



A Time to Cast Away Stones

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Janet Magill's brother has been shipped off to Vietnam, and Aaron Becker, her childhood sweetheart, might well be next. When Janet's parents banish her from the Berkeley protests to what they expect will be a safe, idyllic springtime in Paris, she runs headlong into the 1968 May Revolution and falls in love with a secretive Czech dissident. Far from the City of Light, Aaron makes plans to evade the draft and join her, but loses contact as her "safe" year abroad turns into a dangerous coming of age.

A Time to Cast Away Stones Details

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From Reader Review A Time to Cast Away Stones for online ebook

Laurel says

I enjoyed the hell out of this book, I have to say.

My mom was part of the "hippie" generation, and was an avid reader herself, so when I was old enough, I worked my way through her entire library (we actually had one in our house), including much material that pertained to the period. Sometimes I feel more connected to that time than my own, and reading this book brought me back again, if only to my own childhood when I was reading and discovering the revolutionary 60s for the first time, and becoming enamored of the FEELING of the era. I don't know any other way to describe it.

What I can say is how easy it was to get involved in the book, wrapped up in it, to live the story in my own mind. I suppose that just means that the author succeeded in what she set out to do with the book, at least in my mind.

I enjoyed seeing the story from France, as opposed to the usual Berkeley/Haight-Ashbury type settings. It really brought home to me the wide-spread nature of the social and attitude changes of the time. I'm sure the authenticity of the writing in that sense can be attributed directly to the author's own time in Paris at the time.

Excellent read, truly well done. Totally recommended. :)

Zarina says

"A Time to Cast Away Stones" is a literary lesson in history. In his infamous epilogue to "War and Peace" Tolstoy states, "What does it all mean? Why did it happen? What induced these people to burn houses and kill their fellow-creatures? What were the causes of these events? What force compelled men to act in this fashion? These are the instinctive, guileless and supremely legitimate questions humanity propounds to itself when it encounters the monuments and traditions of the bygone period of turmoil." For an answer to those questions, Tolstoy states, mankind looks to the science of history, "whose purpose is to teach nations and humanity to know themselves." He, however, uses literature to search for an answer. So does, in the Tolstoy tradition, Elise Miller. Through a simple story of an ordinary young woman Miller undertakes a study of the nature of history.

Time to stop and think, says Miller. Could one build a life "above the battle"? Is it possible to be happy at the times of political crisis? Is "personal freedom" possible in the world torn by wars and civil unrest? What is personal freedom? Can one individual change the course of history? What is the woman's role in the life of the country, in this world? How--and why?--do we choose our paths in life and is it even a matter of chose?

Miller's novel resonated with me on a personal level. I read it soon after I had organized my first political rally in San Francisco. Many young Americans came to protest the Russian president Putin's oppressive policy. Our demonstration made no difference. Young women-artists were sentenced to serve three years in Siberia for their protests. My home country slides back into the macabre medieval darkness of a totalitarian state. History tends to repeat itself and if we don't learn from it--or at the very least about it--we are doomed to Joyce's history, "a nightmare I am trying to awake from." "Personal freedom" dilemma is as relevant as

fifty years ago.

Bravo, author, for not shying away from the reality.

Jamie says

This story is a winding and multi-faceted tale of world events, cultural upheavals, and personal dramas, which turned out to be fantastic! Told from two perspectives, it densely but deftly chronicles a short period of time, the year or so leading up to the summer of 1968, that must have seemed interminable and limitless to those living it. But the story is told with the compassion and insight of someone who lived and knew those years. It was a bit hard to get into at first, with some predictable or clunky bits, but the veracity of the story is well worth working for, and the passion is palpable. For the idealist, the history buff, the youth, the searcher, Miller has composed a sonata of the human condition and performed the music with hopefulness and adroit musicality.

This book was won from the publisher through the Goodreads First Reads program. Thank you!

Terry Sattler says

Elise Miller has given those of us who were in college in the late 60's a story for our generation. (Janet, her main character, begins her freshman year in 1967. So did I.) "A Time to Cast Away Stones" has great writing, interesting characters, and an amazing sense of time and place. This book evoked memories of my own college years, what we learned in and out of the classroom, the values we adopted for living our lives. The places Elise describes are places I know, so I found myself stopping to Google and "visit" them again -- both in California and in Paris. I dug out letters I had written and received in college relevant to the issues of our time and read them again. So in other words, I was absorbed.

