Women and the Double Standard of Ageing

The double standard about aging shows up most brutally in the conventions of sexual feeling, which presuppose a disparity between men and women that operates permanently to women’s disadvantage.

— Susan Sontag

I have always wanted to be old. Weird? Probably—and certainly neither cool nor fashionable; for that I would need to be a Grumpy Old Woman, whingeing because things aren’t what they used to be, and confirming all the assumptions about old women as discontented, obsessed with trivia and generally off their trolleys. And I would need to engage in the ‘fight against ageing’ to make myself look twenty years younger. But I’m happy to look the age I am, happy to be the age I am. I want to enjoy it, strip-mine it for all it has to offer. I want to live and work with it, not fight it.

But we live in a society in denial about ageing; a denial fuelled by an obsession with image and style, with youth and physical beauty, and the illusion that we can keep making ourselves over to hold old age at bay. And although we are not all obsessed with the desire to stay young, resistance is frequently interpreted as deviance or failure. But there is nothing shameful about ageing; it comes to us all if we are lucky enough to be here to greet it and to deny our age is to pretend to be less than we are in much more than just years.

When I look in the mirror I can see my ageing in the lines, the sagging skin, the extra rolls of fat, the age spots. I can also feel it in my muscles and my joints, the effort of my breath at exercise, the loss of the ability to sit cross-legged, the fact that I have four pairs of glasses but frequently can’t find any of them, and that I occasionally discover my misplaced wallet packed in the fridge with the shopping. I creak and puff, I droop and sag. I have given up shoes with heels and the effort to hold in my stomach, and I am working hard on not caring about how I appear to others (although the latter is still a work in progress).

But I can also feel it in my head and in my heart; in my joy in life, my greater appreciation of the world and particularly of my family and friends, my increasing satisfaction in small things, in my waning tolerance of the superficial rhetoric of politicians and the dominant culture of personality and celebrity, which has replaced the culture of character. I see it in disturbing flashes of my own mortality: a glimpse of myself dying alone or the prospect of a long and painful decline, a sharper fear of and greater fascination about the possibilities of an afterlife. I question whether simple aches and pains, lumps and bumps, foreshadow something more serious, even fatal.
I feel my age through my need to make the most of every moment and every
day, love more and better, write more and better, learn more, read more. I
value family and friends more and more thoughtfully, feel grief more sharply
and outrage more passionately. And I relish my age in the pure wonder of
having arrived here, two years from seventy, and to be living every day as a
bonus and an adventure.

In 1972 the late Susan Sontag suggested that ageing is largely a trial of the
imagination. She believed that the anxiety and depression many women
experience about ageing is caused by ‘the way this society limits how women
feel free to imagine themselves’. ii In that same year Simone de Beauvoir
described ageing as ‘a class struggle, which, like race and gender, becomes a
filter through which to see and understand differential life changes.’ iii Both
Sontag and de Beauvoir wrote of the ‘double-standard of ageing’ – the
poisonous nexus of sexism and ageism that disempowers women as they age.
We are most desirable as lovers, partners and mothers in our youth, and as
that youth fades so too does our sexual value. ‘For most women,’ Sontag
wrote, ‘ageing means a gradual process of sexual disqualification.’ iv

Even if, as ageing women, we don’t give a damn about sexual disqualification
at a personal level it still affects us in both overt and subtle ways. Despite the
changes that emerged from the women’s movement of the late sixties and
seventies we still live in a world predominantly ordained by men, in which the
male view of women dictates the visual and verbal wallpaper of our lives. And
it’s a particular type of male heterosexuality that defines the overbearing
messages about women’s value and where it lies. This is not an attack on men;
not for one moment do I think that most men are aware of it or even give it a
thought, and I know many who do find it as alienating as do many women.
But sadly the old bog standard attitudes that defined women’s value in terms
of their appearance seems to be enjoying a resurgence in the twenty-first
century, and it infiltrates the lives of us older, disqualified, women as well as
those of younger women and distressingly the lives of little girls.

Is there ever a time in a woman’s life when it is okay to be and to look the age
she is? Tiny tots are being trained with beauty pageants, pole dancing and
Playboy Bunny outfits to mimic the appearance and the sexual appeal of adult
women. Girls in their teens strive to appear older until sometime in their
twenties, when relentless anti-ageing messages infiltrate their consciousness
and they begin to look fearfully over their shoulders. By the thirties middle age
is a threat, the fifties and beyond unthinkable. Sexism defines youthful beauty
and sexual availability as what matters for women. And so advertisements for
fashion, lingerie and cosmetics targeting women are all designed with words
and images that play to men’s fantasies about women to encourage us to
spend in ways that will satisfy those fantasies, until the time we become
irrelevant.

