crystallize. This never quite happens, as Miller indulges more in reflection than incident, and the reflections come almost entirely from Lottie.

Lottie met her husband when she suffered an occurrence of breast cancer, which is now seven years gone. By then, Jack's wife had been rendered vegetative by a stroke. While he tended her dutifully and lovingly, he began dating Lottie. But after the wife's death, Jack seems deeply attached to her memory. Lottie finds that Jack's home, with his teenaged daughter and wife's memory, is choking their love. As she watches Elizabeth and Cameron's rekindled adolescent passion, she aches to have it herself, even does for one brief night in a hotel when Jack visits, but marriage isn't lived in hotels, as Jack tries to make Lottie understand.

Although she is writing an article on love, everything around her makes Lottie more conflicted and confused: Cameron's madcap romanticism vs. Jack's steady realism, Elizabeth's surface glamour yet frustrated callowness. Lottie's own childhood—father

gone by age five, abusive alcoholic mother—perhaps left crusted scars where others are tender enough to trust love. Maybe, she suspects, in our post-Freudian era, we overanalyze our feelings, second-guess our desires and live our lives solely in our heads to the exclusion of our hearts. Certainly, Lottie is in danger of just such excessive cognition.

And so is Sue Miller. While with her characters we come to suspect the biggest obstacle most of them face in their pursuit of love is their own self-absorption, Miller saves *For Love* from fading into philosophic static by the compelling strength of her narrative skill and the sincerity and intelligence of her quest.

Miller shows again her remarkable talent for giving an idea a local habitation. Her vivid details, whether driving through Boston traffic or coping with a toothache, pulse with life like a Cartier-Bresson photograph. She inevitably finds a descriptive word that conveys the heart of each situation or relationship, as when Lottie and Ryan, munching take-out, "chew companionably." Her imagery often achieves poetry: Jack's face fading into reflections on an airport window, a new bride and groom leaving their nuptial garden to live, we sense, east of Eden.

This is a daring venture for Sue Miller, following one woman's struggle to know and grab love even to the border of solipsism. What enables Miller finally to succeed is the value of her character's goal and the certainty that, with Sue Miller, we are in the presence of an earnest and discerning mind.