Eve says

Having been in both Paris and Berkeley in 1968, I can say with a great deal of certainty that "A Time to Cast Away Stones" is a very accurate portrayal of a turbulent era in history, and that the fictional characters are very believable. What makes it interesting is the meticulous attention to detail and the nuanced character development. This is a must-read for anyone who lived through that period of history as a young adult in Berkeley, or Paris, and those interested in the anti-war and/or other social/political movements in the US and/or Europe. A very skilled and compelling historical novel!

James Hanna says

A Time to Cast Away Stones offers a compelling view of the divisions that marked the Vietnam era. Moreover, it is an indictment of the politicians whose lies, arrogance, and bunker mentalities perpetuated the war for so long. It is an indictment for which no warrants have been served, no trials held, and no punishments prescribed. But if there is a court of heaven then surely a justice awaits. Shakespeare said it

well: "Be the cause not good, the king will have much to answer for come Judgement Day, when all those arms and legs and heads band together and cry out, "We died for this?!!" (Henry V).

A Time to Cast Away Stones is a must read.

James Hanna

Vera Lam says

A Time to Cast Away Stones is written with love, empathy and ample nostalgic feelings.

Ms. Miller gives us a touching; intimate picture of Janet MaGill's coming of age.

I have great interests in learning what America was like in the 60's and 70's, especially how the younger generation felt about the American war in Vietnam. Ms. Elise Francis Miller does a wonderful job in portraying the sentiments of the young men and women during that era.

Through the stories of Janet, Aaron and Barbara, I can feel the anti-war sentiment on the university campus and perhaps a good representation of campuses all over American at that time.

At first I didn't care much for Janet, but as I read on, I find myself liking her more and more. After the Paris chapters, I really, really like her.

What I enjoy the most are the dialogues and the different settings – California and Paris. Ms. Miller does a great job in describing the student protests on St. Germain des Pres and other parts of Paris. Teo as a secondary character is well developed; I like him and care about him and want things to go well between Janet and him.

I also like the dialogues, especially the ones in the France chapters. The author has a way to make them lively, genuine and poignant. They flow easily and effortlessly.

A Time To Cast Away Stones is not a novel about war or politics, it is a lovely story about a young woman who is caught during one of most turbulent times in the 60's in the U.S. and in France, and how she sails through those memorable years. In the end, our heroine has grown to be a confident, courageous woman, much different from the first time we've met her on the Berkeley campus. An excellent read!

Audrey says

I tried to finish this book on Bastille Day (July 14), which would have been so appropriate, but missed by one day :-).

This book deeply immerses the reader in its time: 1968. The main character, Janet Magill, possesses at the beginning of the novel a wide-eyed innocence that is almost painful to observe and yet seems utterly of the moment. Quickly, however, current events begin to change her. By the end of the book she is a very different young woman.

I really enjoyed the structure of the book, partly because I am a sucker for alternating points of view. The perspective shifts, first between chapters and then between sections, from Janet's point of view to that of her boyfriend Aaron. He remains in Berkeley, plotting to evade the draft when he graduates from U.C. Berkeley. She is shipped off to Paris, ostensibly to escape the unrest in Berkeley, only to find Paris in even greater turmoil.

The descriptions of the politics and political activities felt a bit like a history lesson at times; I would have liked them to be more seamlessly woven into the plot. Sometimes, too, the dialogue seemed a bit didactic. But ultimately the main characters and the cast of minor character (some of whom were truly memorable, like Janet's irascible French landlady) carried the story along.

I was impressed, too, that the author managed to evoke current politics and social movements, especially the Occupy movement, simply through her description of what took place in 1968 in Paris and Berkeley.

I would recommend "A Time to Cast Away Stones" to anyone who wants an unconventional 1960s novel--one that looks at the effect of war and social unrest on ordinary Americans and defies the stereotype of young people who tuned out and dropped out. Neither Janet nor Aaron is ever less than fully engaged in their world and they both come out changed.

Mary says

I flourished in both high school and college in the late 60's as a hippie and occasional protest marcher (in Chicago), so I relished Elise Miller's depiction of an ordinary, nicely brought up young girl who finds herself conflicted when faced with the realities of incipient and real violence, head-bashing, scary out-of-control people (both police and protesters) because that's pretty much what happened to me, including real hard questioning of the "world" as it was presented to me by my parents and the general culture. A TIME TO CAST AWAY STONES captures very well the passion and the ambivalence that a lot of "us" felt at that time, socially and politically. But this novel goes a step further, away from the U.S. campus experience of the 60's to a more gritty, boots-on-the-ground revolution in Paris in 1968 that pulled together not only students but also workers and unions, unlike what happened here. Revolution meant something completely different in France and especially in Czechoslovakia--and stepping up to the barricades could easily end in exile or death, not just getting kicked out of school or staying overnight in the local slammer. The harsher reality of the Paris May '68 revolution -- along with the engaging love story that happens there to main character Janet -- is presented with force and understanding by the author. A book well worth reading, even -- or maybe especially -- if you're not a baby boomer! -- Mary Burns, author, reviewer

