

## Getting Noticed: Images of Older Women in Australian Popular Culture

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*Despite the fact that women over the age of 45 buy more books than any other demographic group they rarely feature as the central characters in Australian popular fiction. When they do appear it is usually in minor roles where they are characterised in negatively stereotypical ways. This paper argues that by ignoring older women as subjects and consumers, creators, producers and publishers of the products of popular culture fail to provide realistic and sympathetic representations of older women thus rendering them invisible to themselves and to others. It includes a case study of my own attempts to address this representational black hole through the writing and publishing of five novels in the genre of feminist realism, focused on the lives of women between the ages of 50 and 85. It records the success of these books in the commercial publishing market place where they are now all Australian bestsellers and two have reached the top ten fiction on the NielsenBookscan.*

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“Aging is much more a social judgment than a biological eventuality. Far more extensive than the hard sense of loss suffered during menopause [...] is the depression about aging, which may not be set off by any real event in a woman's life, but is a recurrent state of “possession” of her imagination, ordained by society – that is, ordained by the way this society limits how women feel free to imagine themselves.”

*Susan Sontag*

*The Double Standard of Aging*

In 1972, in her essay *The Double Standard of Aging*, the late Susan Sontag captured and articulated women's experience of ageing in a way that is as accurate today as it was almost four decades ago. Sontag dissected the 'conventions of sexual feeling, which presuppose a disparity between men and women that operates permanently to women's disadvantage'.<sup>1</sup> In the 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'.<sup>2</sup> Sontag and de Beauvoir both point to the complex link between ageism and sexism identifying the double disadvantage of ageing as experienced by women and on which many writers have since enlarged.

The imaginative freedom to enjoy ageing, to recognise its possibilities and rise to its challenges, depends to a considerable extent upon how we see our ageing represented in the world around us. Writing in the same year Barbara MacDonald identified ageism as an issue central to feminism and one which feminists have persistently ignored. MacDonald also articulated young women's fear of aging and the revulsion they feel and display towards old women's bodies; this combination of fear and revulsion is, she wrote, created by society: "[y]our power as a younger woman is measured by the distance you can keep between you and older women".<sup>3</sup> In the seventies it was reasonable to hope or even expect that second wave feminism might succeed in disabling this double standard and work towards a healthier attitude among the young, but the evidence proves otherwise. In their research published in 1999 Marilyn Poole and Susan Feldman reported:

As feminists we are aware that ageing has not been a central concern for feminism. The more exciting battles it seems have been those concerning women's control over their bodies, the fight for equal pay, child-care provisions and breaking (or attempting to break) the glass ceiling in management and the professions. Even as those people who worked for feminist goals in the 1970s themselves age and turn fifty-something, and more, few of them research and write about the ageing process and what it means for women.<sup>4</sup>



And in *Age Matters* published in 2006, Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin noted that feminists still “exclude old people both in their choice of research questions and in their theoretical approaches”.<sup>5</sup>

This paper argues that ageing for women has particularly negative implications in Australia where sexism flourishes, where women’s worth is increasingly linked to highly sexualised images of youth and beauty, and where the size of the market place determines the rules of local content in free-to-air television, and the funding of Australian films. Seduced by the assertiveness and disposable income of 17 to 25 year-olds, producers and publishers have ignored both the interests and the market potential of ageing and old women as consumers of the products of popular culture.

In the late 1990s, in my late fifties, I wanted to read about lives that resonated with my own. I searched the shelves of libraries and bookshops which were packed with women’s popular fiction only to discover that women over fifty featured only as peripheral characters, usually negative and stereotypical; bossy, interfering mothers-in-law, nosey neighbours, crotchety spinsters, pathetic empty nesters, or feeble and demented burdens, hampering the lives of the really important people; men, younger women and children. Where, I wondered, were the stories of older, ageing and old women as central characters with interesting lives? Now, more than a decade later, little has changed and this representational black hole remains surprising in view of the fact that in Australia women over the age of 45 buy more books than any other demographic group.<sup>6</sup> I have spent most of my adult life as a freelance writer and journalist developing ideas and projects that will fill the gaps I have identified in the offerings of newspapers, magazines and non-fiction publishing. As the century turned I considered how I might respond to this representational gap in popular fiction and started work on a novel. The book was published in 2004 and I have since produced four more novels focusing on the lives of older women. All five books are now Australian bestsellers and three have been published in France, Germany and the UK. Negotiations are underway for publication of the remaining titles in these countries, and sixth novel will be published early in 2011. A summary of my experience is included as a case study in this paper, and formed the basis of my PhD thesis *Visible Signs of Ageing: Representing Older Women in Australian Popular Fiction*, awarded in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

