

# QA

*FAMILY INSPIRES  
AUTHOR*

# Anna QUINDLEN

By Liza N. Burby

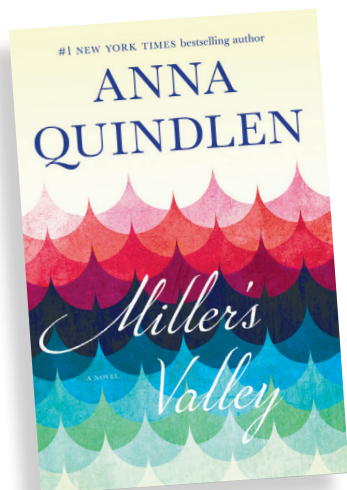


*Photo Credit: Maria Krovatin*

WHETHER *ANNA QUINDLEN* IS DEPICTING THE LIFE OF A FICTIONAL WIFE OR WRITING SCATHING COMMENTARY ON SOCIETY, FAMILY IS AT THE HEART OF ALL THAT THE PULITZER-PRIZE WINNING JOURNALIST AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR CREATES.

**I**n her eighth novel, *Miller's Valley* (Random House), the former New York Times columnist has written the coming-of-age story of Mimi Miller, who grows up with family secrets against the backdrop of a small town literally fighting to stay above water as the government threatens to open a dam and sweep the town away. Mimi's story is told from the 1960s to the present as she discovers the flaws of marriage and sibling relationships, the inequalities of friendship, and the risks of love.

Quindlen, who lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, is the mother of three and a new grandmother. But she is also, she says, an author who "finds women endlessly fascinating" as subject matters. Here she tells us why. »



### ***What was your inspiration for Miller's Valley?***

One of the things I wanted to illustrate was the arc of life and progress for women and men during the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s and that's what I think Mimi embodies. She was born in 1954 and what she can expect of life for her, changes radically simply because of the changes for women in society during those years.

The other impulse is that I really wanted to write a novel about America and how America treats its history. The idea of the small town being wiped out by water reflects, I think, how this country handles its past. That is, it forgets it.

### ***In Miller's Valley, Mimi says, "No one ever leaves the town where they grew up, not really, even if they go." What does that mean for you?***

The place where you came of age lives inside you. I haven't been back to the house in which I grew up [outside of Philadelphia] since I was 14. But I could still walk through it blindfolded. There's something about the place you come from that lives inside you and which you always either try to rebel against or circle back to, or sometimes during the course of your life, both. It's that sense of safety and security that home often provides.

### ***Why are women and families at the forefront of all your novels?***

Women are the lynchpins of life and family is the template for everything else. We learn how to deal in the office by having



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— ANNA QUINDLEN

lived in families. It's how we learn to deal with marriages. Families are the Petri dish. And I just find women endlessly fascinating. They're so complicated, critical to society and they really do knit the fabric of life day after day.

### ***You have three children and a successful career. How did you manage the challenging balance?***

Since my children are now 32, 30 and 27, juggling work and family is no longer the challenge it once was. I can go on book tour and not worry that everything is falling apart in the home. I used to do it differently. When I went on book tour, I took more red-eyes than anyone on earth I think just so I could be home in time for breakfast. Now I can afford to be slightly more leisurely. But my oldest and his fabulous wife are expecting a son and that's why I'll be hurrying back from book tours this time.

*Ed. note: The baby was due this past April.*

### ***How does your journalism background inform your fiction?***

I always wanted to be a novelist, but I feel as if I'd be much less able at this if I hadn't spent those years as a reporter. I learned to look for the telling detail as a feature writer. I learned how real people really talk by writing quotes down verbatim. And I think probably the single most important thing is that I learned to write even when I didn't feel like writing. People ask me all the time about writer's block. Can you imagine having writer's block in the newsroom? That would just not stand. I just feel like my journalism background has been invaluable to me.

### ***You wrote on Facebook that when you're writing a novel, if "all goes well you soon come to live in this new world, perhaps more convincingly than the actual world around you, and for me that was certainly***

### ***true of Miller's Valley." In what way?***

When you're writing a novel, if it's working for you it becomes very, very real. There's a quote from Robert Frost, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." That has so much resonance for me because if I'm not living it; if I'm not walking around in the book; if the characters don't feel as though I may see them crossing the street in front of me, then I'm not really doing what I need to do. But the flip side is if your work is to spend all day living in a fictional community with fictional people, it does make the rest of your life a bit challenging. It doesn't give you a whole lot to talk about at dinner parties when there are real people who have performed surgeries or taken depositions and you've had just had fictional people talking in the kitchen.

### ***Do you belong to a writer's group?***

I don't have a writer's group, but I'm an indefatigable chain reader. I finish a book and two minutes later pick up a new one. There's nothing I like to do more in the world, except hang out with my kids, so I think revisiting the great books that shaped me early on and finding new ones is how I continue to teach myself how to write. I reread one of Dickens novels every summer. He's basically my favorite writer, although it's hard to say that when Jane Austen exists in the world, and Faulkner and Edith Wharton. But Dickens is someone I learn from every time I reread one of the novels. I also read a lot of contemporary. I really love Don DeLillo, Alice McDermott, Amy Bloom and David Mitchell. Reading is my continuing education. **LL**

*Liza N. Burby is an award-winning journalist, book author and editor based in Huntington Station, who can relate to the juggling act Quindlen refers to, as well as how journalism informs her fiction writing.*