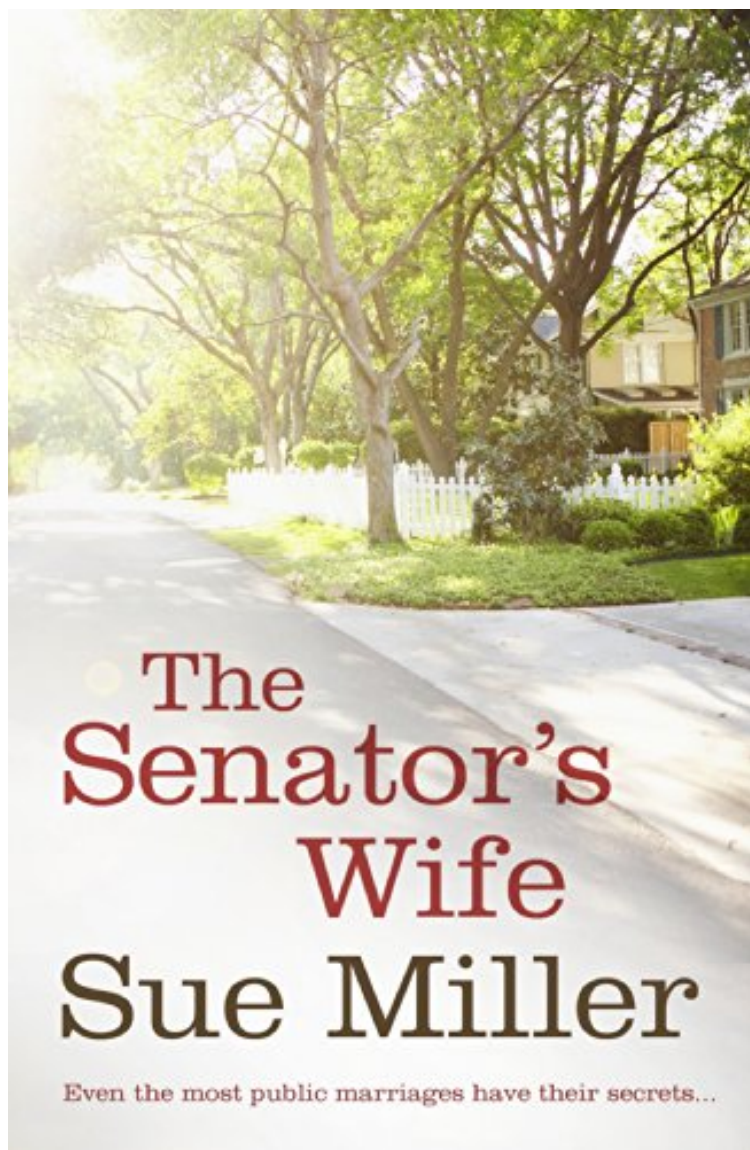


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# The Senator's Wife: rejacketed



*Par Sue Miller*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMaybe some people just like to keep things private. Secret, I guess you'd say.Love came late to Meri, but in a rush: she met Nathan at thirty-six, he moved in a month later, and they married a month after that. Now they are moving to New England and a house of their own - a new life that Meri is not sure she even wants. She loves her husband, but feels there may be trouble ahead. Nathan, however, is boyishly excited that their next-door neighbour is the eminent Senator Tom Naughton, a political hero of his, now in his seventies. The Senator is nowhere to be seen, but Meri strikes up an unexpected friendship with his wife, the elegant Delia, sensing that she has much to learn from her - about marriage, love and motherhood. But soon she comes close to a terrible breach of trust that could ruin everything.ExtraitChapter