### *Popular Culture and Older Women*

Ageing, as Susan Sontag points out 'is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology' experienced by both men and women.<sup>8</sup> Once past the age of fifty women rapidly discover that they have become invisible. We can see each other well enough; can observe our peers living dynamic lives, running businesses and marathons, surfing the waves and the net, travelling the world, trading shares, returning to work or study, falling into and out of love, but we also see that we are caught in a cultural blind spot. While invisibility has its advantages the transition from being the object of the predatory gaze to simply not being seen comes as an unpleasant shock to many women. In fiction, dramas, soap opera and film older women are noticeably absent as central characters and consistently appear as peripheral characters based on old stereotypes. Ien Ang, in writing about popular television suggests that 'women are constantly confronted with the cultural task of finding out what it means to be women, of marking out the boundaries between the feminine and the unfeminine.'<sup>9</sup> Older women who engage in this cultural task will discover that popular television has abandoned them.

In a submission to the Australian Government on proposals for the Australian/US Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) Jane Roscoe of the Australian Film Television and Radio School argued that television is 'an important cultural site, where we learn to be Australian, where we see our lives reflected, where we challenge the status quo, where we think about who we are'.<sup>10</sup> And in speaking at the Perth International Arts Festival in February 2006, on the desires of audiences the former Director of Drama at the Nine Network, Posie Graham-Evans said: 'It's very human to want to see yourself on TV isn't it? We live in this world - aren't we interested in seeing ourselves? Aren't we interested in hearing our own voices?'<sup>11</sup> According to Thomas De Zengotita, seeing ourselves and our lives represented in the products of popular culture is a pervasive and fundamental form of flattery, '[t]he flattered self is a mediated self, and the alchemy of mediation the osmotic process through which reality and representation fuse, gets carried to our psyches by the irresistible flattery that goes with being incessantly addressed'.<sup>12</sup> Television is the representational source at the heart of most Australian homes; the place where one might



hope to enjoy the benefits of representational flattery, rather than facing a representational void.

Significant among the issues concerning the exercise of power in patriarchal society documented by Arber and Ginn in 1991, is the sexualized promotion of youthful appearance in women, and its impact on those who both do and do not aspire to achieve it.<sup>13</sup> Figures from the Australian College of Plastic Surgeons indicate that as between 1992 and 2005 cosmetic procedures of all types have increased by 770%. Botox injections alone rose by 400% between 2000 and 2005 and 72.6 per cent of all cosmetic procedures were undertaken by women between the ages of 21 and 50.<sup>14</sup> In an interview with *Vogue Australia* in September 2007, Dr Meredith Jones, a lecturer in media studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, discussing her forthcoming (2008) book *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* attributed some of the responsibility for this to 'makeover culture' and the repressive nature of the 'compulsory, continual urge towards self-renovation'. She also commented on the increasing trend towards very young role models suggesting that: '[i]n order to be a successful older person you have to seem more youthful, more useful, more energized than people half your age'.<sup>15</sup> Popular culture's distaste for older women now has women in their twenties and thirties resorting to cosmetic surgery to keep imagined signs of ageing at bay. And a woman in her fifties, sixties or seventies who embraces her age and rejects the proposition that she should even *want* to look 20 years younger is viewed at best with curiosity, at worst with distaste. Alongside the twin brands of youth and beauty stands another brand, described by the now 64-year-old Helen Reddy in her recent autobiography, as 'the rise of sleaze'. Having been part of the fight for women to be treated with dignity and respect, Reddy laments the gains since lost with the growth of 'raunch', where girls from pre-pubescence upwards are increasingly dressed in provocative clothing and practicing erotic moves.<sup>16</sup> The effect of this triple brand of youth, beauty and sleaze has been a hardening of the experience of invisibility for older women. Between 1996 and 1998 Australian researchers Marilyn Poole and Susan Feldman interviewed 32 women living in Melbourne,

as part of a project researching women, ageing, and their progressive marginalisation from public life. Although mass media were not a primary focus of that study, newspapers and television were so frequently mentioned that it was impossible to ignore their role in women's experience of ageing.<sup>17</sup>

The researchers found a distinct contradiction between the political culture of older women and 'the market principles that undergird the symbiotic relationship between media and policy making. This 'deviance' on the part of older women results in them being media marginalised.<sup>18</sup> Women in this study clearly articulated the view that the media silences the voices of older women and this, in turn, results in a feeling of being invisible.