Jackie Bouchard says

I was 3 at the time this novel is set, so I can't comment (as some other reviewers have) how this relates to my own experience of that time. Because I know so little about that period, I found the book to be very interesting. Of course, I know about the Vietnam protests that were held here in the States, but had no idea what was going at the same time in Paris. And most of the movies/stories of this time focus on the "hippie" culture. Janet is not a hippie. She's probably a lot like I would have been if I'd been a college student at that time. I really liked how the author developed Janet's character. The way she is conflicted about what to do her freshmen year at Berkeley rang very true to me. When the story moves to Paris, there's so much great detail you'd swear the author **is** Janet.

All in all, a very well written story with a very believable character arc and lots of rich detail to pull you into 1968 Paris. I'd recommend the book to anyone who lived through that era or who wants to know more about it.

Virginia Pommerening says

I was not alive during the Vietnam war, and to a certain extent the type of protest outlined in this book is foreign to me. The thing I will say is that I expected this book to be more about the protests of the Vietnam war, but I was pleasantly surprised to end up learning a lot more about Paris. I found the differences in forms and breadth of protest between the United States and France to be one of the more interesting parts of this book.

The focus of the book is clearly on Janet, rather than Aaron. Aaron's perspective is used more to show the growth of Janet's character.

Either way this book was a good read, even if it did start slowly. About halfway through it became a book that I couldn't put down.

Ally Watkins says

Usually, I don't write reviews, but I received this book through the Goodreads giveaway system, and you're supposed to write a review, so I'll say something briefly--

This isn't my usual style of book. However, I ended up being very glad I read it. It certainly broadened my horizons and I learned a lot about an era about which I knew next to nothing. If you already know about/ are interested in the Vietnam era, I'd definitely recommend this novel.

Jack says

I have now finished reading this excellent book. I received a free copy from a Goodreads / First reads contest. This book captured the emotional times of the turbulent years of my youth, and did so with very interesting characters and a well constructed story. The author is very strong in using real life locations and events for a fictional yet very believable book. I like the way the story was told from two of the characters points of view and how they evolved over time. I finished the book on the same day that I watched the new feature film 'Les Mis' at the theater - so the latter part of the book really matched my emotional feelings about the sacrifices made by young french people to change their world. Cheers for an outstanding writing achievement!

Max Tomlinson says

They say that if you can remember the '60s, you weren't there.

But this quip really only applies to a well-known section of the population that stumbled its way through one of the 20th century's more turbulent decades. Along with the conservative silent majority (who were neither) there were also the not-so-silent-but-politically-conscious students on college campuses around the world.

'A Time to Cast Away Stones' is about these young people—the ones who might have had the odd toke but had higher (so to speak) aspirations.

Set during the intensifying US involvement in Vietnam, the novel follows two Berkeley students, Janet Magill, and her childhood sweetheart, Aaron Becker. Janet begins her college career as a good girl who learns that 'you don't have to be a nymphomaniac with dirty hair to be against the war'—although she is less than enamored with the violent tactics of her fellow demonstrators at first.

When things get rough Janet is shipped off to Paris for a semester or two of intended safety, only to be pulled out of the proverbial frying pan and immersed in the fire of the '68 demonstrations heating up there. Her role in the Paris demonstrations is a far cry from the more passive one she took in California and Janet mans the barricades with the best of them. Meanwhile Aaron, wanting to be with Janet and avoid the draft, is faced with real-world financial concerns that prevent him from coming to Paris immediately. His affair with Janet is chronicled, sporadically at times, through the onionskin airmail letters that go back and forth in a pre-wired world.

The paths of several other very well-drawn characters are followed in this novel as well, including Janet's brother who enlists to go to Vietnam and suffers a change of heart, and Teo, her Czechoslovakian beau who has a mysterious companion following him everywhere.

This is a meticulously-researched novel full of rich detail, particularly the Paris of 1968 and the strikes and riots that brought France to its knees for a time and caused De Gaulle to temporarily flee the country. It's clear that Miller has been where she is taking us. 'A Time to Cast Away Stones' is a faux memoir with historical relevance. The writing is strong and soars to literary highs in many places.

