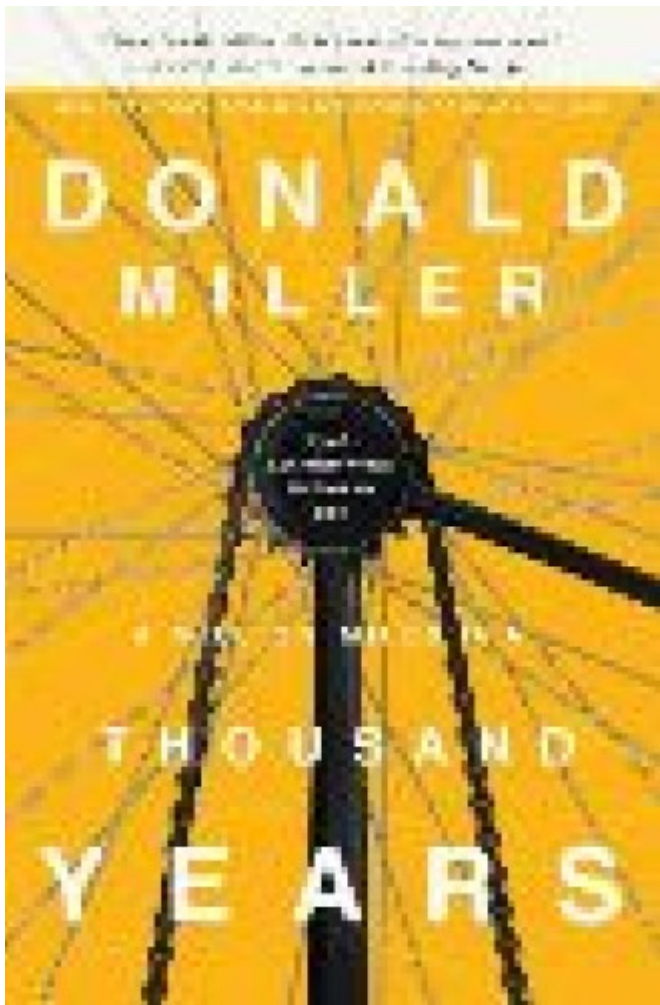


A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: What I Learned While Editing My Life

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

In Review



A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: What I Learned While Editing My Life

Donald Miller
Thomas Nelson

Wondering what it would be like to have his life turned into a screenplay for a movie, Donald Miller asked himself whether “the experience would be like taking a picture of yourself in front of a mirror taking a picture of yourself in front of a mirror.” That sort of multiplied self-reflection is precisely what his new book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, is like. If you like the company of the droll, neurotic, sneakily clever Miller, as I do, the time to read the book is time well spent. If not, it could run the gamut from tiresome to downright creepy.

Miller first broke on the popular scene with *Blue Like Jazz*, a spiritual autobiography for the 20- or 30-something set that bristled with humor and wisdom beyond his years. Ask any reader of that book whether they will ever forget his portrayal of a reverse-confessional booth on the campus of the aggressively pagan Reed College in Portland, where Miller and friends confessed Christianity’s historic sins to drunk, then shocked, revelers. That book’s smash success also brought acclaim to his earlier books, which had previously been largely ignored. They all reappeared with impressive sales.

Miller himself appeared briefly on the political stage when he agreed to deliver the opening invocation at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver (accepting an invitation that other Gen-X evangelicals had turned down). He is something of a scribe for Generation X, as Frederick Buechner was for our grandfathers and Anne Lamott is for our mothers. And he is more intimately familiar than they are with the evangelicalism that he still draws on while trying to push toward something new.

In *A Million Miles*, Miller uses the device of a movie about his life to ask whether the stories of our lives are worth telling. More than that—he uses it to goad us into living a life with conflict, sacrifice, friendship and courage. “Life is staggering and we’re just used to it,” he argues, then makes this assertion convincing with a rueful glance at his own life:

I realized there were no pictures on my mantel. . . . You stand there looking at a bare mantel and the house gets an eerie feel, as though it were haunted by a kind of nothingness, an absence of something that could have been, an absence of people who could have been living there, interacting with me, forcing me out of my daydreams. I stood for a while and heard the voices of children who didn’t exist and felt the tender touch

of a wife who wanted me to listen to her. I felt, at once, the absent glory of a life that could have been.

Now this is masterful not only because it's well put without being overwrought, and not only because it's rare to find "spiritual" writing in our day that's in touch with genuine sadness, but because Miller puts his finger precisely on a problem for the generation that he and I are both members of: how to be a man. As the first generation in which we can assume that one another's parents will be divorced, we often grew up without men present (Miller wanders a family graveyard and marvels at a time "when there were men"). This cannot but have an effect on our relationships, on the sorts of stories we inhabit, and on whether there will be children to tell them to one day.

So Miller sets out to, as the clichéd admonition says, "get a life." He decides to track down his own father. He decides to hike to Machu Picchu, not taking the tourist bus but walking over the mountains as the Incas intended. There's a girl on that trip he's after. He decides to start a nonprofit to provide mentors for at-risk kids in Portland. And he decides to join a group that is biking across the country to promote awareness of . . . something. If it sounds exhausting, that's sort of the point. Miller wants to get his storyless fellow Gen-Xers off the couch and into a story, joining others to sacrifice and achieve. The book works so well largely because Miller's attempts to find a plot either fail or only half-succeed. The nonprofit he birthed, called The Mentoring Project, holds out the most long-term promise, which of course is yet to be realized in full.

Perhaps my emphasis here on Miller's admonition to be somebody makes the book sound joyless. Nothing could be less true. Miller's humor ranges from the dry to the outlandish and pops up so frequently that you should be careful what you sip while reading. The would-be director of the film about Miller's life responds to his question about whether they can just portray his life the way it is: the audience would "stab each other in the necks with drinking straws." The tension in the room during one writers' meeting is palpable, "as though we were drafting for fantasy football." A friend distracts himself during a writers' workshop by "emailing people on Craigslist asking them whether the poodle they were selling could be trained to fight." This is Gen-X humor: raw, aggressive and full of ennui. Even as we laugh, we wonder whether such a generation can get a life at all.

Miller's theology is never rigorous, steeped in scripture or attentive to church tradition. It'd be a mistake to ask him to be something he's not. Never theless I felt a certain Christ-shaped absence here. Miller can wax rhapsodic about the way even inanimate objects make sense only in the context of a story, but with each regular insistence on the importance of story, I wondered anew whether stories can be demonic just as easily as life-giving (he does stop to say yes to this occasionally)—and about how exactly the story of God in Jesus stoops to intertwine with our stories (not much interjection here).

As Miller pushes his readers to join a team of people and do something sacrificial, I find also a church-shaped hole in his work. It's not just any old sacrificial organization we're after (the army, Wall Street and the university also are groups that demand sacrifice in the service of what they take to be noble ends). What we're after is the body of Jesus' followers being changed by the Spirit from one degree of glory to another. Unlike the legion of doctrine cops who excoriate Miller on the Web, I don't have the sense that he disagrees with me on these things. He's just not as interested in them as he is in demanding of us what he's demanded of himself: that we live a story worth telling. That's a good thing to demand. It's just not enough.