



Family Pictures

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Spanning forty years, *Family Pictures* follows the conflict between husband and wife, over a beautiful autistic child. Randall is both angel and demon. His father, David, a coolly rational psychiatrist, wants him placed in an institution; his mother, Lainey, insists on keeping him at home. Yet it is not just David and Lainey who are struggling to come to terms with a difficult and unpredictable child; there are five other children in the family, each of them coping with the dramas and rifts surrounding them, each of them affected by Randall.

Family Pictures Details

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Kait says

This is the first of Sue Miller's books that I've read. It was a good book but it fell short of a full five stars for me.

It was a very real picture of a family broken by mental illness. I applaud Miller for her extremely believable portrait of the Eberhardt family which being torn apart by a child with autism. The family struggles through accusations from other each other, failing marriages, disruptive children, war, and so on. Based on how Miller describes these events in the lives of the Eberhardts, I would have given the book five stars. Each major event is described in shifting perspective, which works on occasion but not always. These small "snapshots" of the Eberhardt family is partly where the book derives its name.

However, the book was very long winded. As I said before, the shifting perspective got confusing on occasion and I would have to recheck who I was reading about at the time. The book tended to go off on tangents at times only adding to my confusion. The book appeared to be very shallow at times, but giving the time period and setting that may have been intended. The characters seemed to lack a little bit, they just weren't "real" enough to me to reach the height of a five star book.

Overall, it wasn't a bad book. I liked it, but it was difficult to follow at times and could be long winded. The premise of the story was good. As strong as the descriptions were of the people, places, and events, it really just fell short of what it really could have been. With some humorous and inspiring passages, it wasn't the worst novel I've ever read, but it really could have been better.

Heather Muzik says

Sometimes I can be slow to digest a book, slow to come to terms with my feelings about it. In this case, when I finished Miller's book back in 2012, I unequivocally gave it four stars—there was no question that I was drawn in by her story and intrigued by the family dynamic she portrayed. I didn't care for several of the characters, although I appreciated their characterizations, for they were true and bold and agonizingly real to me. But it is only after all these months have passed and so many other books have been read, that I truly understand the depth of what Miller accomplished. *Family Pictures* has stuck with me. The story of this family... the agony, guilt, and shame that exists below the surface of this thing they call life—a life that is happening whether they are prepared for it or not—deeply resonated with me. I keep going back to it. Rehashing it. Comparing the essence of what was in these pages to other stories. And there is only one thing I can conclude from that: this is a beautifully tragic work of art. Miller has crafted a superbly timed and weighted story—each character and emotion finely honed. The subtle strains and battles of family life are magnified through the lens of autism in the 1950s. Parents and older siblings struggle to accept and endure the new way of life that Randall brings. Younger siblings accept their world as one that only exists with Randall in it. The dichotomy she fosters is so poignant. A worthy read. Five stars.

Meredith says

This should have been a better book than it was. The story is centered on a family with an autistic son, and how the presence of this son shapes the family and each of its members. Unfortunately, all the family members are pretty unlikable and it is very hard to care about what happens to them. The mother and father are particularly unpleasant - very self-absorbed while believing they are selflessly dedicated to their kids. All of the characters seem to float in their own little bubbles of self-absorption and never really come across as a family. Overall, a disagreeable read.

Meri says

Sue Miller gives us reminder of how bad some psychological theories were in the 1950s and how they could ruin a family, especially regarding children on the autism spectrum. She really portrayed the ramifications of how an autistic child can affect the family. That being said, it is a long slow book and took me awhile to get into it.

Mags says

This is a story about a semi-dysfunctional but loving family. I really enjoyed this book. I like how this book is more character-driven than a plot-driven novel. It's about a family drama and it plays out the childhood, teenage years, and young adulthood of the children in the family. It explores what our place in the family does to us as part of our development. It probes into our own expectations of our siblings and parents. This book can get a little boring in some places, but I still enjoyed reading it.

Maggi says

Absorbing story of a semi-dysfunctional but loving family set in the 60's- and 70's. Several points of view bring different facets of this story to light. Sue Miller's style is a bit more flowery and metaphor-filled than I prefer, but her gift of narrative shines.

Kirsten says

I like Sue Miller, but this is not her best work. She is a fabulous writer, and that really shines through in some sections of the book. The shifting narration does not always work (though when it does, it's quite good). I was left feeling that the character motivations were missing here - so I never knew why anyone did the things they did, and therefore never really connected with them in any meaningful way. (Although, the last chapter goes a teeny way toward ameliorating this - but it's too little, too late.) Just okay, not great.