It is the end of fertility that marks us out as sexually unattractive and
undesirable, and it brings with it the additional assumption that we are
moody, depressed and emotionally unstable. But while some women do suffer
severe physical and emotional difficulties at menopause, for most the effects are just mild and annoying, and some experience very few symptoms at all. Menopause is the culture’s defining consciousness about older women and within it there are several narratives of the ‘problem’. There is the medical-problem-medical-solutions story, which treats it as an illness and is accompanied with lists of enough grim physical and psychological symptoms as to make you slash your wrists. It is heavily weighted towards hormone replacement therapy and frequently has a critical edge that implies that while menopause is a clinical condition requiring medical intervention, the woman is selfish and pathetic for seeking help to manage her symptoms. There is the pull-yourself-together-so-you-don’t-frighten-the-children-or-upset-the-men story, which counsels women not to bore and embarrass others with this life-changing experience – ‘just grin and bear it, and keep taking the tablets’. And finally there is the I-did-it-my-way-with-the-help-of-the-goddess-and-a-few-archetypes; this version is dreamy and mystical and often involves herbs, visualisation and rituals with shells and candles.

All these narratives create the context for menopause as a major design fault that leads inevitability to diminishment, alienation and invisibility. The impact of hormonal change is physiologically and emotionally real, but it is not necessarily debilitating or disabling; even so, biological determinism – used to declare women mad, sad or bad as adolescents and in pregnancy – has a special bite in old age where it also erases us from public view. How can mature women begin to imagine themselves pre, during and after menopause without images of vibrant, content, energetic older women with their own very special beauty.

The imaginative freedom to enjoy ageing, to recognise its possibilities and rise to its challenges, depends to a considerable extent upon how we see it represented in the world around us. Writer and anthropologist Thomas De Zengotita suggests that seeing ourselves and our lives reflected in the products of popular culture is a pervasive and fundamental form of flattery: ‘The flattered self is a mediated self,’ he writes, ‘and the alchemy of mediation is the osmotic process through which reality and representation fuse, and get carried to our psyches by the irresistible flattery that goes with being incessantly addressed.’ In other words when we can constantly see realistic representations of people like us in the media we feel we are being acknowledged, spoken to by the creators of those images, included as part of the audience and therefore part of the larger tribe.

But ageing and old women are rarely the central characters in the products of popular culture. They appear in minor stereotypical and frequently negative roles: nosey neighbours, interfering mothers-in-law, dippy old aunts, scheming bitches or frail old burdens who impede the lives and the desires of the really important characters – men, younger women and children. Television, at the heart of most Australian homes, is the place where we should reasonably expect to experience the benefits of representational flattery, but for older women it is a representational void. For ageing women invisibility is both a feeling and reality, and the silence of not being addressed is deafening.
Realistic fictional representations are, I believe, even more powerful in terms of representational flattery than real-life examples of successful women. In the long history of efforts to raise the status of women the existence and visibility of real-life female leaders as role models has always been inspirational, but famous, high-profile women can also seem remote from our own more ordinary lives. It is in fiction – in books and on the screen – that we can experience the inner lives of others, observe their challenges, learn how they deal with anger, grief and loss as well as success, joy, love and fulfilment. In fiction we are privy to the emotional rollercoaster of ordinary lives that reflect our own and in its multiple possibilities we see who we are and who we can become. It works to humanise and to bond us with those who are living with or have already passed through what we have yet to experience.

It was the absence of interesting and realistic older women as the central characters in Australian women’s fiction that led me, ten years ago, to start writing novels that feature these characters. I had been searching the shelves of libraries and bookshops for novels that featured women of fifty plus; I wanted to read about women like me. I was in my late fifties then, and surrounded by friends and colleagues of a similar age and older who were living dynamic, useful and rewarding lives. They were, and still are, starting new businesses, enrolling at university, playing the stock market, surfing the waves and the internet, travelling, retraining and falling in and out of love. I regularly interviewed ageing women who held powerful positions in government and business, who excelled in the sciences, the arts and in sport, who had raised money to fund women’s scholarships, overseas orphanages, or support services for women and children in crisis. They were doing all this in spite of, as well as, and way beyond menopause. It seemed to me that these women’s stories were just as worth telling in fiction and drama as the stories of young women setting out in pursuit of careers and Mr Right offered by chick-lit and rom-coms.

Quite a few people laughed when I spoke of writing novels about older women; quite a few more, particularly those in the media, sucked in their breath, shook their heads, and told me unequivocally that no one would want to read about older women. As women over forty-five buy more books than any other demographic this seemed a frankly stupid assumption and further illustrated the insidious effects of the double standard of ageing. Now, six best-selling novels later, I am delighted to have proved them wrong, but despite this demonstrated market, creators, producers, editors and publishers of popular culture still seem locked into the frantic pursuit of a youthful audience.

My argument is not with young people themselves, many of whom are concerned about and alienated by the sexualisation of marketing in so many areas, and by the pressure to conform to standards of physical beauty and sexual allure which they find unrealistic, undesirable and frequently offensive. Young women and men are profoundly affected by the absence of realistic, interesting and positive stories, images and messages about older people. When young people don’t see realistic representations of the rich, diverse and satisfying lives of older people, they cannot see the future possibilities and
choices open to them. In my conversations and correspondence with women of all ages and in a variety of contexts the invisibility of older women always rears its head. It’s not surprising that many fear age and are drawn into the myth of some sort of battle against it when they cannot see the pleasures, rewards and opportunities that ageing can offer.

If you aren’t aware of the double standard of ageing and feel that as a woman you haven’t experienced it I urge you to think again, and to look beyond yourself. Wake up to the bigger picture, study the patterns on the wallpaper and listen for the tone of the background music.