One: Meri, June 1993 From her perch in the middle of the backseat, Meri surveys the two in front her husband, Nathan, and Sheila, the real estate agent. There is something generally vulnerable about the back of the head and the neck, she thinks. Nathan, for instance, looks a bit schoolboyish and sad from the back his ears in particular probably because of the haircut he had before they started out on this house-hunting trip. They've been at it for two days. Meri has occupied the backseat the whole time at first because that's just how it happened when they all got in the car, and then by choice. She finds she likes the sense of distance. She likes the view she gets of their faces as they turn to speak to each other or to her the profiles, the three-quarter angles. She feels she's learning something new about Nathan, watching him this way, hearing him ask his real estate questions. He has so many! Questions about heating costs, about taxes, about the age of appliances, about insulation and school districts. Why hasn't she thought about any of this? Because. Because the other reason she's sitting in back is that she can't bring herself to care very deeply about the house whatever house it's going to be. The whole thing is Nathan's idea. Meri has sometimes spoken of it to him jokingly as "your big, fat idea," and, as it will turn out, that's apt: the house will cost much more than they'd planned on spending. But even that will have almost nothing to do with her. Nathan's the one with money. Not that he has a lot. But some. He was living penuriously in their midwestern college town when she met him, salting away what he could. He lived penuriously before that in another college town, a saver there too. In the end it has piled up a little bit. But more important, he has a mother willing to give him his "legacy," as she calls it, before her death. She doesn't need it, she has said repeatedly, and he does. The idea of a parent not only willing, but able, to help you out financially, before or after death, is alien to Meri. A legacy? She will contribute nothing to the purchase of the house she has nothing, and nothing is coming to her. None of this means she's unsympathetic to Nathan. She loves him. She understands his impulses and wishes. He was miserable when they met, trapped in the meanest of academic environments, where his brand of scholarship and his popularity with students was looked on with a combination of contempt and envy. To be offered a job at a good college in the East, a job in a department that values the kind of work he does, a tenure-track job, a job with the promise of what might be called real money in these circles this is a coup, an achievement. An escape. They celebrated the news by going out to dinner in the best restaurant in Coleman the Italian place and by spending a good deal of the following weekend in bed. The house they are planning to buy, whatever house it turns out to be, is supposed to be a further celebration of all this of Nathan's new luck, of his new place in the world. It's supposed to mark, for him anyway, a great change, a beginning. For Meri, its meaning is less clear. She's sad to be leaving her life in Coleman and her apartment there. She'll miss her job and the people she works with at the alumni magazine. She'll miss their competitive telling of jokes. She'll miss their long meetings, the meandering conversations that would finally and inevitably come around, in some mysterious way that always surprised all of them, to the topics for articles they might do for the magazine. And she's just a little worried about her marriage. She knows Nathan is planning a life, a life which the house is part of, that she's not sure she wants to live. She doesn't know whether she can be at home in the place he imagines, in the way he imagines her being. She suspects there's trouble coming. But she feels if they can just hold on to the easy camaraderie and sexual heat of their early days, then they can find a way to keep talking about all this, a way of shaping their marriage to suit them both. Their first day with Sheila was a waste of time. They had agreed on this in their room at the inn yesterday evening, lying down exhausted and fully clothed on top of the bedspread, not touching. Nathan's hands were folded on his chest, as though he were arranged for viewing at a funeral home. They agreed they would have to raise their upper limit to get anything they really wanted or Nathan suggested this and Meri went along. To her, everything they'd seen seemed possible. In each cramped little bungalow or shabby row house, while Nathan was getting visibly depressed, she was thinking how, if you just painted the pine paneling white or ripped up the orange carpet, if you took down the heavy layers of curtains and let the light in, the place could be livable. But because she could see Nathan's sorrow, she didn't try to sound hopeful or cheerful about anything. These weren't qualities he seemed to like in her anyway. And back at the inn she didn't even mention any of this. She agreed with him, she bolstered him. She was the one who finally got up from the bed and made the phone call to Sheila told her they would need to start over with new rules the next day. Sheila has quickly pulled together a revised list for today's viewings. They've seen three so far. The first one was too far out of town they both wanted to be able to walk or bike to work. The second one was just ugly, they all agreed over lunch. Fake-brick siding, a tiny dark kitchen. No. The third one, the one they've just come from, was lovely, a Victorian, but also much too big and in need of repairs. The porch actually bounced slightly as they strode across it, and inside Nathan pointed out the water stains on the ceilings and

walls, the rotted window frames. Now Sheila is saying that this next one, the one she's driving them to, is a little out of their range, but she thinks it's so perfect for them that she just wants them to take a peek. She mentions a price that makes Meri flinch in the backseat. She looks quickly at Nathan. His face is in profile to her as he looks over at Sheila. Meri can see a small, bitter smile move across it. A danger sign, though Sheila doesn't know that. But Meri can sense what's coming. He's about to tell Sheila it's a lot out of their range. He's about to ask her not to waste their time. Maybe he's even about to say that they're tired, that they've seen enough for one day. But Sheila isn't looking at him. Her small, childish voice rolls on, an innocent and unstoppable flow. Meri thinks of clear, shallow water. "It's a double house, actually," she says. "You know, attached. The other side is owned by that old senator who's retired now. Oh, I bet you know him: what's his name? The famous one, more or less the Kennedy era. He even looked kind of like a Kennedy. Oh, shoot!" She smacks the steering wheel. Meri watches as Nathan's face changes, as the little smile disappears. He says, "Tom Naughton?" "That's it!" Sheila says. She turns and smiles at him. "They've owned it forever. I've got no idea how long. Since way before my time." There's a silence. Nathan turns to look at Meri. She can admire the sculpted line of his cheek, his jaw. "It wouldn't hurt to look, I guess," he says. "You know me," Meri answers. "Real estate voyeuse." She tries to make her voice sound ridiculously sexy, she shimmies her shoulders, and Nathan laughs. That's good. He hasn't laughed, it seems to her, for a few days. But who's Tom Naughton? She'll have to look him up. When she met Nathan, Meri was living alone, in a place she loved. A vast room in an old brick building whose tall, bare windows looked out over the mostly empty main street of what was euphemistically called downtown Coleman. At one time the building had been a factory. Harmoniums had been built there and, factory-like, it had uselessly high ceilings, of pressed tin. In winter, the warm air rose up and sat just under these ceilings, far above Meri's head. Or at least she assumed that's where the warm air went. There was certainly none down where she lived. There, chilly breezes crisscrossed the room, on a stormy winter day sometimes actually stirring the piles of papers stacked everywhere. Meri wore multiple layers of clothes at home through the coldest months of the year, and huge green down booties all day and well into the night. She wore them to bed. She didn't remove them until she had been under the covers for a while and the heat of her body had begun to tent her safely. It was for this reason, among others, that she was grateful to have met Nathan in the early summer, when, even though it had no cross-ventilation, the apartment stayed cool and airy with the outside windows thrown open. When she went barefoot at home, loving the feel of the painted wood under her feet. When she wore skimpy dresses that showed off how tall she was, how strongly built. When you could lie naked in comfort. They had known each other for only a month, lying naked in comfort for much of that time, when he moved in with her. They had married a month after that. They had been married for ten months when they flew to Williston to spend this long weekend looking at houses they might live in. When Sheila pulls up at the curb, Nathan sits quietly for a moment before getting out, looking up the walk. As though in reverence, Meri thinks. She follows his gaze. There's a for-sale sign planted in the deep lawn, and behind it rise the two attached brick town houses, built at the turn of the twentieth century, probably, with lots of white carved-stone trim around the windows and doors. Curlicues and animal shapes. There's even a small couchant lion at the top of the stone steps up to the porch.