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THE DISTINGUISHED GUEST

By Sue Miller

HarperCollins. 274 pp.

George Garrett, one of the finest writing teachers alive, suggests that promising writers become great ones via a three-step progression. The first step, accessible even to teenagers, is verbal facility. Over the next decades comes a deepening insight into character. Finally, the best writers see the overall patterns, how an individual story fits into the larger scheme of things.

And then there's Sue Miller. Her hugely popular debut novel, *The Good Mother*, reeked of amateurishly bloated prose, yet its insight into its central character was so penetrating, so universal that it rocketed Miller to a well deserved immediate stardom. Having instantly nailed down Garrett's second step, Miller has since then progressed masterfully toward completing steps one and three.

Her last novel, *For Love*, contained prose of such vivid evocativeness that it looked genuinely poetic beside her earlier work. And the writing in her new, fourth novel is better still.

But now Miller impresses most with the mature, overarching view she brings to the tasks awaiting us in the second half of life: caring for dying parents, understanding and accepting our children who've matured according to their plan not ours, accepting the loss of our own roads not taken, growing ripe for our inevitable death.

Lily Maynard, the eponymous guest in Miller's affecting new novel, published her memoir at age 72. That memoir detailed her years as the supportive wife of a minister struggling to promote civil rights in Chicago and Lily's gradual estrangement from him and his political tactics; it won lavish praise for its feminist sensibility and quest for self-discovery, Lily's dawning sense of "her own Lilyness." It also revealed a compassion and reflection surprising to her architect son, Alan, who'd grown up pained and resentful of his mother's emotional distance.

Now, Alan and his French-American wife Gaby must take the celebrated writer under their care as her mind and body wither under the progression of Parkinson's disease. And they must entertain the provocative presence of Linnett Baird, a young journalist attempting to research a profile on Lily for the *New Yorker*.

With deliberate and sympathetic mastery, Miller unfolds a tale touching on five generations of the family. She shows the austerity of Lily's girlhood, the vanity of her celebrated age and the sad lessons life as taught her, such as that "there's no surer or shorter route to heartbreak than having high expectations for your children." But we also

see Lily realize how unfair she'd been in describing her husband in her book so that she herself might fit the self-image she desired.

At first, Lily is purely the titular distinguished guest. Gaby, removing Lily's shoes, "had a sense, suddenly, of doing something holy." Linnett, at first, feels she is in the presence of a great soul.

Intriguingly, Linnett has entered the Maynard home in a cast, her ankle newly broken while jogging. As she limps about the home, however, we gradually come to see that everyone here has a limp; Linnett's is just the kind you can see. Emerging from a Chinese boxes structure made of writing within writing—Miller's, Lily's, Linnett's, Lily's ex-husband's—we come to see all the hollow nooks time and proximity carve into any family, places where misunderstanding and resentment can settle and fester.

Most painfully, we glimpse here in compelling human flesh what Eliot once called "the shame/Of motives late revealed, and the awareness/Of things ill done and done to other's harm/Which once you took for exercise of virtue." We see in both Lily and Linnett dawning awarenesses of how the very insights Lily took for growth sprung actually from an illusory self-portrait composed by vanity and pride.

The art—it's tempting to say the genius—of this book, however, lies in the blend of candor and empathy with which Miller renders these characters. The shame in Lily, the muted anger in Alan, the conflicts in Gaby and her own children all unfold with such dead-center recognition that most readers will spy memories of their own families floating randomly toward them as the pages turn.

For Sue Miller's greatest gift has always been to create vivid characters and, through them, show us ourselves.