

The BiblioFiles: Sarah Miller

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is Sarah Miller, author of *Miss Spitfire* and *The Lost Crown*. Chances are you've already heard of *Miss Spitfire*. It's the childhood nickname of Annie Sullivan, companion and teacher of Helen Keller, a deaf-blind girl in late 19th century America who later rose with the tireless assistance of Annie Sullivan to international fame for her achievements.

The incredible true story of these women is recorded in history books and has been an inspiration to millions. In *Miss Spitfire*, Sarah Miller presents a fictionalized account of Annie Sullivan's first arrival at the Keller home, and her struggles to reach six-year-old Helen, who is wild, stubborn, violent, and trapped inside her head with no awareness of words or their meaning.

Any other teacher might have been daunted by the task, but not Annie. Raised in orphanages, state institutions, and nearly blind herself, Annie was tough, resourceful, and just as willful as her young pupil. Within a few weeks, Annie had reached Helen and given her the words and concepts she needed to finally connect her mind with the world. Annie would remain with Helen as teacher and companion for the next 49 years.

Miss Spitfire is a captivating read. Instead of painting the story in gentle, glossy tones, Miller focuses on the struggles, the doubts, and even the physical battles between Annie and Helen, while also bringing to light the pain and sorrow of Annie's past. While this could result in a sad tale, it absolutely doesn't. By showing the hard road Annie and Helen travel, it makes the little triumphs and final tremendous breakthrough all the more powerful, golden, and inspiring. It is an amazing book.

In addition to *Miss Spitfire*, Sarah Miller has written *The Lost Crown*, a young adult novel that details the life and eventual downfall of the family of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia in the early 1900s. The paperback version of *The Lost Crown* was released in July of this year.

Sarah Miller joins us from Detroit, Michigan. Ms. Miller, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

SARAH MILLER: Hi. Thanks.

DR. DANA: What first captivated you about Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller?

SARAH MILLER: I saw the play live at Meadow Brook Theatre. And I'd seen the movie. I mean, who hasn't seen the movie, and I knew what happened. It wasn't any big surprise. And I

can't tell you why because I don't know, but seeing it live, for some reason I finally understood what the big deal was for Helen Keller, was that there was no voice in her head.

And I think it's just that one realization that struck me so hard. Because you can't even imagine that, really. Because you need words, mostly, to imagine that. And I think going from there, there was also another kind of realization that led me to be a linguistics major after seeing that play, was that everybody has a Helen Keller moment. But you're usually, I don't know, what, six, seven months old maybe, when you figure out what words mean.

So the concept was, I guess, that once completely foreign and, wow, I'd never thought of that before. And yet, something I myself and everybody else has done, has realized. And from there I just got really caught up in learning about Helen, and from there it all snowballs into Annie Sullivan. And I was pretty much on my way.

Although, I didn't know that I wanted to write a book, I just have a habit when I get captivated by something, I dive in and learn all I can. And, eventually it occurred to me, I could do something with all of this idle research. And that's kind of how it happened.

DR. DANA: Was it daunting to write about these two titans of inspiration?

SARAH MILLER: It was a little. Yeah. You wonder, what are people who really love these people already-- what are they going to think? But that was kind of a abstract notion at the time. Because I wasn't in touch. It was different, for example, with *The Lost Crown*. I was involved for a lot of years with an online discussion forum where people just every day check in and talk about this history and these people that they love. So I knew exactly what those people were thinking all along.

But it was easier because it was more abstract with Helen and Annie. You wonder, are these people going to feel familiar to people who already, in a sense, know them. But you do the best you can. And if they feel familiar to me, from having read what I've read, that's the best I can do and hope that other people feel the same way and recognize the same people in the same words.

DR. DANA: Annie communicates with Helen through fingerspelling. And in the book, you describe it, it's basically one hand on top of the other spelling out the words. Did you try fingerspelling yourself?

SARAH MILLER: I am fingerspelling nervously right this minute. That was one of the first things I did after I saw that play, was re-recall how to fingerspell. Because I'd learned in elementary school. They taught us how to do Braille in first grade on Styrofoam meat trays with toothpicks or something. So I had a basic understanding. But, yeah, for the last 12 years or so, people will occasionally look at me like, what she's doing? Oh, I'm just apparently talking to myself with my hand, which is a little bit silly.

