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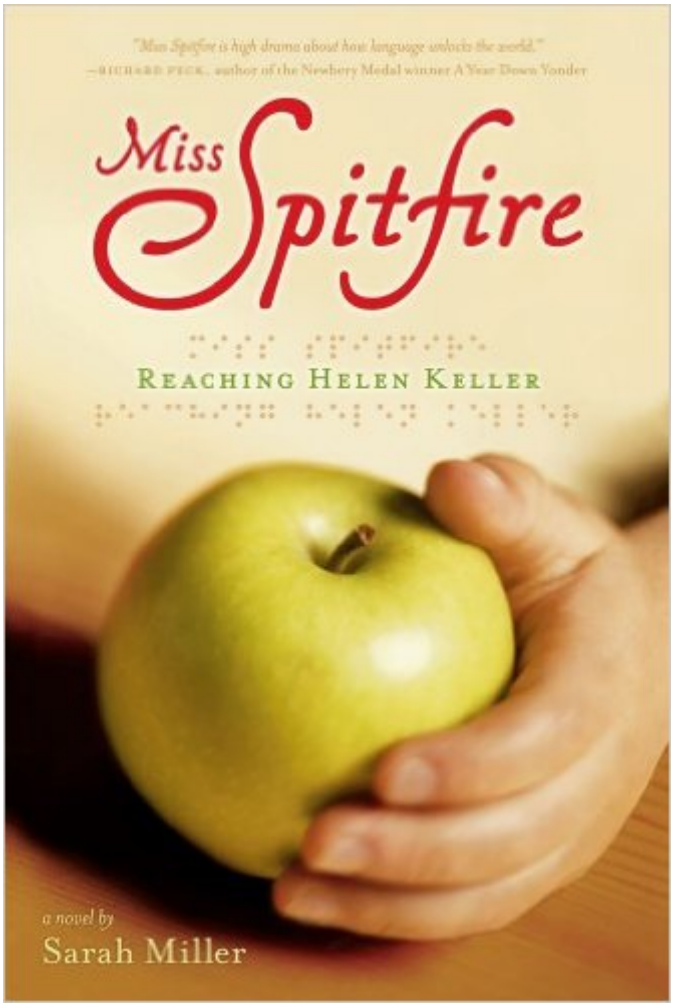
Miss Spitfire: Reaching Helen Keller



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Synopsis

Annie Sullivan was little more than a half-blind orphan with a fiery tongue when she arrived at Ivy Green in 1887. Desperate for work, sheâ ™d taken on a seemingly impossible jobâ ”teaching a child who was deaf, blind, and as ferocious as any wild animal. But if anyone was a match for Helen Keller, it was the girl whoâ ™d been nicknamed Miss Spitfire. In her efforts to reach Helenâ ™s mind, Annie lost teeth to the girlâ ™s raging blows, but she never lost faith in her ability to triumph. Told in first person, Annie Sullivanâ ™s past, her brazen determination, and her connection to the girl who would call her Teacher are vividly depicted in this powerful novel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Authors that try to tackle any aspect of Helen Keller’s life in a children’s literary format are simultaneously blessed and cursed. On the one hand, talk about God’s gift to authors. The emotional ups and downs of Helen’s tale, the (dare I say) hope of her life, I mean she’s a great historical character. Loads more interesting to a nine-year-old than your average everyday biographical figures. So there’s that. On the other hand, none of this is a secret. As a result, my library’s Helen Keller section of biographies is rivaled only by Martin Luther King Jr. So when I saw that someone had done a middle grade work of fiction regarding Helen and Annie Sullivan’s early days, I hardly gave it a thought. Why read what we already know? I mean, if everyone knows a series of facts about someone, can there be any worthwhile reason to read yet ANOTHER story about her life and trials? The answer, as it happens, is yes. Debut author Sarah Miller shows us that even the most familiar story can become edge-of-your-seat gripping when the writing’s cool and

collected.There’s a reason this book is called "Miss Spitfire". Turns out, that was the nickname bestowed on Annie Sullivan when she attended the Perkins Institute for the Blind. Irish, alone in the world, half-blind, and with guts galore, Ms. Sullivan is terrified at the prospect of her very first job. She’s being sent to work with one Helen Keller, a blind, deaf child. The hope is to work a "miracle" on her and teach her to bridge the gap between signing and the use of words. The task turns out to be more than she gambled for, however, when it appears that Helen has had the run of her household for years.

As a blind individual, I have always been drawn to Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. Their relationship was complicated and consisted of many emotions: mainly pain, triumph, and, ultimately, love. Author Sarah Miller has expertly composed a vibrant symphony of words to depict the growing relationship between these individuals. "Miss Spitfire" spans the time period from March to April, 1887 and chronicles the brutal struggle the twenty-year-old Annie encountered when she tried to demolish the barrier of silence that had imprisoned Helen for for years. Told from Annie’s perspective, this book is haunting and truly poetic. Annie endured abuse and unspeakable pain as a child as the result of the loss of her younger brother, and the reader glimpses Annie’s craving for affection and love. I was particularly struck by the utter loneliness Annie encountered within her life. I learned so much about Annie’s difficult childhood, which is in striking contrast to Helen’s overindulged existance. The most memorable scene to me takes place at the dining table as Annie watches Helen greedily snatch tidbits from everyone’s plate. Annie remembers meals at the Tewksbury asylum during this meal, and we see how Helen’s parents coddling nature has turned the little girl into a trapped wild animal. We as readers are made to realize that a balance must be reached: love without discipline is little more than cruelty. It is up to Annie to find this balance as she seeks to unlock Helen’s mind and teach her language.I particularly liked that the Keller family was portrayed as overprotective yet ultimately strong. Each family member is empathetically portrayed. They are all willing to yield their daughter to someone who can help her. Helen’s Aunt Eveline was portrayed particularly well.

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