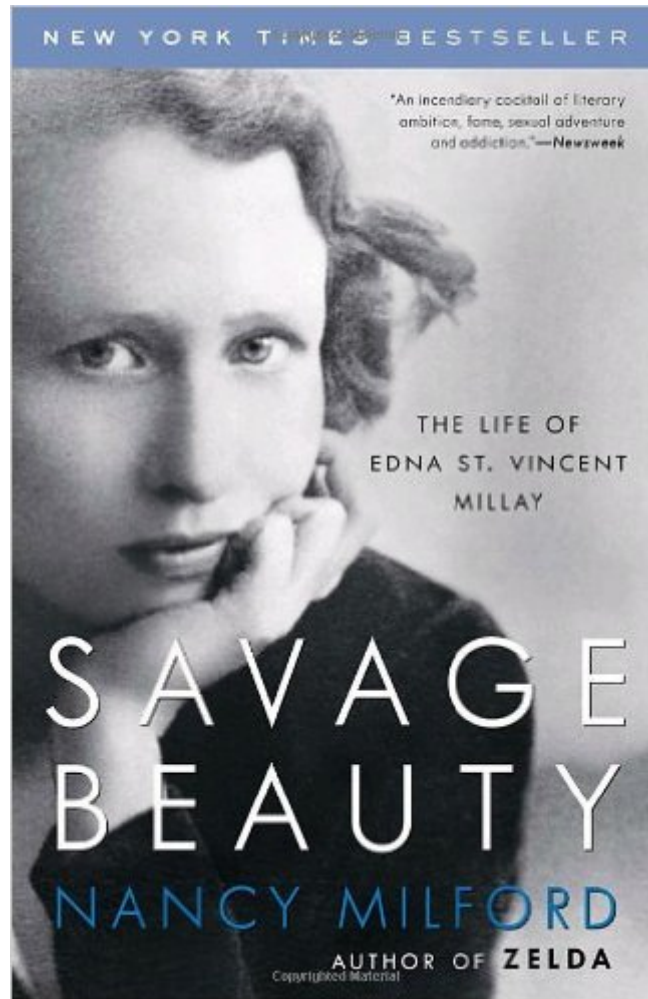


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Savage Beauty: The Life Of Edna St. Vincent Millay



Synopsis

Thomas Hardy once said that America had two great attractions: the skyscraper and the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. The most famous poet of the Jazz Age, Millay captivated the nation: She smoked in public, took many lovers (men and women, single and married), flouted convention sensationally, and became the embodiment of the New Woman. Thirty years after her landmark biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, Nancy Milford returns with an iconic portrait of this passionate, fearless woman who obsessed America even as she tormented herself. Chosen by USA Today as one of the top ten books of the year, *Savage Beauty* is a triumph in the art of biography. Millay was an American original—“one of those rare characters, like Sylvia Plath and Ernest Hemingway, whose lives were even more dramatic than their art.”

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book, one of two biographies of Edna St. Vincent Millay out this year, provides us with a full-fleshed view of the lyric poet. Nancy Milford had unparalleled access to the correspondence of Millay, and interviews with her surviving sister, Norma. Milford wrote the book over a period of years, allowing her study of Millay some time for seasoning and reflection. The early slangy, insouciant letters between the poet and her mother and sisters, are a delight, revealing their loving, teasing relationships. (I admit to being surprised by their wide use of baby talk.) Since Millay moved in literary circles and knew many writers, the letters back and forth to lovers and friends are wonderfully expressive. Many female readers may wish that their husbands and boyfriends could

write of love and longing as eloquently! Milford reveals how Millay labored over her art, how creating her lyrics which seem to flow smoothly and effortlessly, required energy and commitment on her part to produce. She details Millay's slide into alcoholism and drug dependence in her later years. One wonders how intelligent, educated people like Millay and her husband Eugene could fall into such a state, but apparently there was no one in their lives to do what today is trendily called "an intervention," and as they became more and more isolated, Millay's physical decline was accelerated. Kudoes to Nancy Milford for a comprehensive biography of a passionate American poet!

Edna St. Vincent Millay, long my favorite poet, lived a fascinating, wild and even shocking life. Learning the truth about her may disturb some people, but I was happy to learn the details, sordid and exemplary. Nancy Milford writes engagingly and her biography of "Vincent" became for this reader quite a page-turner. The author's use of correspondence to and from Millay, and about Millay, reveals the character of this jazz-age poet with a sense of immediacy and freshness. (In that sense, this biography has a great deal in common with David McCullough's current best-selling and very engaging biography of John Adams.) Millay drank, was dependent on prescription pain killers, was promiscuous, and otherwise flouted the conventional morals of her time. She also wrote exquisite poetry and expressed not only beauty of spirit and self, but from time to time high-mindedness -- for example, in trying to evoke the national conscious during America's isolationist response to the rise of fascism in Europe. This biography is worth reading, as is Millay's poetry.

Uh, no. Not the best biography on Edna St. Vincent Millay. The biographer lacks focus and never did gain control over the subject. Milford does do one thing very magically: she captures the personality of the young poet, and she pours the feeling of the early 1900's and the 1920's into this book. That historical era will sweep you away and carry you for a while, deeper into this book. But really soon, you may feel like the biographer is out of her element. She cannot breathe underwater and you have to do that if you are really going to swim with the Goddess, the Mermaid, the whore, the slut, the genius, the frail, the much beloved center of the Universe that was Edna St. Vincent Millay. Milford's biographer's dissecting knife is dull. Yeah, it's a fancy knife, right out of some PreRaphaelite painter's notebook, but she didn't handle it very well with clean cuts. The biography that holds incredible insight into the poet's life and her work, is Epstein's bio, *What Lips . . .* It is the book I keep in my library that I read again every couple of years, as I read the sonnets of Edna St.

Vincent Millay. This overworked bio by Milford went to the Goodwill book section a long time ago, right after I first read it. She just did not know which relationships were truly important to Millay and her outpouring of poems. The relationships Milford focuses on are important to a certain extent, but she does not see clearly into the life of the poet. It's a muddy biography, a muddy ocean.

Nancy Milford must surely be the best biographer in our county today. From the moment I began SAVAGE BEAUTY I could think of little else. I read it straight through in 2 days. There is nothing stilted or contrived in Ms Milford's writing as her flawless prose moves quickly from page to page telling the story of a beautiful, talented, dreamer who is always just a step away from never-never land. Milford captures this character just as she did Zelda and maybe even more so! As a young person I underlined everything of Edna St. Vincent Millay's in green ink (green ink was a strange necessity at the time). This Poet's work, however, was not to be talked about at my parents home. I remember writing many of her poems on index cards and carying them in my pocket. Several years later I was living in Cambridge with my husband who was in graduate school at Harvard. It was there that I discovered her earlier work. While in college in Va. I was the script editor of our Sophmore play "The Women". I was overwhelmed by the interest in Vachel Lindsay and ee cummings. Why?? Lawrence Ferlinghetti and "friends" only echoed what Millay had said years before. Being from the South, my roommate, the soccer "Destroyer" from New Jersey was suddendly explained. Ms. Milford's book put Millay's life in perspective and also mine. "Vincent" changed a generation. But then so does Nancy Milford. SAVAGE BEAUTY makes this available to all of us. The best, and best written nonfiction read of the year. Thank you. Atlanta

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