DR. DANA: Many people don't realize that, at first, there were some real physical struggles between Annie and Helen. I wonder if you might be willing to read a passage that illustrates this.

SARAH MILLER: I can do that.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that this is only one of many fights Annie has with Helen as she attempts to reach her and teach her the connections between objects and the words she is spelling into Helen's hand.

SARAH MILLER: "Armed with a bit of cake, I go downstairs to fetch Helen. I find her in the parlor, rocking a much-abused rag doll in little Mildred's cradle. She moves the cradle with the same fervor she showed the butter churn two mornings ago. If the poor doll had a brain, it'd be added into cottage cheese by now. Thinking to appease her, I put the hunk of cake into Helen's right hand and grasp her left one to lead her up the steps.

God above! You'd think I'd tried to drag her up by her toes, the way she fusses-- clawing, kicking, and finally going limp and dangling by an arm.

'That's enough of that,' I growl, releasing her hand. She drops like a sack of coal and scuttles back to the parlor. Hot on her heels, I follow and grab her by the arm. She twists and gropes for anything-- cradle, doorframe, banister-- to brace herself against, but it does her no good. When we reach the stairs, I stop only long enough to hoist her up under my arm, balance her against my hip like an upturned baby, and haul her up the steps.

I plunk her, panting, into the chair and spell s-i-t. I tap her hand, but she refuses to repeat the word back to me. More to my surprise, after her tussle over the trip upstairs, she doesn't move at all.

'Is it the silent treatment, then?' The absurdity of the question hits me, and I laugh aloud. 'Be a silent witch if you want. I can do the talking for both of us.' I suppose it's every bit as absurd of me to speak aloud to her. Ridiculous or not, I can't see the use in muzzling myself for hours on end simply because she can't hear. Besides, I've never been inclined toward holding my tongue.

Guiding her movements, I make Helen feel the doll with one hand as I try to spell the word into the other. She yanks her closed fist away, shoving it into her lap. I slap my own hand over her clenched fingers and pull her arm toward me.

I hear the sound before I understand what's happening.

Thwack!

The table topples onto its side, spilling my lesson over the floor. Helen's booted foot swings gaily in the space where the table stood. As usual, she doesn't smile, but a hint of smugness plays across her face. I don't care for it in the least. *I will if I want to, and I won't if I don't*, that look says-- the very thing I said the first teacher who tried to command me.

I give her a wry half smile as my hand lands on her ankle with a snap. 'If I didn't know better, I'd think my teachers had sent you to avenge them,' I tell her, stilling her boot and resisting the temptation to squeeze until I hear the shoe leather creak. 'Think you can get the better of me, do

you? Not today, my little spitfire. Not today.' She squirms against the pressure of my grip. After a moment I release her.

I right the table and replace all the objects. Helen reaches out for an instant to feel the table, then crosses her arms in a sulk.

'That's right, you. There's no stopping me today.' I reach into the crook of her elbow, grabbing for one of her hands. She hunches up like a turtle, clamping them up under her armpits. Her resistance only stokes my resolve.

Crouching on my knees beside the chair, I lunge in with both hands to wrestle one of her arms free. She grunts like a bull, clutching her hands to her sides. Suddenly all her defiance falls away, and I hold one wrist in my hand like a trophy. I don't realize my mistake.

Her other fist flies like lightning. I hear a crack inside my head and think for a moment of thunder, until something in my mouth distracts me. Something small and cool as the hand of a china doll.

A tooth. My tooth!

I slap a hand over my mouth and hold my breath, waiting for the pain. There is none. Only a slow-waking ache in my jaw. I open my mouth and gasp for a breath.

Searing cold slices across the broken tooth's edge. Tears boil up in my eyes, and my throat swells, but I can't cry, for fear of the scalding pain. I press both palms to my mouth and try to breathe slowly through my nose. Brassy-tasting blood runs from a split inside my lip.

I stumble toward Helen, and she scrambles away, warned by the clumsy jolts of my feet. 'Come back here, you beast!' I cry after her. The exposed tooth-stump throbs with every word. A sob breaks out of my chest, slowing me for an instant as I stagger out of the room and stampede, moaning with each step, down the stairs.

