

From *20 over 40*

Preface

Art is long; life is short. But if you're a consumer of art, maybe a constant reader, you can't help wondering whether art is passing you by as you grow older. Or maybe it's simply not keeping up. Open any magazine that publishes fiction, and you'll usually find something that's supposed to sound trendy or edgy but too often winds up sounding immature. Is it aging adolescent angst? If you were born before Kennedy was shot, you might find yourself thinking, "Where are *my* experiences represented? Whom can *I* identify with?"

Grown-up readers have a right to feel largely omitted from popular culture, including literature. Blame our youth-obsessed society, though this problem isn't tied to the new millennium. The elders of ancient Athens complained about the same phenomenon. These days, most literary journals and popular magazines feature occasional oldster fiction (often written by twenty-something-year-old writers) and a lot of coming-of-age whining or bragging (depending on your perspective).

In 1986, an editor named Debra Spark came out with an anthology called *20 Under 30*, a collection of twenty short stories written by writers under the age of thirty. The book made a splash, as did some of the writers included. Then the *wunderkind* grew older like everyone else, trading youthful energy for experience, and raw instinct for judgment. Given this transition, it's not surprising that midlifers rule the country—if not always wisely—and most of the media.

Yet midlife is nearly invisible in our culture. The middle of human life, like the middle of almost anything, seems disappointing, anticlimactic. Middle-of-the-road views or mid-list books just don't seem electric enough. On the other hand, a middle-of-the-road philosophy will keep you alive a lot longer—just ask Aristotle. A lot of mid-list books avoid easy formulas, and many are better written than this week's Triumphant New Find. As for middlebrow culture, if people even recognize the term anymore, it dates to a time that publishers view with nostalgia, when the public still read. In fact, one of the problems with our society is that we've lost our respect for the middle.

As anyone over forty can attest, the middle of life can be quite complex. It means assuming authority over both the younger generation and the older set: kids and aging parents. Still, midlife fiction has gotten short shrift, if it's gotten any shrift at all. Of course, midlife fiction does have some flag-bearers in literary history. Sinclair Lewis's George F. Babbitt and John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom are two of the more salient examples in the twentieth century, along with John Cheever's disintegrating suburban families and Alice Munro's independent women. These characters have to contend with both noisy life and intimations of mortality, a poignant scenario. As Donald Justice puts it in his poem "Men at Forty":

Men at forty
Learn to close softly
the doors to rooms they will not be
Coming back to.

.....

Something is filling them, something

That is like the twilight sound
Of the crickets, immense,
Filling the woods at the foot of the slope
Behind their mortgaged houses.

Midlife fiction is often a narrative of crisis, though a restrained one because there are other people to be considered: family, friends, and co-workers, along with responsibilities and obligations—the very elements that may have started the crisis in the first place. People over forty are familiar with that territory, and they also inhabit a world built from decades of references and allusions that youth isn't privy to. In the preface to her essay collection, *Not under Forty*, published in 1936 but focusing on incidents from an earlier part of the century, Willa Cather said that she was writing for an older set, that the “world broke in two” at one point, and she needed an audience to appreciate the years from before the divide.

Fed up with the quest for the new (at least, when it means that “new” trumps “good”), we decided the time was ripe for an anthology by authors all over forty, those who sidestep in-your-face insta-fiction, who have the patience to develop their characters and plots, and who have the life experience to write real narrative rather than recounting How I Lost It at the Mall. We paged through stacks of magazines, literary journals and anthologies, and canvassed authors and editors we admired, to find an assortment of fiction that represents what it means to be middle-aged in America today. We read stories of midlife crises, adultery, ticking biological clocks, failing health, caring for aging parents, caring for all-age children, marriage, divorce, widowhood, new love, second marriages, career successes and failures, and occasionally something completely different that sang to us. The fiction here is written by middle-aged authors who know what they're talking about. These writers are no longer novices, yet they're not jaded or bored. They know their craft.

Because we believe that even middle-age can be “new,” most of the stories have appeared in print once before at most. A few of the authors are published here for the first time; others are quite well known. Three of our writers—Robin Hemley, David Leavitt, and Heidi Jon Schmidt—share the distinction of an appearance in the original *20 Under 30* anthology. For what it's worth, all the authors approached for this project freely owned up to their age. One older writer, sympathetic to the project but not, in the end, a contributor, snorted, “Hell, everyone I know is over forty.”

Obviously we can't represent everyone's experience of midlife, but we think we've compiled a fine array. We hope readers will recognize themselves and people they know in many of these stories. And perhaps with our collection we can redefine that old literary genre, the “coming of age” story, and make it new again by making it older.