#### *The Australian Experience*

Why is the double standard of ageing so acute in Australia? Part of the answer to that may lie in the limited local content in Australian free-to-air television and particularly in the paucity of Australian produced drama. Under the terms of the Australia-United States of America Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) local content quotas of 55% programming and 80% advertising on free-to-air television are the required standard. In the period from September 2002 – April 2003, 76 per cent of all new programs shown on Australian television were foreign, dominated by the USA which provided more than 65% of the of the audio-visual import trade. In contrast foreign imports to the USA amounted to a mere 4%, Britain and Germany 9% and France 33 per cent.<sup>19</sup> When older women viewers see women of their own age on television they are almost invariably the distorted stereotypical characters of American sit-coms and soaps, along with some, usually more realistic, British women whose lives and aspirations do not necessarily reflect the Australian experience. Cinema distribution is even more heavily weighted in favour of American film with 83% of the Australian box office over the same period going to the US, and only 6% to Australian film. Interestingly a significant part of the small percentage of the Australian box office captured by local product in 2005, was generated by *Wolf Creek* and *The Proposition*, two films depicting violent misogyny in graphic and



demeaning detail. But it would be foolish to assume that by raising local content requirements older women would suddenly appear on our screens. Producers and programmers show little interest in exploring the lives and experience of this demographic group. In contrast Australian film and television drama seems to have no difficulty in accommodating plenty of ageing Ocker blokes. Compare the frequent presence on Australian screens of John Waters, John Howard, Colin Friels, Terry Norris, Chris Haywood, Bill Hunter and the late Ray Barrett and Bud Tingwell, with the occasional sightings of Wendy Hughes, Rowena Wallace, Cornelia Frances, Julia Blake and Val Lehman. The lasting, and now iconic, representation of an older woman on Australian television is the late Ruth Cracknell's portrayal of Maggie Bear in *Mother and Son*; a character that combined all the negative stereotypical imagery associated with older women, being not only mad but also sad and bad. As Baba Copper writes, "The old woman finds herself captured by stereotypes which drain her initiative and shatter her self-respect".<sup>20</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that Generation Y, so consistently and closely represented through hours of Australian content devoted to reality television shows such as *Big Brother*, *Australian Idol*, *The X Factor* and soap operas such as *Home and Away*, become, as de Zengotita suggests, increasingly narcissistic. Naturally they question why their progress to influential positions in business and government seems blocked by the presence of those irritating old baby-boomers and, worse still, the war babies. I would argue, however, that the difference lies in the sense of entitlement and the expectation of instant gratification that are the result of being the constant target of representational flattery and all that it implies. It is cool to be young and hot.

In *The Change* (1991) Germaine Greer suggested that 'the climacteric marks the end of apologizing. The chrysalis of conditioning has once and for all to break, and the female woman finally to emerge'.<sup>21</sup> But Australian women will be hard pressed to find realistic representations of the emerging older woman at this significant milestone. Even the lucrative women's magazine industry has failed to respond to the challenge of addressing older women as part of the mainstream readership, and still resorts to the ghettos of fashion and beauty 'specials' for 'our older readers'.

Popular culture plays an important role in the regulation of gender, generating cultural expectations which are often detrimental to women. The characteristic Australian discourse of mateship and masculine solidarity, set predominantly against the background of the bush, the sports field, the pub, and the smoko room, has always excluded women positioning them at the margins. So it is with representation, but the gap between representation and reality is a wide one. In its report *Australian Social Trends 2006* the Australian Bureau of Statistics documents a dramatic increase in the education levels, employment rates and incomes of older women and compares current figures with those of people in the same age group in 1984. While men's participation in the workforce reduced from 83 to 80% in that period, the number of working women rose from 37 to 62% per cent and the number of men in their fifties claiming welfare as their main source of support has risen, while women's has fallen.<sup>22</sup> While men are quitting the workforce in their fifties and sixties women are returning to pick up the careers put on hold while they raised their children. Many of them have just made it to levels of influence and will not be making an early exit to accommodate the aspirations of Generation Y. Those who have retired are the first generation to have accumulated occupational pensions or superannuation in significant numbers.

