

Searching for connections

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

When Sue Miller's latest novel opens, Jo and Daniel Becker are enjoying a leisurely afternoon on a lake. He is fishing and she is resting, half asleep, in the bow of the boat. The book's title is also its theme: *While I Was Gone*. This latest novel from the author of *The Good Mother* begins when Jo "goes away" into a brief moment of self-awareness, which she realizes is impossible to share with anyone else.

"I was abruptly and most intensely, sharply aware of all the aspects of life surrounding me and yet of feeling neither a part of it nor truly separated from it. Somehow impartial, unattached--an observer. Yet sentient of it all. Deeply sentient, in fact. But to no apparent purpose." In that moment, Jo is disconnected from her husband, the pastor of a local church, from her life as a mother of three grown children, and from her job as a veterinarian.

As the engrossing and constantly surprising narrative of Jo's search for connections unfolds, we learn that she has gone away on earlier occasions, once as an eight-year-old when she briefly ran away from home. As a young woman, she leaves her first husband and adopts a new persona, living for seven months in a '60s style Cambridge group home with five other adults who, like her, are trying to discover a direction for their lives. Now Jo has long been settled with her steady, reliable and loving second husband, Daniel, who believes enough in God to do a credible job as a pastor, but who admittedly entered the ministry not because of any compelling divine call, but because he likes to help people.

In one of the many provocative parallels in Miller's story, Jo also wants to help, in her case, by caring for sick and wounded animals. One day a former housemate from her Cambridge era, Eli Mayhew, reappears in her life, the owner of a dog who must be "put down." Eli's arrival sets in motion yet another "going away" for Jo, in which she risks both her career and her marriage, still searching for the same unknown joy she was probably seeking the first time she ran away from home.

Tempted into a possible affair, she thinks: "I would remember touching [him] at the clinic and again at my party--the density of his body, its heavy heat, so different

from Daniel. I would see again the slow turn of his beautiful body toward me in the steamy bathroom long ago. Like a greeting. And then I would dismiss it. Coffee. Coffee and talk on a winter Sunday morning while Daniel was at church. That was all."

It may or may not be all, but we have arrived in Sue Miller territory, in which human interaction is intricately ambiguous, reaching across a network of needs and responsibilities. Miller's writing is deeply moral, but unlike the simplistic style of many of her writing peers--not to mention the absolutism of many religious believers--hers is no easy one-size-fits-all morality. Indeed, Jo goes through a series of moral struggles, none of which involves easy choices.

Though Miller's first novel, *The Good Mother* (made into a movie with Diane Keaton), had a more focused moral dilemma, it too dealt with a complex struggle to find a correct answer to ambiguous relationships. In that book, a divorced mother of a small daughter falls in love with a man she is certain will continue to make her happy. But her former husband, angry and jealous over the loss of his child, conspires against the new boyfriend in a situation that leads finally to a painful legal battle over allegations of child abuse. The "good mother" is forced to choose between keeping her daughter and the man she loves; because she feels she must "keep the children safe," she chooses her child--not, however, without suffering terrible uncertainty over whether or not she has made the right choice. Maybe she could have had both? Or does life force us to choose between competing loyalties and desires?

Jo Becker's intermittent journeys away from home and away from her various families always involve a quest for love, in tension with responsibility. Alas, dogs are easier to love than people. Dogs have soft furry necks Jo can nuzzle and dogs will always greet her with unbounded enthusiasm, a sharp contrast to the husband who disappears into his upstairs study or goes out to perform pastoral duties, failing Jo in those moments when she is most in need of intimacy.

The men in Jo's life are always just outside her reach, tempting in their promise to provide her happiness, but never sufficiently present to touch that inner personal core that demands the certainty of love. Jo's children also disappoint her, lodged physically and emotionally just outside her ability to reach out and touch, and certainly never as reliable as the three dogs that live in Jo's house, almost as replacements for the three grown, self-centered daughters. The youngest of the

girls, for example, faced with a disruption of her school work by a serious moral choice her mother has just made, is oblivious of her mother's struggle. Her lament is universal: What about *me*?

Jo's work as a veterinarian allows her an excuse to stay away from church and thus cover up her own lack of traditional faith. But what Miller does with religion is to engage Jo in a struggle over that which is central to religious faith: love and responsibility. Jo is obviously much clearer about the right and wrong thing to do with animals than she is about her dealings with humans; she can explain "putting down" a suffering dog to a devastated owner, but she finds it virtually impossible to explain to her husband what motivates her most critical journey, one that could lead to the termination of their marriage.

Miller's theological wisdom is also clear in her understanding of the demands of human relationships as a continual reshaping of what keeps people connected. Jo and Daniel, for example, have a marriage that is profoundly and physically intimate--one scene of lovemaking is so exquisitely rendered that the reader wants to look away at what feels like an invasion of a very private time. But then, a few pages later, Jo reflects on a list of petty grievances that drive her away from her husband.

Miller never employs conventional religious arguments in her evocation of sin and grace. What she does is draw the reader into the ambiguity of each moral choice that her central character is forced to make. None have solutions and all open doors to yet more choices.

Miller's growing maturity as a novelist reflects a theological sensitivity which is rooted in a clear understanding of original sin and of the certainty of both sin and grace. These, in her novels, arrive on the scene in about the same proportion that they do in real life--heavy on sin, sparse on grace. *While I Was Gone* reveals a surer theological touch than did *The Good Mother* (in which Miller punished the boyfriend far too much, given the absence of any immoral intent on his part).

Reading *While I Was Gone*, I could not help but reflect on our recent national conversation about morality. I wish the House managers in our recent Senate trial would read Sue Miller. She would make them aware that the complexities of human interaction do not lend themselves to simplistic, absolutist phrases that completely miss the human dynamic of what motivates us sinners who long for a secure base from which to be both responsible and loving.