

each other's ambition and anxiety." (She and her mother published *Circus Dreams: The Making of a Circus Artist* about the experience.) Faced with signing on with a professional circus she didn't like, Miller returned home, where she got into Harvard on early action and spent the intervening year as a solo aerialist for the Pickle Family Circus. There, she got a concussion from falling headfirst onto the stage during a pole-climbing act in which she hung by one foot with two women dangling from her. Healed after three months, she kept working until Freshman Week.

Entering Harvard in the fall of 1992 (at age 22), Miller quickly found a home with the committee on folklore and mythology and a mentor in Deborah Foster, senior lecturer, head tutor, and director of undergraduate studies. And even though she had never been on a diving board, she joined the diving team, reorienting her skills. (She was with the team all four years, but did not compete for two, after being hit by a truck while riding her bike to practice early one morning.)

"...the beautiful, superhuman hero."

Folklore, myth-making, and narrative all appeal to Miller's sense of how we should understand the world of human experience—and herself. Foster's fieldwork course "made clear that what I was doing in my life in taking these risks was to plunge myself into very different cultures and really live that culture for awhile, and that the powers of observation and writing that I had and used were really the skills of a fieldworker," she explains. "I approach folklore as anthropology." Her senior thesis looked at how women gymnasts who become media commentators perpetuate mythologies of the sport.

After college, Miller worked for the Great American High Dive Team, which performed at Dutch Wonderland, "a tourist trap and the most miserable show I've ever been a part of," she says. "I was doing five high-dive shows a day with no days off for \$300 a week and living with members of the team in a trailer in close, confined quarters. It's a grueling, grueling life. It's painful and monotonous."

Alumni College

The Alumni College programs, run by the Harvard Alumni Association, range from day-long symposia to two-hour workshops and cover an array of topics.

On December 7, "Shaking the Family Tree in Forensic Investigations: Genetic Surveillance in the 21st Century" features associate professor of pathology Frederic Bieber and associate professor of public policy David Lazer. They will present groundbreaking research about government-maintained DNA databases and talk about the growth and social and political effects of other DNA collections.

The event, open to alumni and their guests, takes place from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Science Center, 1 Oxford Street, Cambridge. Tickets are \$10 per person, which includes appetizers and parking. For the latest details on this and other events, visit <http://post.harvard.edu/travel> and click on "Alumni College," or call 617-495-1920.

After moving to the relatively "supportive, cushy atmosphere of academics" at UCLA, Miller took advantage of Hollywood's spectacle-hungry culture, performing solo aerial acts at nightclubs, political events, award shows, schools, and private parties. She began to weave narrative into her acts: Greek mythology, and tales of people and animals who struggle, evolve—and learn to fly.

These days, her work schedule imposes a limit she dislikes on her mid-air suspen-

sions. "I am struggling to find a way to integrate that without just dropping dead from exhaustion," she reports. As a new professor teaching her courses for the first time, she spends hours researching materials. (In her occupational folklore class, she used scenes from the movies *Pushing Tin* and *United 93* to explore "exoteric" and "esoteric" ways air-traffic controllers are perceived.) Often she gets by on only three hours of sleep, and is typically awake at 4 a.m. e-mailing students.

It takes stamina to keep tabs on youthful trends. In Miller's "Introduction to Popular Culture" class, students present weekly research projects, such as new TV networks with shows they've dreamed up for a niche market. "This was in the context of learning to think critically about the composition of the programming they consume," she says. "For example, how commercials are placed deliberately in shows for specific audiences, how product placement is used in TV and movies, and how moral

messages are subtly transmitted through the media." She wants students "to think about audiences, and how the popular culture we consume is deliberately shaped and targeted for specific populations. And in turn, how interest groups can become more sharply defined as popular culture carves out niches for them."

Project topics have focused on alcohol, television, drugs, music, and movies. "I try not to be judgmental," Miller says. "These are all very much a part of their thinking and their world. And I'm an ethnographer—I study youth culture. I want to know the truth about what they do—I'm not afraid of it. I actually feel honored that they let me into their lives."

She is currently studying the Facebook phenomenon through student subjects who keep journals about how they use it. Miller herself spends a couple of hours a day observing student profiles and perusing Facebook for news of her 150 "friends." Many students post sexy photos and gossip; others make serious pronouncements. "One came out as gay on Facebook and dealt with the whole repercussion of that on-line," she reports. "This is a whole new framework for socializing—an outlet, a place to perform and experiment. What I'm focusing on is what risks students will take on Facebook that they will not take in real life."

JUST AS FACEBOOK culture does not meet standards of "traditional folklore," so, too, is it shielded from the immediate, corporeal risks associated with standing in bare feet on a windy perch and throwing yourself off the side of a cliff. "That is dan-