



Helen Keller: A Life

By Dorothy Herrmann

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Dorothy Herrmann's powerful biography of Helen Keller tells the whole story of the controversial and turbulent relationship between Helen and her teacher, Annie Sullivan. Herrmann also chronicles Helen's doomed love affair, her struggles to earn a living, her triumphs at Radcliffe College, and her work as an advocate for the disabled. Helen Keller has been venerated as a saint or damned as a fraud, but Herrmann shows her to have been a beautiful, intelligent, high-strung, and passionate woman whose life was transformed not only by her disabilities but also by the remarkable people on whose help and friendship she relied.

"Fascinating. . . . Stripping away decades of well-meaning sentimentality, Herrmann presents a pair of strong-willed women, who struggled to build their own lives while never forgetting their dependence on each other."—Ron Charles, *Christian Science Monitor*

"We meet an entirely unexpected Helen Keller—a woman with deep if concealed ambivalence toward her self-sacrificing teacher; a political radical; and a woman longing for romantic love and the fulfilled sexual life of a woman."—Joan Mellen, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Herrmann's portrait of Keller is both fully embodied and unflinchingly candid."—Mary Loeffelholz, *Boston Sunday Globe*

"This well-proportioned biography of the deaf and blind girl who became a great American crusader rescues its subject from the shackles of sainthood without destroying her as an American hero."—Dennis Drabelle, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Herrmann's engrossing biography helps us see beyond the public's fascination with how Keller dealt with her disabilities to discover the woman Keller strived to be."—Nancy Seidman, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"Perhaps the most intimate biography [of Helen Keller]. [Herrmann] gives her back her sexuality [and] imbues her with a true humanity. . . . *Helen Keller: A Life* has some of the texture and the dramatic arc of a good novel."—Dinitia Smith, *New York Times*

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* is justly celebrated for its dramatic depiction of the innovative techniques by which Annie Sullivan taught Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind, to communicate with the outside world. Now, Dorothy Herrmann's solid, readable biography of Keller reveals that the 7-year-old, who was liberated from her isolation in 1887, grew up to be a strong-willed, tough-minded, intellectually independent woman--not at all the "plaster saint" her teacher liked to present to the public. Throughout her long life (1880-1968), Keller worked tirelessly to promote the interests of the handicapped, but she was also an avowed socialist who believed that working-class people deserved a larger share of America's wealth and a racial egalitarian whose support of civil rights horrified her genteel Southern family. Veteran biographer Herrmann paints a nuanced portrait of Keller's complex relationship with Sullivan, which included anger and resentment as well as devoted affection, and she vividly depicts the maddening constraints imposed by society's image of Keller as a perfect Victorian maiden, virginal and selfless, when in fact she had an ego and a sex drive no different from those of hearing and sighted people. The book abounds in colorful touches such as Keller's delight in performing on the vaudeville circuit--her admirers were scandalized by this vulgar display to earn money. She adored "the warm tide of human life pulsing round and round me." Candidly acknowledging Keller's frustrations and some of her less-than-sterling qualities, Herrmann gives readers a flesh-and-blood woman whose achievements are all the more remarkable. --Wendy Smith

From Publishers Weekly

Since William Gibson's 1959 play and, later, the film *The Miracle Worker*, Keller (1880-1968) has been overshadowed in memory by her indefatigable teacher, Annie Sullivan. Herrmann (Anne Morrow Lindbergh) returns Keller blind, deaf and mute to the center of her own story, although Sullivan nonetheless remains the determined manager of the miracle that was Keller herself, who was seven at their meeting and frustrated by her grim, blank world. Spelling impressions into Keller's palm, Sullivan opened a sensory door. By controlling the metamorphosis of Keller's personality, Sullivan released the rural Alabama girl who eventually became one of the most famous females of her time. Sullivan did not set out to create a prodigy, yet Keller soon became one, writing books and articles on a special typewriter, meeting every president from Cleveland to Eisenhower, finding mentors and friends in the likes of Alexander Graham Bell and Mark Twain. Unwilling to accept handouts and insisting on earning a living on her own, Keller with Sullivan until she died in 1936 at age 70 went on the vaudeville stage and later lectured and involved herself with left-wing politics as a member of the Socialist Party. She remained a stoic, often charming woman with strong ideas and acute senses of touch and smell that kept her in sensory contact with what she could neither see nor hear. Herrmann's life avoids sentimentality and evokes the grievously handicapped Keller stretched by protective persistence into a figure admired worldwide. Photos. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Biographer Herrmann (Anne Morrow Lindbergh: *A Gift for Life*, LJ 11/15/92) takes us beyond the image of Helen Keller portrayed in *The Miracle Worker* to unearth a passionate, politically radical woman whose inspiration and teacher, Annie Sullivan, is equally fiery and brilliant. Herrmann brings us into the everyday lives of the famous pair, but the story is hardly mundane. The quasi-sexual undertones of Keller and Sullivan's relationship are present, but psychological motives are always offered. Sullivan forsook the attention of men while consciously or unconsciously turning Keller from a "monster" into a "grateful, helpless child" and then the "utterly dependent woman [who] would never desire to be free of her." Herrmann gives us fascinating details via archives and unpublished memoirs to show how society's view of

disabled people was greatly shaped by Keller and Sullivan. The result is not dissimilar to Joseph Lash's dual biography, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan* (LJ 5/15/80). Herrmann's work can stand alongside Keller's famous autobiography *The Story of My Life*. Recommended for all public libraries.

-?Kay Meredith Dusheck, *Univ. of Iowa, Iowa City*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Erin Mohammad:

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Mary Kenney:

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Paul Jackson:

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