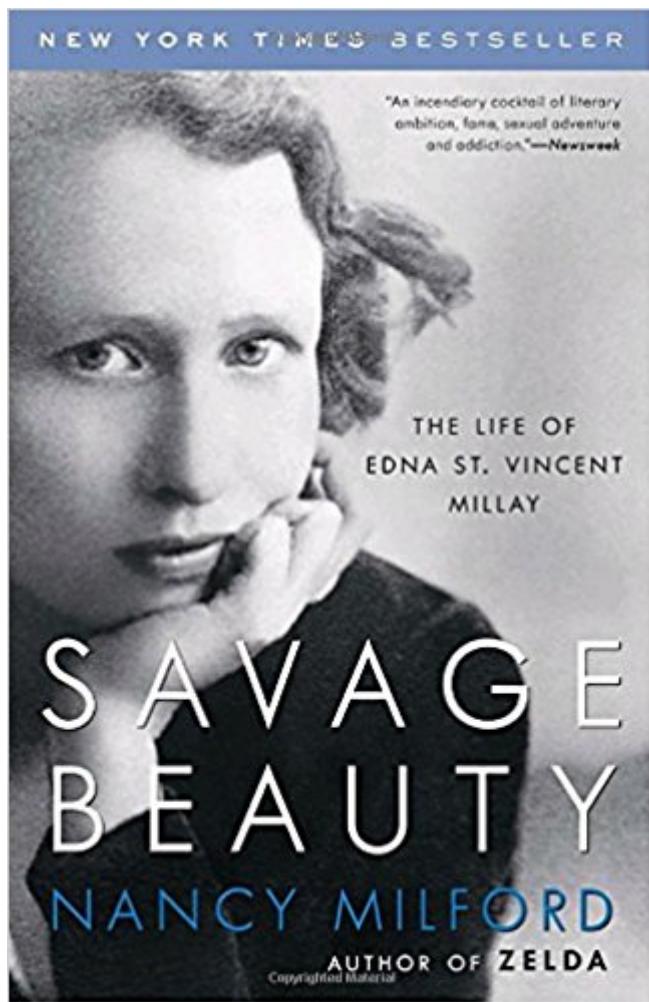


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Savage Beauty: The Life Of Edna St. Vincent Millay



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 sensationaly, 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.

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Customer Reviews

Fans of *Zelda*, Nancy Milford's groundbreaking (and bestselling) biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald's tortured wife and muse, have been waiting impatiently since 1970 for Milford's promised follow-up about poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950). It's finally here, and they will not be disappointed. Milford's vivid narrative limns an electric personality with psychological acuity while capturing the freewheeling atmosphere of America in the turbulent years following World War I. After "Renascence" was published (when she was only 20) and she moved to Greenwich Village, Millay was the queen of bohemia, taking lovers with zest and voicing the reckless gaiety of a generation in her famous lyric, "My candle burns at both ends; / It will not last the night; / But, ah, my foes, and,

oh, my friends-- / It gives a lovely light." With her flame-red hair, milk-white skin, and a voice that thrilled audiences (making her poetry readings a welcome source of income), Millay was the archetypal "new woman": powerful, passionate, and not to be ignored. But Milford makes it clear that her first loyalty was to her mother and sisters, and her deepest commitment to her writing. This juicy chronicle has famous names aplenty--critic Edmund Wilson and Masses editor Floyd Dell were among the men devastated by her refusal to be faithful--and lots of dissipation: Millay drank heavily and became addicted to morphine. It also takes a perceptive look at how an artist draws material from her life and at the strategies she uses to protect the wellsprings of creativity. Brief passages interspersed throughout delineating Milford's interactions with Norma Millay, the poet's younger sister and literary executor, might have been self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing; instead they offer intriguing snapshots of the complex process by which biography is made. The resulting book is a tour de force, and wildly entertaining as well. --Wendy Smith --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Milford hit the New York Times bestseller list 30 years ago with her acclaimed biography of Zelda Fitzgerald; she now seems poised to do it again with this outstanding biography of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. Like Fitzgerald, Millay (1892-1950) was a Jazz Age phenomenon, causing a sensation wherever she went; lines from her brief poem, "First Fig" ("I burn my candle at both ends/ It will not last the night... ") would become the rallying cry of a generation. She was notorious for her sexual unconventionality and (as Edmund Wilson put it) "her intoxicating effect on people... of all ages and both sexes." How a lyric poet could have achieved such celebrity is the conundrum at the heart of *Savage Beauty*. Millay, as Milford depicts her, was a troubled genius who used her prodigious gift to propel herself out of rural poverty and into the center of her age. She carefully cultivated the reporters and patrons who took the "fragile girl-child" under their wing. But her delicate image masked a force of nature whose incendiary wit and insatiable ambition took the public by storm. Milford deftly links the lyric intensity of Millay's work with her ravenous appetite for life. Whether tracing her ghoulishly close relationship to her mother and sisters, her years at the center of cosmopolitan life or her morphine addiction and untimely death, this account offers its readers a haunting drama of artistic fame. A true paradigm of literary biography, this finely crafted book is not to be missed. (Sept. 11) Forecast: *Zelda*, a finalist for the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, sold 1.4 million copies. In addition to a nine-city author tour and first serial publication in *Vanity Fair*, Milford will be interviewed in the September issue of *Harper's Bazaar*. Expect lots of excellent reviews and return trips to the printer once the 75,000 initial run sells out. Along with this bio,

