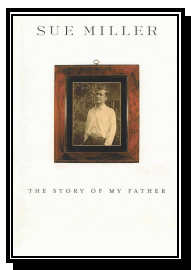


Are *The Story of My Father* and *Iris* Worth Losing Your Mind Over?

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By Sue Miller
Alfred A. Knopf Publisher, New York (2003)



Buena Vista Home Video (2002)

My grandmother was diagnosed with a terribly fatal brain disease known as Alzheimer's before I was born. As a result I never knew my grandmother the way most young adults know their grandmother. I do not have any stories to share about how she took me to the park every Sunday or about how she used to make Thanksgiving dinner. No, instead all I can remember about my grandmother is how I was allowed to change her liquid food bag each time I went to visit her. By the time I was born my grandmother was a "vegetable," not able to speak or think, much less move or eat on her own. This disease is one of the largest causes of death in the world.

The Story of My Father is a novel written by Sue Miller, which attempts to tell her readers what it is like to care for a loved one who is being consumed by this fatal disease. From my experience, doing such a task is not easy; however, Miller chooses to focus more on her own emotions rather than the actual hardship her father faced. "My particular version of the caregiver's dilemma, then, was one of confusion..." Here is one of many times that Miller speaks of her own ethical, physical, and emotional dilemmas. Although the novel is a biography of Miller's experience, I feel she has trouble sticking to the topic of her father.

In the novel, one receives an inside look on this author's childhood memories in extreme detail, although many assume this book's purpose is to show what she faced as her father died. One could argue, however, that she includes these flashbacks in her story because Alzheimer's is a disease that, although it is not diagnosed until later in life, potentially shows signs earlier than many can recognize. By describing her past, including her memories with her father, she questions his past actions, wondering if his whole life was pre-Alzheimer's rather than normal. One question to the reader then comes: did she ever truly know her father? For instance, her father's very quiet, easy-going, and content nature might all have been due in large part to the disease. Miller's awareness of this fact connects personally with her readers making it an emotional novel. If you are a person who likes a healthy cry, this book will be like cutting onions.

Narrating from beginning to end, a concept many people learn from early on is a problematic issue in Miller's novel. She begins her story sometime before she was born, and soon to follow is a more present experience in which her father took his first obvious turn for the worse. This quick glance at the present is all she allows her readers at one time, and instead of going from start to finish she seems to beat around the bush with the events leading up to her father's awful death. As previously mentioned, some flashbacks serve a purpose, but when I read this novel I expected a direct portrayal of what an Alzheimer's patient faces, rather than why Miller and her mother did not get along well. The movie *Iris*, I found, can also be put into this category.

In this film the main character, Iris, a British woman, is a victim of Alzheimer's disease, and after reading *The Story of My Father*, *Iris* helps to make Miller's visualizations of what a patient of the disease might look like come to life. In fact, although *Iris* is difficult to watch based on the cultural difference, the portrayal of how the disease affects the victim directly is much clearer in the film than in Miller's biography. As previously touched on, this story too conflicts with the idea of absolute start to absolute finish and jumps between past and present. In contrast to *The Story of My Father*, *Iris* does not recollect all the way back to childhood. Instead, she only flashes back to her middle adulthood. Similarly to the book, this is also done to show the earlier signs of the disease. One possible connection that can be made is to how Iris led almost two completely separate lives, as though she had a split personality. Finally, in the last stages of her life, her husband, John Bailey, realizes, "She is in her own world now. Perhaps that's what she always wanted." This statement sums up what the disease did to Iris and how it may have shown through in her personality the entire movie.

Iris is a character I had trouble becoming emotionally attached to, and this made the film less personal for me, causing me to take a more outside stance. I never felt as though I knew Iris, but perhaps that was the point, showing that Alzheimer's victims are

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no longer themselves once the disease progresses enough to be diagnosed.

Because both the novel and film are based on a deep scientific issue, Alzheimer disease, most people uneducated in this area may feel they are unable to comprehend its complexities. One aspect both pieces possess is clear and fundamental explanations of how the disease is diagnosed and how it affects the human brain. Miller especially provides a more in-depth commentary on scientific terms and theories directly related to the disease. This type of commentary makes this novel educational without making it difficult to grasp, like a text book. Readers do not fool yourself into believing that you will not be able to understand neuroscience concepts while getting a personal outlook on how they are applied to real life.

The Story of My Father and *Iris* are both interesting portrayals of how Alzheimer's disease can affect the victim and the people around them. Miller could have made her novel deeper by accenting her father's struggle rather than the issues she had with her mother. And *Iris* would have been more emotionally touching if the writer would have used a character more culturally acceptable to Americans. I do have sympathy for each and every character and getting to know them was a unique experience. I recommend reading the novel or watching the movie to anyone who does not mind becoming emotional over the lives of others, and especially to those who have been through this experience in their own lives.