Lawanda says

Re: Autism. Audiobook performed by Pam Dauber

Joy says

Another family story -- a strong and confident family in 1948 of mother (slightly eccentric), father (sarcastic, always cool-tempered), a boy, a girl. Then the third child is born, severely disabled. The family spends the next 40 years trying to survive upheaval, heartbreak, pain. Summary: "Everyone around here's under a lot of strain right now. No one has a lot of resilience. The edges are frayed." This was painful to read. I kept thinking that there had to be a better way to deal with the difficult situation, but, of course, life doesn't always have 'easy' solutions. My conclusion was that the mother was most at fault for the family suffering. "Their mother didn't know how not to fight. She couldn't take a joke, their father said. Everything mattered to her. And she fought with everyone, not just at home..." "Perhaps what is is just that Lainey has no gift for what Freud calls 'normal misery.' Good book with lots to think about.

Arwen56 says

Tutte le famiglie felici sono simili le une alle altre; ogni famiglia infelice è infelice a modo suo, diceva Tolstoj.

E, infatti, questo romanzo ci racconta il modo in cui sono infelici gli Eberhardt, una famiglia americana cattolica, che l'autrice ci fa conoscere e seguire a partire dagli anni '50 sino a giungere agli anni '90. Un padre, una madre e sei figli, di cui uno autistico.

Oggettivamente, non posso lamentarmi di nulla: il libro è ben scritto, i fatti sono articolati, i personaggi sono presentati da diverse prospettive, la storia naviga tutto sommato abbastanza bene. Eppure non sono riuscita ad appassionarmi e mi sono accorta che ogni sera lo prendevo in mano non dico con riluttanza, ma senza entusiasmo sì.

Non aggiungo altro, perché ulteriori osservazioni da parte mia sarebbero fuor di luogo, dato che non ho motivazioni concrete da portare a supporto.

Magari a voi piacerà. In ogni caso, ve lo auguro. :-)

Maggie says

Technically a 4.5-star rating. So touching and beautifully written, with a searingly insightful understanding of the family dynamic, the pain and beauty at its core that shapes who we are. It was so dead-on with its portrayal of the impact fraught family relationships have on all of us. I'm withholding the last half star only because I wasn't quite fully satisfied with the ending, and didn't understand how/why it would be Nina's chosen ending.

Miller writes like a better, kinder version of Jonathan Franzen. One that's a little less cynical, more beautiful, sympathetic and appreciative of life:

"I wept for a long time in her office. I wept because I felt so confused by life - I was eighteen - and its strange mixture of beauty and ugliness. Because I was frightened at the idea of giving up what I felt was all I had inside of me - my rage at my family, my pain. Because I saw that therapy, the terrible cure my father had forced on me, had brought me to this moment, the moment I thought I was evading even as I began to tell the story that contained it. I wept because it had released me and helped me in a way I never would have chosen, hadn't in fact consented to."

I liked that the story is told and explored through the various points-of-view of different family members but am not quite sure get why the perspective sometimes changed from third to first, specifically when the story returns to Nina's POV (but still alternating between a first/third person perspective within her POV). While I'm sure it was intentional and purposeful, I couldn't figure out why and what it was adding, and therefore found it a bit random and distracting.

I loved how the book treated Randall. While he was inevitably, irrevocably at the center/core of the story and established family dynamic, he himself is this vague, undefined character, without personality or specificity. It felt heartbreakingly real, that the family could revolve so resolutely around someone who is so 'not there.'

And this, I suppose, is the power and impact that Miller's (and Franzen's) familial exploration imparts: it reminds us of all the ways that our love can inflict pain and sorrow every day, through the smallest and slightest of actions and words, on all those forced to share our days in close proximity and circumstance.

Karen Wilczopolski says

I just couldn't connect with the characters. No one seemed completely "finished". It was scattered and I can't tell whose perspective it was actually about, until the last chapter or so. I kept hoping for that breakthrough moment but it never came.

Bamboozlepig says

This was a pretty decent read. My only one gripe is the amount of characters. There were too many siblings and they felt extraneous, especially since the focus of the novel was on Nina, Mack, Randall and their parents. Liddie, Sarah and Mary felt out of place in the narrative and had no real job to do, other than to just kind of clutter the plot.

It also felt at times like the plot lacked focus and kind of wandered around. The last few chapters were on the blah side, despite there being a major development late in the novel. That development came off as rushed and underexplored within the frame of the story.

Still, Miller's storytelling was intriguing enough that overall I enjoyed the novel.

Katie Kenig says

But that's the way it is in a family, isn't it? The stories get passed around, polished,

embellished. Liddie's version or Mack's version changes as it becomes my version. And when I tell them, it's not just that the events are different but that they all mean something different too. Something I want them to mean. Or need them to. And of course, there's also the factor of time. Of how your perspective, your way of telling the story - of seeing it - changes as time passes. As you change.

