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Henry Miller: The Last Days: A Memoir

Barbara Kraft

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It could be argued that it was mere chance that drew Barbara Kraft, a young aspiring writer, into friendship with each party of one of literature's most famous love affairs: Anaïs Nin, and then Henry Miller; yet, upon reflection, it seems it was meant to be. In 1974 Kraft signed up for a writing course with Nin only months before the discovery of the cancer that would end the famous diarist's life two years later, and Kraft would prove to be a faithful and dependable friend and companion until the end. During this time, Kraft kept a diary detailing the events of her relationship with Nin, which would become the heart of her acclaimed memoir Anaïs Nin: The Last Days. Only months after Nin's death, Kraft attended a "Q & A" talk by Henry Miller and, inspired by his dynamism, did a "crash" rereading of much of his work. This rediscovery led to Kraft writing and reading "An Open Letter to Henry Miller" on an NPR station, which Miller eventually heard and admired. Wanting to meet Kraft, Miller invited her to cook dinner for him, and, of course, to engage in a long and interesting talk with him, a habit Miller developed during his destitute days in 1930s Paris when he made sure he was invited for lunch and dinner in exchange for good conversation each day of the week. While no longer destitute, and in failing health, the ritual of dinner and conversation kept on until the very end. Kraft became one of Miller's sixteen regular cooks, and she developed not only a comradery with him, but a mutually nurturing friendship for the last two years of his life. This memoir is an inside look at the chaos that ruled the famous house on Ocampo Drive in Pacific Palisades, the long stream of people who lived or crashed there, the revolving door of seekers, celebrities, scholars and filmmakers, and how Miller maintained a fulfilling and creative life in the midst of all the commotion. We see the dynamics of Miller's relationships with his family, his young love interest and those who professed to care for him as his health declined. We discover how some sought to exploit him and how others rose to the occasion when he needed help. It is a highly personal story in which Kraft captures Miller's conversations so perfectly that one can imagine his voice uttering the words. Henry Miller: The Last Days is a celebration of Miller's indomitable spirit as his body failed him, his rebellion against old age, his refusal to give in, his never-ending submission to the creative urge, his battle to preserve his right to dinner, wine and talk even if it meant superhuman effort. It is the story of how one of America's most celebrated writers could have died alone in a house full of strangers. After absorbing Barbara Kraft's sensitive and yet bold narrative, one cannot help but have even more respect for Henry Miller's courage and humility, and rejoice in his final triumph.

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