I'll demolish that child. No one has hit me since I learned fight my own father, and I'm not about let anyone start."

DR. DANA: Not your typical schoolhouse scene.

SARAH MILLER: No, but they sure were fun to write.

DR. DANA: So tell us a little bit more about the path you chose to address these struggles, and why you chose to not avoid them.

SARAH MILLER: Let me think about that. I just remember at one point thinking, this kid has no limits. I mean, just absolutely none. And I thought, wow, that could be a lot of fun. I mean, it's going to be not a lot of fun at all for Annie. But there's a scene when they're in that little house alone, and she's trying to put Helen to bed. And she's climbing, literally, climbing the bed posts

and diving under the bed. And that's exactly when I had that thought where, I can do anything with Helen. Because Helen would've done anything.

And I think some of that is lost in light of what Helen later became. Because she was so famous and held up as such a pinnacle of inspiration and virtue and determination. While Helen herself was pretty honest about her childhood, her mother, for example, was uncomfortable with it. Some of the things that came out in her own writing, Mrs. Keller did not, in my guess, approve of. Though, I don't know how much tension it caused between them, if any.

But, yeah, I didn't really want to lose that because that later image is so carefully crafted. And it is a deliberately crafted image. There's a picture of her, and I can't remember in what biography-- in about the 1950s, sitting next to Polly Thompson in a car who was Annie's replacement. And Helen looks really mad. And on the back of the photo, apparently, was penciled-- it's noted in the biography, "Don't use. Too tense." And they were completely aware of how she appeared, and how they wanted her to appear.

So I guess to be more honest about the reality of where she started, there wasn't really any way to-- plus anybody who's seen *The Miracle Worker* knows darn well. She was throwing spoons and kicking people and just completely out of control.

DR. DANA: I'm just amazed at how tough Annie was. She did not back down.

SARAH MILLER: Uh-uh. And I think that had a lot to do with where she came from. Because it was rough. Her father was out of work and was a drunkard. And the children were passed off after her mother died to sort of willing relatives, and then to the poor house where it wasn't pretty. There were people in there dying of alcoholism and young women in trouble as they put it back in the day, having babies that were abandoned and mostly died of disease. And it was just ugly. And she had to be that person to survive. And her own brother died in the Almshouse. And to get through that, she either had to have that kind of will, or she would have been a completely different person. Probably not the person who could have broken through to Helen Keller.

DR. DANA: After a few weeks at the Keller house Annie finally breaks through to Helen by fingerspelling the word "water" while water from a pump is running over Helen's hands. It's a famous moment in their relationship. One that has been depicted many times in books, in plays, in film. What did it feel like to write your version of this scene?

SARAH MILLER: That was probably one of the scarier things to tackle because everybody knows it. Everybody knows what's going to happen. We're going to go out to the pump, and there's going to be water. And there's going to be this enormous light bulb over the whole property when this happens.

But what finally occurred to me and made it so that I could write the book and knew how to end the book was not what this meant for Helen, but what did it mean for Annie to stand there and have that happen. And to have Helen reach out because she wants to know Annie's name. And what Annie chooses to tell her, in a sense, defines her life at that moment and for the next 50 years.

DR. DANA: It's beautifully written.

SARAH MILLER: Thank you. That's the point where it turned and, like, OK I can see how to do this differently.

DR. DANA: The book ends on the evening of Helen's discovery at the pump. Can you tell us a little bit about how the story of Helen and Annie continues after this?

SARAH MILLER: After that, it just sort of exploded rapidly. Helen was phenomenally smart. The mind that was locked up in there was an amazing mind. She learned-- I could look it up in a minute-- but dozens of words that day. And hundreds-- there were a hundred and some words that week, maybe. And then went on to be the first deaf-blind person who graduated from college.

She learned English, French, German, Greek. I'm sure I'm missing one. I think she knew at least four languages. She learned, because Braille was not standardized at that point in time, at least two or three Braille-- I can't think of the right word-- but systems. And she was just something else. And she was so hungry to learn and had this amazing capability. She could speak French, for Pete's sake. When she learned to speak, she learned to speak in other languages, even though she couldn't hear her own voice. And people who knew both French and English said she was easier to understand in French, maybe because the qualities of that language were more suited to the qualities of her speech.