In the idyllic 1950's, the Eberhardt family seems to have it all. They bought the big house overlooking the park in Chicago, where the dad is a psychologist and the mom stays home with her three beautiful children. Until they discover that something is wrong with their youngest, most beautiful child. He is autistic, and it sends the family into a tailspin.

Dad is angry and retreats into his work. Mom is destroyed since the diagnostics of the day place the blame of autism squarely on Mom's shoulders. As a result, she conspires to bring three more children into the family, trying to make up for the problems of their son.

Certainly even then we thought of the family as neatly divided down the middle. The first three, Macklin, Lydia and Randall, were the special ones. Even those names, we thought, showed greater imagination, greater involvement on our parents' part, than ours did: Nina, Mary, Sarah. Clearly by that time they had run out of gas.

But we didn't necessarily connect any of this with our father's nicknames for us. These were embarrassing not because of what they meant - which none of us stopped to consider then anyway - but because they existed at all. Not because they pointed to some quality we shared, but because they pointed to us. He called us "the unexpected guests." or "the surprise party." He would lower his book and watch us as we passed his study door, the three of us always together. Under his high, narrow forehead, his blue eyes had the trick that eyes in certain portraits or photographs do, of seeming to follow you while actually remaining steady, unmoving. "There they go, the extras," he'd say. Or, "Ah, the fleet's in. The Nina, the Pint-sized, that Santa Maria." We were "the little pitchers of health," "the coup de grace," "the last straws." We complained and laughed and whined about it, we told our mother, but it only made him worse.

Needless to say, it didn't quite work. It does, on the other hand, make for a fascinating family dynamic.

This book follows the family through the 60's and 70's, even through to adulthood in the 80's. You have a chance to see through the eyes of each of the family members, except for the autistic son, who is in very many ways the center that holds the rest of the family together as well as being the catalyst for change and destruction in their lives.

I really, really enjoyed this book. I loved that it was set in my home town of Chicago, and found myself daydreaming about the many settings and neighborhoods that were reminiscent of stories my parents had told me about from their youth. The author does a fabulous job of bringing the city to life as well as the family the book is centered on.

This is very much a character-driven novel rather than a plot-driven novel. It's a family drama, and plays out the childhoods, teenage years, and young adulthoods of the children in the family, from what high school was like in the 1960's for a girl that didn't fit that era's feminine ideal, to what happened to young men who dropped out of college and were sent to Vietnam, to wives swept up into a culture where swinging was becoming the norm. It examines what our place in the family does to us as part of our development. Are we expected to be the golden child? Were we overlooked in the middle? Coddled as the baby? It delves into our own expectations of our siblings and parents, and how we can change people with our own perceptions.

This book is a little dry in places, but I still found it very hard to put down. It's an excellent read.

Judith says

I loved *The Good Mother* and especially *While I Was Gone*, both by Sue Miller. I did not love this one as much and I have been trying to understand why.

The story is about a family more than about an individual. Yes, there is a main character - Nina - but her life is surrounded by the lives of her parents and siblings, and several chapters are from these other points of view. For a while I wondered if we'd ever get back to Nina, because I missed her.

The controlling force in the story is Nina's older brother Randall. Nina was the fourth child, Randall the third. Randall had neurological problems. They settled on calling him autistic but it sounds like more than that. Never mind. The label is not important. What is important is how his disability affected his parents and by extension his siblings.

In getting to the seat of it all, Miller weaves back and forth in time. Sometimes I felt we were thrown from one age to another, then back again, like a carnival ride. She takes in Nina's parents and their parents in her survey, which helps to provide a basis for the action.

Randall's parents felt very differently about Randall. It appeared to Lainey, his mother, that her husband David blamed her for the defects in this child. In response to this belief, Lainey goes on to have three more children - "perfect" - as a way of sorts of proving that she had nothing to do with it. Nina always felt out of it, different, because of this distinction, and her father jokingly referred to the three youngest as "the extras", the "unexpected guests", the "surprise party", the "little pitchers of health".

Her father was a psychiatrist. It appears that he took his profession seriously, extending his listening manner to his family. Which contrasted with Lainey's more excitable nature. At times I was irritated by David's steady, controlled manner, and at others by Lainey's uncontrolled outbursts or her attempts at joking everyone out of a funk. I did not become fond of either.

Nor did I become especially fond of Nina's older brother Mack, older than Randall but often seen as a kind of twin, the "perfect" twin. He felt pressured to perform at full volume for a while, until he threw it all away, again a response to the existence of Randall.

We don't get into the minds of the younger sisters to any great degree. We do meet Liddie, the eldest, and recognize that she uses her talent, her voice, to move her farther and farther away from her family and from forming any family of her own.

It's a compelling portrait of a family challenged by the one who is least aware of the others. For some reason, though, I never really felt sucked into it. Towards the end I could hardly wait for the last page, which differs from how I have felt when reading Miller's other books - that I would be sad to leave them behind.
