

# Who Am I and Who Are We?

Nancy K. Miller, *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past*

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In the documentary series “Who Do You Think You Are?” celebrities like Blair Underwood, Marisa Tomei, Reba McEntyre, and Vanessa Williams trace their ancestry to often surprising ends. Expert hands shepherd them through registries and archives as they trace forced and voluntary family migrations, confront slavery and pogroms, and are introduced to geographically distant and previously unknown family members. It is riveting, but the 90-minute episodes inevitably gloss over the numerous dead ends that confront those tracking the ancestral trail. Even with online tools like Ancestry.com and the vast genealogical archives kept by the Mormons in Salt Lake City, the past still sits in implacable silence before dedicated and resourceful seekers, even as it tantalizes with clues.

In her new memoir, *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past*, Nancy K. Miller pursues her family’s lost past with no such team; the search massively overflows a 90-minute time frame, and there is no tidy resolution. Instead, Miller, who is a distinguished professor of English and comparative literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the author of numerous scholarly books and a family memoir, and an important figure in feminist literary criticism, is largely on her own. After her father’s death, Miller discovers some old photographs and letters in a drawer. Without forming a plan beyond saving them, or deciding in a conscious way that she would learn more about

her father's side of the family, the Kipnises, she feels pulled to hold onto and later to understand "what they saved." She translates letters, identifies figures in old photographs, tracks down army records, and travels to meet her aging cousin and his family before eventually traveling back to eastern Europe. A story of Jewish families scattered across the diaspora takes shape, focused on two sons, her father and his brother, and their very different lives. There are revelations about the Kipnises, including potential ties to the mob, and Miller does not spare herself as she includes her own suicidal depression following her divorce, but such unveiling is not the driving force here. Instead, Miller's curiosity, as well as her tenacity and imagination, moves to the fore in this detailed portrait of a Russian-Jewish immigrant family.

Certainly, Nancy K. (for Kipnis) Miller's estimable skills in research and interpretation equip her well in this undertaking, but the process is still filled with dead ends and unpromising leads. She has only a handful of objects, and few family members to guide her. Instead of suppressing the tension between frustration and success in the process of figuring out her family's past, Miller reflects on the hard work of coaxing information from implacable history. I found myself equally compelled by the braided strands of the search for the past, Miller's reflections on the process, the revelations of Jewish history, and Miller's willingness to expose the seams in her own feelings about what she was doing. The centrality of Miller's voice balances the biographical and the autobiographical aspects of the project, and this dual focus offers the book a coherence that supersedes gaps in the family record. When the material is more abundant and the figures known to her, the story takes off. The courtship letters between her parents, for example, are remarkably vibrant. Miller knows these people well, and the chapter pulses with their liveliness. In other chapters, the trail is colder and Miller works to create characters from slimmer knowledge. These chapters engage the reader differently as Miller holds open the space of wonder, anticipation, and longing for what she cannot force into view. The interplay between different chapters pushes forward a form of questioning, a way of engaging the material as Miller calls attention to and balances the almost compulsive detective process with the search for meaning. What is she looking for? What does it mean? How does the search end? How will she know when it does?

Miller concludes meditatively as she wonders what prompts people to look back. When many writers look back, they ultimately find themselves

staring hard into a mirror. They confront, inevitably, the mortality of others, but their own intrudes as well. Does the desire to look back signal some turning away from the future, some reorientation that signals our own end? Do we turn toward the past because we feel closer to casting our lot with those who reside there? Or does the backward turn signal something more like an increased scope, a readiness and capability to draw from our own experience to sketch in the outlines of meaning? For Miller, looking back is so active and constructive, as each new piece of information presents its own puzzle to be solved or accommodated, that the book feels less nostalgic than renewing. Something new and unfathomable will keep turning up, as Miller shows: a letter, a lock of hair, a candlestick, a spoon, and near what seemed like the end of the project, a scrapbook. Each offers, as she puts it, “a chance to begin again.” *What They Saved* dives deeply into genealogy and Jewish history, lets loose ends dangle in plain sight, and cultivates a palpable feeling of anticipation for the unfinished project of narrating the past.

—Leigh Gilmore