Some may find the alternating first-person narrative jarring at first but it does allow the author to drill down into the two main characters. Janet is clearly the protagonist but Aaron is a worthy second, a young man with authentic emotions, many he might not wish to reveal, including jealousy and cowardice. His transformation comes when he is faced with a situation that tests his love for Janet and his commitment to the new politics of the '60s. Miller gives her characters just enough sympathy and doesn't sugarcoat them, with the exception of Teo perhaps, Janet's Czech boyfriend in Paris, a true warts-and-all character. Teo is a dashing third in a love triangle, yet he lives in a hovel that belies his appeal. Is he using Janet? Just how much?

The late 60s are the real character in this novel though. Any reader wanting to know more or simply revisit a time that is fast becoming ancient history will enjoy 'A Time to Cast Away Stones'.

Linda Abhors the New GR Design says

I'm in between 2 and 3 on this.

Short disclaimer: I would have been about 5 when this took place, so I remember little. Other than Watergate and footage of the war interrupting my cartoons, my memories of this subject are limited to the following: I went into the hospital to have my tonsils removed. On the way, we dropped my oldest brother, then 18, at the bus station. My mom was crying, but I didn't know why. During the operation, I stopped breathing and turned blue, thereby buying myself another three days in an improvised oxygen tent. During that time, my brother walked back into my hospital room. My mom was crying, but I didn't understand why. Years later, I found out he'd volunteered to go to Nam, and they had turned him down for some medical reason, like flat

feet or low blood sugar or something.

So I wanted to like this book--like the main character, my fear would have been that my brother, one of the sweetest people I knew, wouldn't have been tough enough to make it. Even if he'd come back alive, he would have been one of those who "died" in other ways (they could have taken my younger brother, though! I don't think anything could have killed him.) And it was a giveaway, accompanied by a nice note from the author.

I liked how the chapters alternated between the points of view of Janet and her boyfriend, Aaron. I think that their voices are distinctive enough. I liked that things didn't necessarily end with everything all neatly sorted out, because we all know that it doesn't happen that way in real life. It's probably good in providing a sense of what it was like to be a teen/young adult at that time, in a more entertaining way than a historical text would be. I remember getting this feeling particularly during the chapter on the reactions at Berkeley to the draft and MLK, Jr's assassination. (see above disclaimer)

It's also interesting that each of these characters has an inflated opinion of the other, much as might happen in real life--Janet sees Aaron as very confident, Aaron isn't necessarily so. Both can seem full of themselves at times (in my humble UW-Madison experience, though, I've never met anyone who came out of Berkeley who didn't); in Aaron's case, he's almost unlikeable at moments due to his patronizing attitude toward his mother (not the beneficiary of a college education). But having been through similar moments, I know what it's like to be first-gen, negotiating those relationships, changes, and growth.

That being said, there wasn't anything riveting about it that "grabbed" me and made me not want to put it down. Some things just didn't ring true. I'm definitely able to accept that parents could have sent a student to France hoping to remove her from Berkeley's political turmoil without knowing that the entire city of Paris would essentially be shut down for the same turmoil. After all, it was a "pre-Google" world. But I'm an INTJ, and little details will throw me off--although I know that they might not throw other readers off. For example, a lot is made of the fact that, while they're both from Beverly Hills, Aaron's from 'the other side of the tracks', that they are from two different social circles. Why, then, are Janet's parents so excited that her brother got into the local power company as a meter-reader? I should think that they'd have used their golf club connections to at least land him something in the office. Someone who starts as a reader probably isn't ever headed toward an exec's position. Why is it that Aaron FLIES back to LA with Janet at Christmas holidays? It's about 5.5-6 hours by car.....when I was in grad school in the 80s, I was 4-5 hours from home. When I didn't have a car, I took a bus, rode home with someone else, or didn't go. Flying was not an option for middle-class me. It was still relatively expensive in those days, and I can only imagine that it was even more so in the 60s. And not having a roommate in itself was a luxury, regardless of how much you worked--renting an entire small cottage without roommates was not within reach. Other little things, like the language, also distracted me: anachronistic use of slang, such as "freaky", "sleaze", or "dork" (long story on how I know this last one wasn't a slang word until the 70's), and the French needed some editing. Both wore off as I read on--in other words, I learned to get over it. On the good side, there are other great details, such as a reference to "those Ace bandages", with a description, because the bandages, commonplace today, were a recent innovation.

So, for its portrayal of young life at the times, I liked it, although I wouldn't re-read it (and if you've read my list, you'll know I'm not a fan of reading "straight" history). I think the things that bugged me about it might not bug other readers--it might just be me.
