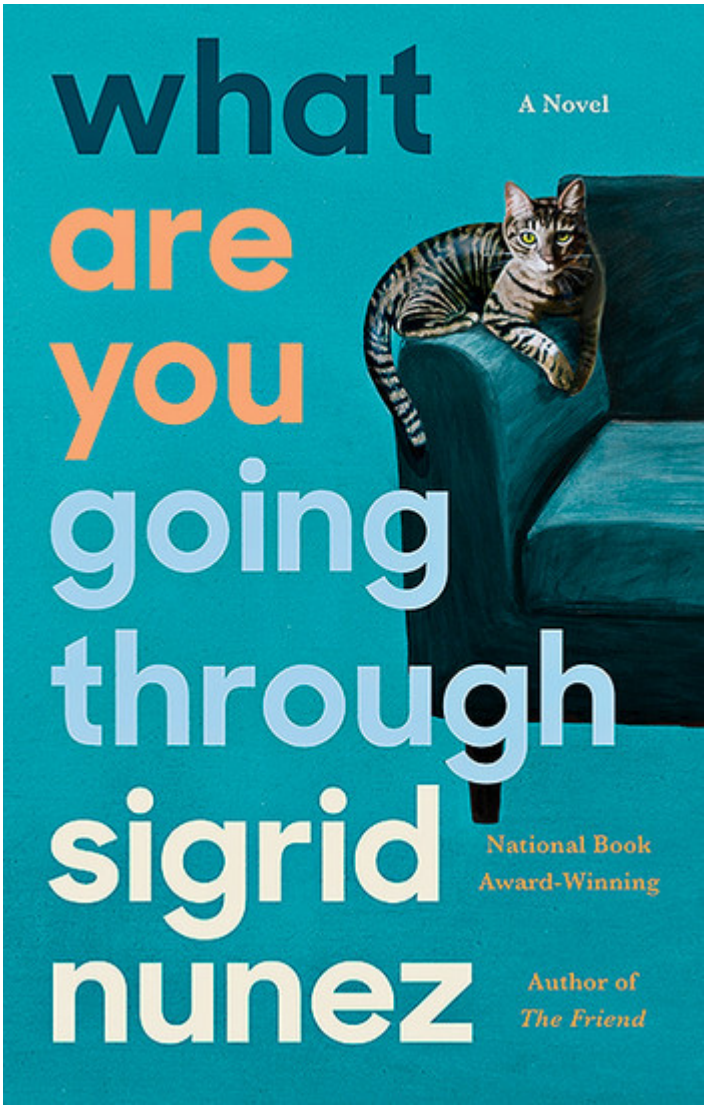
Books

Review: *What Are You Going Through*

By Sigrid Nunez ’72BC, ’75SOA (Riverhead).

By
Stuart Miller '90JRN
|
Winter 2020-21



Riverhead

“I went to hear a man give a talk,” writes Sigrid Nunez ’72BC, ’75SOA in the opening sentence of her new novel, *What Are You Going Through*. Like much of her prose, the line is simple and direct. But readers should not be fooled by the straightforward tone; Nunez’s seventh novel is stunningly complex, a nuanced, layered look at aging, friendship, love, and death.

Fans of Nunez will find both the themes and the voice familiar. She first earned acclaim with her 1995 debut, the autobiographical novel *A Feather on the Breath of God*, narrated by an unnamed mixed-race immigrant girl growing up in a Brooklyn housing project in the 1950s and ’60s. After experimenting with literary forms over the next two decades (the novel Mitz was a mock biography of Virginia Woolf’s pet marmoset; she also wrote a memoir of her 1970s friendship with Susan Sontag ’93HON), Nunez returned to the unnamed narrator in *The Friend*, a touching examination of grief that won the 2018 National Book Award. *What Are You Going Through* appears to be the next chapter in the character’s life.

The man in the novel’s first sentence is not some random stranger: he’s the narrator’s ex — though theirs is not the relationship that drives the narrative. The protagonist went to the talk while on a trip to visit a sick friend, and she uses the visit to explore the ideas of aging and love, empathy and the necessity of connecting with others. Nunez shows how easy it is to let the bonds of friendship fray.

The narrator’s tone is intimate not just as she describes encounters with her close friends but also as she reports on conversations and incidents in the lives of others. For much of the book, we are in her head, gaining insight into her character from seemingly mundane events. She recounts, for example, a conversation with a woman at her gym who strives to maintain her figure. “She knew it sounded crazy, the woman in the locker room said, but when her sister got cancer and lost thirty pounds she couldn’t help wishing it would happen to her. And was it so crazy? After all, always hating the way she looked, always fighting against her own body and always, always losing the battle meant that she was depressed all the time.” Through these encounters and reflections, Nunez gives us tender and fraught glimpses into people’s complicated lives.



Sigrid Nunez. (Marion Ettlinger)

It takes some time for Nunez to introduce the central plot point: the narrator's sick friend is dying of cancer and wants her to stay by her side as she prepares to kill herself. "I will not go out in mortifying anguish," the friend says. "I can't be completely alone. I mean, this is a new adventure — who can say what it will really be like. What if something goes wrong? What if everything goes wrong? I need to know there's someone in the next room."

"Epic struggle to keep my composure, to choose my words," Nunez's narrator notes grimly, before asking if there is anyone else who can take on this role. But *What Are You Going Through* is not a sad book, despite the tears shed or fought back. When the narrator finally agrees to aid her dying friend, the friend texts back, "I promise to make it as much fun as possible." And indeed, there is a life-affirming quality and even humor in the evolving companionship as the two women prepare for one's death. The book may not quite have the narrative engine or emotional engagement of some of Nunez's previous work, but the novel has much to recommend it. The writer's willingness to examine the power of compassion for a friend and the human fear of dying alone of a terminal illness has never felt more potent or more relevant.

Read more from ***Stuart Miller '90JRN***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from **Stuart Miller '90JRN***