

Recounting Henry Miller's love for his Venus

Letters detail relationship between aging writer and young actress

By Hunter Drohojowska

July 23, 1976
My darling Brenda —
Last night I went to bed in a state of bliss. What a wonderful evening you gave me! Thank you, thank you! (And here are a few hundred kisses in the interim.)

Henry Miller, the vulgar, the censurable, the libertine, the chauvinist, the artist, the writer, penned those words to a woman roughly 60 years his junior, Brenda Venus. At the age of 84, Miller discovered his last fantasy, his last sensual obsession with a beautiful young actress, and wrote her 1,500 love letters during the last four years of his life. A selection of these letters, with commentary by their recipient, has recently been published by William Morrow and Co.: "Dear, Dear Brenda, The Love Letters of Henry Miller to Brenda Venus."

Brenda, I wish God had given me the gift of writing about sex like D.H. Lawrence. Somehow my efforts always seem crude and shocking, even to liberal minded individuals.

Why do I speak thus?
Because, willy nilly we are approaching that delicate yet most powerful region called the genitals...

Actually, Miller never did approach that "powerful region" with Venus. His letters are full of wishful thinking and pure fantasy, but even yearning warmed Miller's old heart and apparently prolonged his life.

And I still haven't told you how I crave you, worship you... Everybody tells me I look better and better. And I say, "It's all because of Brenda."

Brenda Venus — her real name — was in her 20s, an actress who had played some small parts, such as a mute Indian in Clint Eastwood's "The Eiger Sanction," when

she introduced herself by mail to Henry Miller. It is an improbable tale: The evening she had planned to hear him lecture, her house burned down. Later, she discovered his address on a letter tucked into a first-edition set of books titled "Women Through the Ages" which she bought at auction for \$3,000. She sent photos of herself with a letter of introduction. The elderly, eager Miller responded promptly.

What began as a whim, an adventure and a curiosity for Miller soon swelled to become an affectionate and trusting relationship. Venus visited or wrote to him daily, brought him to dinner at the Imperial Gardens, chauffeured him around town in her Porsche. He acted as mentor; she served as student.

Venus doesn't look a wrinkle older than the photographs of her with Miller taken a decade ago. She is willowly, graceful — a teacher of ballet — with coal-black hair to the middle of her back. Her father was Sicilian, her mother Navajo, and the combination produced an exotic beauty. Miller thought of her as a cross between his volatile actress-wife June Smith — the inspiration for his breakthrough masterpiece "The Tropic of Cancer" — and his more stoic lover, Anais Nin.

In a husky, Southern accent from her home in Hattiesburg, Miss., Venus outlines her route to L.A., a history of beauty contest titles such as Miss Mississippi and Miss Texas, modeling for her parents' department store, and a few years of college, before coming to Hollywood for a small part in a film. Her last role was as a hooker in "48 HRS."

"I mostly get cast in the parts of hookers, mistresses, athletes, masseuses or as somebody's fantasy," she says. "Inside, I'm a small-town girl from Mississippi, but casting people never see that part of me."

In her Beverly Hills condo, decorated in black marble and ivory rugs and sofas, one wall is taken up



The actress Brenda Venus (her real name) stands before a portrait of her with her mentor, the late author Henry Miller.

by an enlarged photo of Venus with Miller.

"I think we were both looking for something in our lives," Venus says. "I desperately needed somebody to let me know that everything would be all right. It's a terrible experience to lose all your possessions (when her house burned down). Henry was able to be my Rock of Gibraltar."

She adds, "I was Henry's fantasy. He liked my type. When you've got a fantasy, whether it is making love to a 10-foot tall Egyptian, it is delicious, exciting, a secret with yourself. If you actually found that person and made love, you would be disappointed. The fantasy is more erotic than doing it. I was his fantasy, but if we had taken it to reality, he would have had nothing to live for anymore. It would have been ordinary. If you keep a

fantasy where it belongs, it grows and grows and grows."

In his letters, the fantasy is cultivated to blossom. Miller chafes and chides at her restrictions. He constantly tries to seduce his pupil, describing graphic dreams as only Henry Miller could, and often referring to rare sexual philosophies, Tantric yoga and erotic Japanese movies.

In one letter, Miller writes:

How could I dare fondle the delta of Venus or the noble globes above? Rather I would lick your feet, kiss your glowing backside! ... In other words, Henry Miller the saint, the wise man, is even more interested in your physical attributes.

Venus never returned those impulses, even supposing that, at Miller's age, and in his poor health,

he could have participated in his favorite act. Only once, in 1978, did she respond to his request for a "little favor" by surprising him in his bedroom wearing a white Grecian robe. She dropped it to stand nude before him, then donned it once again and left with a smile.

The next day, Miller wrote:

Dear Brenda — Ever there in my brain cells is the image of you lifting off your dress ... What a moment! What a commotion.

Venus explains, "From my point of view, Henry was the opposite of the character in his books. He had style, class, sophistication. He taught that the most important thing in the world is love. And he gave me the security to be who I am no matter what. Henry was to me a father, uncle, friend, not a lover. So

we wrote different types of letters to each other."

Miller relished his duty as guru and introduced Venus to authors from Knut Hamsun to Marie Cor-elli, urging her daily to finish books so he could send her more from the Gotham Book Mart.

Between 1976 and 1980, Miller wrote more than 4,000 pages to Venus. Just before his death, he asked Venus if she would publish them. She answered with a question: What did he wish? "Well, they are pretty good," he replied. "Follow your heart."

"People kept telling me to publish the letters," Venus says. "They thought it would give people a different concept of Henry as a man, not just as a writer."

Through a mutual friend, Venus met Stan Corwin and Gerald Seth Sindell, the pair who discovered and published "... And the Ladies of the Club," the best-selling first book by another octogenarian, Helen Hooven Santmyer.

"Henry always taught me that if some opportunity comes by, you have to grab it," Venus says.

Corwin and Sindell edited the letters. Miller's friend, Lawrence Durrell, wrote the introduction.

At the end, Miller seems to have accepted the platonic nature of his love for Venus. One of his last letters reads:

Darling Brenda —
I have just taken Valium and two Anacin, which usually put me to sleep (imaginatively) by your side, preferably in your arms, but not as a fornicator — just a beloved. ... It has taken me all these years to achieve whatever success one may put upon my life. Yet, in another sense, I can think of myself as a success coming out of the womb. I came out of one womb to enter another of my own creation. I say this because I think there is a genuine parallel between us in this respect.

Now I begin to feel sleepy
Good night dear heart
Bless your soul!

Henry

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