Modern Library will issue a new edition of Millay's poetry, edited by Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

An excellent book, but there's a typo, or error, in the quote from "There are no Islands Anymore" in section 10013, which changes the meaning entirely. Milford wrote: Let French and British soldiers, Deep in battle, needing guns and sleep, For lack of aid be overthrown, And we be left to fight alone. The next to last line should be "NOT for lack of aid be overthrown." Also, a reviewer mentioned the photos. I would have liked to have seen them, but there were none in the Kindle edition.

Those who admire Millay's poetry would do best to content themselves with the challenges of the works themselves and leave this biography alone. It is a case of an abundance of primary source material adding up to much less than the sum of its parts. Somewhere between 50-70% of the book is quotations -- many long and repetitive -- of letters, diaries, notebooks, interview responses, whole poems, etcetera. The author is preoccupied with finding a way of joining up this monumental architecture, with flying buttresses of metaphor and stockades of text breaks, and the task finally is overwhelming. Millay's life, as a continuity of events (as opposed to a montage of commentaries) only occasionally flows to us, the reader. Unfortunately, I would say, one of those few occasions is in the final chapters, when, with depressing inevitability, we witness the descent into addiction and failing powers. Students of this subject are provided with an abundance of valuable raw material for future PhDs, thanks to Milford's impressive research and access to Millay's papers. The apparent pay-off for this access -- giving Edna's sister Norma an "acting part" in the book's narrative -- I found to be more a distraction than an advantage. To make the case she wants for Millay, as the Lyric Voice of the Jazz Age, she needed to stay within the historical period and give us a richer context; instead, we are constantly roused from the past into the present, only to be quickly sent, sleepy eyed and bewildered, back there again. The unusual structure of this biography, of course, was not an accident. Some readers may regard it as superior to more conventional biographies strewn with spurious certitudes, based on guesswork, and frequent purple patches of historical backgrounding in lieu of biographical evidence. Milford chooses the words of others over her own, in large part, and that should not be treated too harshly. Where this biography falls short, for me, is not only in its structural awkwardness, but in its judgements. Milford has surprisingly little to offer by way of discernment and analysis of Millay's poetry. Almost everything is uniformly wonderful, splendid. For instance (p181) she bestows the laurel of "great" on a sonnet ("Pity me not because of the light of day") that, to me, seems trite and derivative. Millay did much better work, but how are we to

evaluate what makes those poems worthwhile if this rather self-pitying, immature effort is held aloft with them? Am I caught up in a pointless contest of subjectivities? I wonder, when I read a description of a photograph of Millay in which, to me, she looks dowdy and prematurely aged, but to Milford appears "ripe, voluptuous"? No, I decide, it is not merely subjectivity but a more complete parting of the ways, on reading this (p333): "Edna St. Vincent Millay...told [her] generation what to say about how they felt..." Told? How they felt? Nothing about the life revealed in his biography suggests to me that Millay would have greeted such a pretentious claim with anything other than howls of derision.

I was interested in learning about Edna St. Vincent Millay, so I chose it. It is very long and detailed. I enjoyed learning about her early life and her family, but I skipped through much of the detail in her adult life. I did not find her a very sympathetic heroine. Many of the people in her life were straight out of a F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. I did finish the book so that I would know what she was like in her later years. It just was not my cup of tea to read. Give me the "Reader's Digest" version.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was an interesting lady, but I didn't think this book was up to the same level as the author's previous biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, despite being thoroughly researched. The book recounts the major events of Millay's life, including her very early promise as a writer, her relationship with her mother and sister, her many romantic affairs, and her fame. Yet, I didn't get a real sense of the person behind the persona of Millay. What drove her to flit from man to man and eventually commit to one? How did she end up as a chronically ill drug addict? Was she really in some kind of physical pain or was this hypochondria run amok? I also thought that the last section of the book dealing with Millay's health problems and addiction just dragged on for an interminably long time without providing much insight. Occasionally the author will mention some telling detail, like the reminders of her husband that Millay kept in her room, but not really explore why it is there or what it might mean. In the end I just thought the book was something of a hodgepodge without a point. It was still informative to read but it's not the kind of biography that stays with you.

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.

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