

**Obituaries**

# Anita Miller, author and co-founder of independent Chicago publisher, dies at 91

By [Matt Schudel](#)

, Reporter

August 12

Anita Miller, who brought hundreds of literary works into print as the co-founder of the independent publishing company Academy Chicago and who was embroiled in a bitter legal battle with the family of writer John Cheever, died Aug. 4 at a nursing facility in Chicago. She was 91.

A son, Bruce Joshua Miller, confirmed the death but did not cite a cause.

Dr. Miller was a college English professor before she and her husband, Jordan Miller, launched Academy Press (later called Academy Chicago Publishers) in 1975. Their first book, “A Guide to Non-Sexist Children’s Books,” by Judith Adell and Hilary Dole Klein, sold out its initial press run of 5,000 in less than four months and went on to sell more than 40,000 copies.

“We thought publishing was simple, just publish a good book and people will buy it,” Dr. Miller said.

She soon learned otherwise.

“Over the years,” she told the Chicago Tribune in 1994, “I have made every mistake in the book and quite a few outside of it too.”

Nonetheless, through a combination of literary taste, determination and luck, the Millers built Academy Chicago into one of the most enduring and successful small presses in the country. Drawing on Dr. Miller’s expertise in 19th-century literature, the company developed a backlist that included many classic works that had gone out of print — a common practice today but then relatively unknown.

The Millers republished books by British writers Arnold Bennett and Walter Pater and helped revive interest in French novelist George Sand. (Dr. Miller joked that Academy Chicago could be called “a house built on Sand.”)

Other top-selling books included a series of mystery novels by a pseudonymous British writer known as Leo Bruce and a 1982 espionage thriller set in Russia, “Murder at the Red October,” by first-time novelist Anthony Olcott.

Dr. Miller, who was president and editorial director of Academy Chicago, also “rescued” many out-of-print books by female writers, including Sylvia Townsend Warner, Olive Schreiner and Mary Wilkins Freeman. A 1949 historical novel by Dutch writer Hella S. Haasse, “In a Dark Wood Wandering” — translated into English by Dr. Miller — sold 50,000 copies after Academy Chicago published it in 1989.

Other entries in the company’s eclectic catalogue included biographies, travel books and transcripts of the testimony of Anita Hill during the 1991 Senate confirmation hearings of U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

“It’s an old-fashioned approach,” Dr. Miller said in 2001. “We’re not looking for anything specific. We’re looking for something good.”

Over the years, the Millers published more than 500 books at Academy Chicago, but none of them got as much attention as the one they didn’t publish: a collection of 68 short stories by Cheever, originally scheduled for release in 1988.

Editor Franklin Dennis tracked down the stories, which had not been included in a 1978 collection that won the Pulitzer Prize, and offered them to the Millers. The 500-page collection would have been the most important literary work in Academy Chicago’s history, with an initial press run of 100,000 copies. Paperback rights were sold for more than \$225,000.

The Millers paid Cheever’s widow, Mary, an advance of \$750, with another \$750 due on publication. Royalties to Mary Cheever were expected to reach into six figures.

Just before the book was to come out, however, the Cheever family sought to block its publication, saying the advance was too small and that some of the stories were of inferior quality.

“Academy Chicago is a small press, and my impression when I signed that terrible contract was that this would be a small edition for libraries, for students,” Mary Cheever said in 1988. “I had no idea they’d grabbed what they thought was a gold mine, which was their idea from the beginning.”

The Millers sued to enforce the contract, and the Cheever family filed countersuits, setting in motion what was described in *The Washington Post* as “the most expensive, protracted, and vicious court battle to take place in recent years over a book.”

The resulting legal saga wasn’t at all like one of Cheever’s incisive domestic dramas but instead resembled a tale by Franz Kafka or even the endless *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* lawsuit in Charles Dickens’s “Bleak House.”

“We didn’t want to sue them,” Ben Cheever, one of John Cheever’s sons, said in 1988. “This nice little book had turned into something bigger than we had in mind, and they were getting it for very little money.”

The Millers feared that the stories they had planned to publish would be taken away and sold to a New York publishing house with deeper pockets. Lawyers and literary agents got involved, voices were raised, and “an off-duty policeman came to my mother’s house and served her a summons,” Ben Cheever said. “Mummy was very upset.”

After more than three years of litigation in two states, the case was settled in 1991, when the Illinois Supreme Court nullified the contract between Academy Chicago and Mary Cheever.

The Millers had spent more than \$400,000 on legal fees, the Cheever family almost \$1 million. Both sides believed they were fighting for a matter of principle, but no one came out looking good. In the end, “The Uncollected Stories of John Cheever” never appeared in print.

“I’ve often thought that if I had never heard of John Cheever, I’d be a lot better off,” Jordan Miller said.

There was a measure of resolution in 1994, when Academy Chicago published a smaller version of the book, containing 13 previously uncollected Cheever stories, all in the public domain.

Dr. Miller recounted her version of the ordeal in a 1998 book, “Uncollecting Cheever.”

“We almost went bankrupt,” she said, “because we were in the Cheever business and not in the publishing business.”

Anita Rochelle Wolfberg was born Aug. 31, 1926, in Chicago. Her father had a currency exchange business, her mother was a homemaker.

She was a 1948 graduate of Chicago’s Roosevelt University, where she met Jordan Miller, a poet who later ran a news-clipping service.

Dr. Miller received a doctorate in English literature in 1973 from Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., where she taught for several years. Her frustrating search for a publisher of her dissertation led Dr. Miller and her husband to found a publishing company of their own.

Survivors include her husband of 69 years, of Chicago; three sons, Bruce Joshua Miller, a publishers’ representative, of Chicago, Mark Crispin Miller, a writer and professor, of New York, and Eric Lincoln Miller, a former small-press publisher, of Reno, Nev.; a brother; and four grandchildren.

In 2002, Dr. Miller and her husband co-wrote, with Sigalit Zetouni, the first English-language biography of Israeli leader Ariel Sharon. In 2015, Dr. Miller published a humorous memoir, “Tea & Antipathy: An American Family in Swinging London,” about a year she and her family spent in England in the 1960s.

The Millers sold Academy Chicago to Chicago Review Press in 2014 but continued to have editorial oversight of the imprint for two more years.

“I don’t have any grand plan or secret of success,” Dr. Miller said in 1994, describing her career at Academy Chicago. “It’s definitely an idiosyncratic company, and money is not the most important criterion. Bringing out good books is.”

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida. [Follow](#)

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