

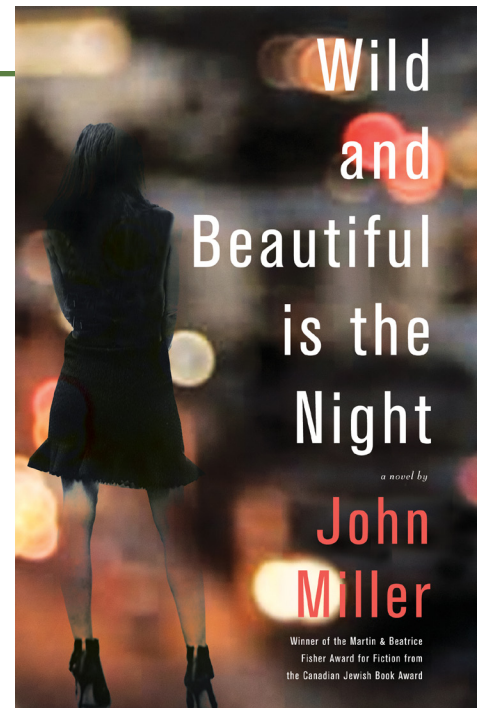
READER'S GUIDE

Wild and Beautiful is the Night by John Miller

INTRODUCING *Wild and Beautiful is the Night*

Paulette and Danni grew up miles apart—Paulette in Hamilton and Danni in North Toronto—but they might as well have been worlds apart. Paulette's family emigrated from Jamaica. Danni grew up Jewish in an affluent neighbourhood of Toronto. Now both women find themselves on the streets of Toronto, working in the sex trade.

Paulette is a seasoned prostitute, working to support herself and her addiction. She acts as an unlikely and reluctant mentor and friend to Danni, who is new to the street and whose addiction has set her on a similar path to Paulette. Their paths intersect again and again over the course of a difficult and troubled friendship that sees Paulette begin to pull herself together while Danni manages to survive everything that comes her way.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Perception

Perception, and its impact on how we treat people, is obvious in the dialogue on prostitution throughout the book. Danni and Paulette argue about the feminist merits (or lack thereof) of prostitution; for Danni, the idea of prostitution as empowerment espoused by her professors enables her to rationalize her own actions. Danni's romanticism of life on the streets guides what she initially shares with Paulette, for whom Danni's charmed life looks like a paradise, and Danni, by extension, an ungrateful child. The way Danni and Paulette dress and pose on the streets affects their success. Despite the cold, they wear minimal clothing in winter to attract tricks. Paulette tries to cut through others' perceptions of her as Jamaican, black, and queer by insisting on telling her own story, but at the same time she turns her 'exoticism' to her advantage by abandoning her wig. The protestors from Maggie's, with their "Sex is work" boards, show the stigmatization that prostitutes undergo, while its resultant criminalization — alongside drug use — by both police and abusive clients like Zach are obstacles both Danni and Paulette stumble on. Both the stigma and the criminalization show how entrenched their (and our) society is in its perception of prostitutes as dirty, negative figures.

Motherhood

Woven throughout *Wild and Beautiful is the Night* is the separation of mothers from their children, seen both from the child's and mother's perspectives. Yen Mah lost her mother as a child to drugs; Carole-Anne lost custody of her children for the same reason. Danni's relationship with her own mother is strained due to her mother's relationship with alcohol, and her failure to protect Danni from her boyfriends: one a pedophile, the other enabling Danni's drug habit to cover his own deceit. Paulette's own relationship with her mother collapsed due to her mother's depression, her own drug use, and her teen pregnancy. The consequences continue to follow her to adulthood, where her drug use again interferes with her relationship with her son and leads to him being taken away.

Support Systems

Paulette teaching Danni the ropes of prostitution is the first support system we encounter in a book littered with systems both functional and fractured. There is the support of the city, whose resources are spent providing detox facilities as well as delivering clean needles and condoms as measures of harm reduction; the support of friends like Yen Mah, willing to forgive late rent and hold Paulette's room while she's in jail; and the support systems of family, like Danni's ability to call her mother. Danni and Paulette become support systems for each other, watching out for each other on the streets and rooming together. The failure of all of these support systems — Danni as a victim of Zach but being brought in alongside Paulette; Paulette needing to avoid giving birth at St Michael's hospital because she was treated there for drug-related abscesses; and avoiding care facilities and other supports for herself as a working mom for fear of Children's Aid — underscores the dysfunction of Danni and Paulette's lives and the way in which these systems have been set up against them. Ideally, Paulette and Danni would prop each other up, but they actually end up undermining each other's recovery, imitating in microcosm the way the macrocosm of support around them operates.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Miller chose to tell the story from Paulette's point of view and not Danni's?
2. What were your perceptions about sex workers and drug users before you read the book? Has the book affirmed or subverted any of those expectations?
3. What do the other sex workers, as foils for Danni and Paulette, reveal about their futures, prospects, and likely life outcomes? Who do you think most closely resembles either woman?
4. Compare The River Gang's protests with those of the anti-abortionists.
5. How does Yen Mah's attitude towards and forgiveness of others differ from the way other characters handle forgiveness?
6. Do you think Danni and Paulette will be able to stay clean beyond the ending of the book?
7. Is the word "clean" problematic when applied to recovering addicts or those who test negative for infections?
8. Do you have any ideas for a "better way" forward for drug using parents and their dependent children?



ABOUT JOHN

John Miller is the award-winning author of two previous literary novels: *The Featherbed* (2002) and *A Sharp Intake of Breath* (2007), which won the 2008 Beatrice and Martin Fischer Award in Fiction. Miller was born and resides in Toronto, and currently works as a freelance consultant in non-profit organizational development and in global health.