Yes, just "kerpow" out of the cannon, that kid. And Annie stuck with her all along. And was kind of overlooked-- well, not even kind of-- literally, pushed aside sometimes because Helen became so famous that people would just shove her out of the way to get to Helen. They wanted to meet Helen.

Annie eventually received-- I can't remember if it was from Harvard-- an honorary degree, which she was kind of reluctant to accept but was talked into it by Helen and friends. So she was, of course, recognized. And there were people who recognized that, in a sense, the miracle was as much Annie as it was Helen.

But the two of them were virtually inseparable for the better part of five decades. And Annie was just always alongside her, always interpreting for her. The interesting thing about Annie though was that when she came across somebody who could fingerspell, or who could communicate directly with Helen, she never hesitated to step aside. She didn't insist on being that middle man and filtering everything. As much as she enjoyed Helen and loved Helen and needed Helen, she was willing to take a break and let Helen have firsthand experience, quite literally, of other people, which I think speaks well of her and her approach to Helen.

DR. DANA: You've also written a second book, *The Lost Crown*. It came out in paperback this July. The subject matter of the book, the plight and last days of the family Tsar Nicholas II pushes it into the young adult category. I'd be interested to know what it was like to write this book.

SARAH MILLER: That book was a mighty Russian bear. It was bigger in every possible way. I chose to do it from the point of view of four characters. So there were four voices in alternating chapters. The research was just outrageous. Because there's so much, and so much of it is not in English. And so much of it is old stuff. Although, it's not, actually-- now that I think of it-- it's not any older than the Keller stuff. It was just harder to get a hold of. Because a lot of things were locked up during the Soviet era. It was just forbidden.

And so the information that was initially available came out of the 1920s. The courtiers who knew the family, their memoirs, which were really valuable firsthand resources. But you also have to remember at the same time, these were written by people who knew them. Some of them followed them all the way into exile, and their friends, their employers, were murdered.

So their point of view became a lot more sentimental, rosy-colored kind of stuff. And I was lucky while I was working that there were releases of the Tsar and the Empress's diaries-- came out in Russian, but from the two years that I was focused on-- 1917, 1918-- I have their entire diaries loaded with commentary. There was another book of the girls, who were my main characters, their letters and diary entries from World War I. That time leading up to the upheaval and abdication and everything.

So there was great stuff that came out of it. But it was in Russian. And I was a Russian minor, but I tell people I know just enough Russian to frustrate myself. When I sit down with this stuff and I can't read it fluently. I can look at it, and I know the context. And I can see what they're talking about, but I really have to get in there with my dictionary and work to get the nuance out of something like that.

And it was bigger in the sense that the setting was bigger. With Helen and Annie, I was looking at two people most the time in a very small cottage. And these folks had yachts and palaces. And even when they were exiled, they were exiled to mansions in Siberia.

So you sit in one room in that book, and there's maybe four, six, ten people there. And there was just daunting quality to that. Like, do I have to mention everybody who's in the room? I wasn't used to that because it was Helen and Annie. And you knew before, it was just Helen and Annie because there was nobody else in that little cottage.

But, say, here we have a room full of half a dozen people and two dogs and maybe a couple guards wander by. That was just completely different and felt really big. But I've got three shelves of books for The Lost Crown in research, where Helen, I have probably one tightly packed shelf. It was just a big difference in scale.

DR. DANA: What historical event has captivated your interest now?

SARAH MILLER: Ooh. My latest thing that I'm cycling through is Lizzie Borden. I had a big Anne Frank binge. I had a big Laura Ingalls Wilder binge. So the rumors at the library where I work, currently, are that I am writing Anne Frank from the point of view of the cat. Or Little House on the Prairie from the point of view of the dog. Or Lizzie Borden from the point of view

of the hatchet. And I tell everybody, feel free to spread any of those rumors that you like. I don't mind.

But that's the joke because every time I check out a nonfiction book at the library, somebody says, "Oh. Oh, that's what you're working on next." I'm like, well, sometimes I just like to read.

DR. DANA: Sarah Miller, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles.

SARAH MILLER: Thank you. It's been fun.

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