

FOCUS BY ARTHUR MILLER (1915-2005)

When you think of Arthur Miller you are likely to recall some of the great plays he has written. *Death of a Salesman*, *All my Sons*, *The Crucible* are all plays I have seen and enjoyed more than once.

What is little known – so much so that I couldn't even see it mentioned in his biography on Wiki -- is that back in 1945, Miller also wrote a full length novel called, *Focus*.

I came across it many years ago and have read it a number of times since. It's the story of a clerk, Newman, living and working in New York. After visiting an optician, he finds he needs to wear spectacles. These change his appearance to such an extent that they alter people's attitude towards him. They begin to treat him with suspicion because the new glasses make him look Jewish. His neighbours stop talking to him. He gets up one morning to find that the bins holding his trash have been overturned and the garbage has been spread all over his front lawn. People pick on him. No one wants to know him. And the more he protests that he is not "one of those", the more he is shunned. He gets sacked from his job and goes from being a regular, happy go lucky guy to someone who is always having to look over his shoulder.

The experience changes his perception of people. He starts talking to the Jewish people in his neighbourhood – something he had never done before. He dates a Jewish woman – someone he had interviewed and turned down for a job at his firm – because she looked Jewish. At the corner of his road there has always been a newspaper stall owned by a Jewish man. Newman had never before visited the stall, always choosing to go out of his way rather than get his papers there. Now he finds himself identifying with this man and even goes so far as to defend him from a threatening mob. From then on he befriends this man, not only stopping to buy a newspaper from him but chatting to him every day.

You can see where this book is going. At a time in the USA – and elsewhere in the world – where post war there was still rampant antisemitism, Miller confronts it by having his protagonist walk in another man's shoes. What better way to understand racism and antisemitism than to experience it yourself?

I doubt if I could ever begin to write a book like this but I very much admire Miller's work. He writes beautifully with sparing but descriptive prose. When he writes about the mob violently attacking the newspaper stall holder, the reader winces at every kick, every punch and every foul word said.

It is an unforgettable story that deserves to be more widely known. A really superb novel written by Arthur Miller who, quite rightly, is acknowledged to be one of the greatest writers of the last century.

Andrea Neidle