

Helen Keller in Love

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Just after college I worked as a social worker at an agency for the blind in New Orleans. I remember one client particularly well. He was totally blind and deaf--an older fellow who spoke in a modified sign language and by spelling letters lightning-fast into your palm. Pat, who had worked there for years, was his favorite person to communicate with, but when she was gone, he'd come to me. Occasionally, while biking home from work, I'd see him from a distance crossing four lanes of traffic on St. Charles Ave.--usually against the light--his white cane held like a sword before him. He was always too far away for me to help, but my stomach would clench, and I'd hope that he'd make it across safely another time.

Reading *Helen Keller in Love* gave me a fresh awareness of what blind people endure especially the deaf and blind. When I was young, *The Miracle Worker* played in movie theaters (with Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft) and this movie painted Helen in saint-like tones. How refreshing and humanizing is this biographical novel. In her first novel, Rose

Sultan portrays Keller as a woman in her mid-thirties who is impatient at being dependent on care-givers, who is lusty, and who lies to those closest to her in an attempt to get the life she wants, one that most people take for granted--that of having a husband and family.

This book is based on a real love affair between Helen Keller and a male secretary during a period when her dear teacher, caregiver and friend, Annie Sullivan believed that she had contracted tuberculosis. The secretary, Peter Fagan, was an unemployed journalist when Annie's estranged husband selected him for the job.

Some unusual things I learned about Keller while reading this book included: she was a dyed in the wool socialist, a pacifist who led big rallies against the war, and a reformer who pressed officials to abolish slums in New York City. Her tours and speeches across the country brought in a huge amount of money, most of which she donated to other blind people including some in Germany while we fought against that country in WWI.

Sultan has a knack for capturing the sensory world, both the world Helen experienced and the one she did not. The author paints vivid pictures of tour and train scenes and life on Keller's farm in Massachusetts. One vivid scene recounts Helen swimming in the pond with Peter for the first time. Helen could smell wood smoke, grass, thunderstorms, tobacco on her lover's clothes, and even the smell of sickness on Annie. Outside, Helen felt the sun on her arms and during a lunch at which a band played music, she felt the reverberations of drums through the floorboards.

The conflicts in this book are huge: Helen fights against herself. She has always been honest and said exactly what she thought, but while having an affair with Peter that she hopes will lead to marriage she lies both to Annie and her mother, to both of whom she feels she owes a great debt. While her father wanted to send Helen to a freak show as a child to earn her keep, her mother fought back and demanded a teacher. Annie was the first person who managed to break

through to Helen and teach her about the world, providing her with a rich, intellectual life. Helen also battles Annie and especially her mother. Both Annie and her mother decide that Peter is dangerous for her. They believe that Helen can never marry and they do their best to separate them.

This feisty novel about love and a woman's dramatic search for independence is one you will long remember. For books on similar topics, try E.L. Swann's *Night Gardening* about a woman with disabilities in love and Greeley's *Autobiography of a Face* about a young woman with Ewing's sarcoma also searching for love.

Posted by Dory L. on September 2, 2012

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