My own experience as an author of popular fiction suggests that fifty-something women now constitute a substantial and growing market sector who want and expect their lives and dilemmas to be represented in accessible forms in the mainstream media. Sadly most media outlets have not yet recognised this demand or its commercial potential.

### *Representing older women in fiction: a case study.*

In 2001 I began to address the absence of Australian novels for and about older women in the same way I had approached my previous freelance work; I identified a gap and attempted to fill it. My own circle of female friends, acquaintances and colleagues is made up of strong minded, intelligent women living interesting lives. As they deal with the pressures of caring for aged parents, the life crises of adult children and caring for



grandchildren, many are also making radical changes; returning to study, starting new businesses, travelling and taking up new interests and activities. They worry about their financial and emotional futures, end old relationships or re-negotiate their terms, and sometime move into new ones. These women bear little resemblance to the stereotypical images of popular culture. And while some face the prospect of ageing with anxiety, confusion and misgivings many more also see it as a time of change and opportunity, the chance of a different life and time to devote to pursue their own agendas. In considering how I might create fictional characters and narratives about older women I identified some essential but fairly predictable elements.

- optimism
- mid-life as an opportunity for change
- women's friendship
- characters in paid employment and in traditional domestic roles
- relationships as wives, mothers, grandmothers, single people and sexual partners
- a diverse and realistic range of issues facing women as they age

I also wanted to portray same sex partnerships as mainstream and within families; this, I felt, as with older women, was absent from mass market fiction and usually ghettoised as 'gay fiction'. Finally, as a woman who, in the early seventies, came to feminism through the feminist consciousness-raising novels of the seventies, I wanted to infuse my work with the themes and values of second wave feminism; independence, self-realisation, and an awareness of the nature of sexual politics in private and public life, and social consciousness. I also knew that I needed to avoid the sometimes alienating polemic of some of those seventies novels.

As I contemplated character development and story lines I was reminded of a practice recorded by anthropologists and known as 'the crone's retreat' where, in some tribal communities, women leave the tribe at menopause returning a year later as elders of the tribe. The ritual marks the end of child-bearing and the beginning of new stage of life. For me this raised a question: what would happen if western women introduced this

ritual into their own lives and took time out from the tribe? I set out to explore this by creating four women friends each strong and accomplished, each experiencing mid-life restlessness and reaching for something beyond her own immediate circumstances. I then deployed them on separate journeys to different parts of the world, where their friendship sustained them over time and distance. I called the book *The Crone's Retreat*. I had previously negotiated the publication of eleven non-fiction books with various publishers but was aware that publishing fiction is a very different proposition so I appointed an agent to represent me. The agent was enthusiastic about *The Crone's Retreat* but was shocked by the barrier of disinterest she encountered on her initial attempts to pitch the synopsis and sample chapters to publishers. Three major Australian publishers of mass market women's fiction were not interested in reading a manuscript featuring older women as the central characters. The first major publisher to read the manuscript said that she had enjoyed it, but had major concerns about trying to market a book about the lives of older women. She also asked the question: 'Is this fiction or polemic because it can't be both. Essentially this is a character driven novel and could work as such, however it is currently too strongly didactic and driven by the author's feminist politics'. Obviously I had not quite shaken off the legacy of seventies consciousness-raising and this constructively critical comment illuminated the problems I needed to fix. Early in 2003 Cate Paterson, then fiction publisher with Pan Macmillan Australia, the first publisher to whom the revised manuscript was submitted, accepted *The Crones Retreat* and I was offered a two book contract. Paterson, now the Director of Publishing at Pan Macmillan, has a reputation in the industry for successfully identifying new talent and new trends. Fortunately she identified me and *The Crone's Retreat*. She also identified a problem with the title. Only a very small number of potential readers, she suggested, would understand the feminist reclaiming of language that made 'crones' interesting and positive. If book buyers were familiar with the word at all it would almost certainly have negative connotations for them. The title was consequently changed to *Gang of Four*, a title based on the way the four women referred to their friendships.

*Gang of Four* was published as a trade paperback in March 2004.<sup>23</sup> The publisher originally planned for an initial print run of 5000, optimistic for first novel, but this was raised to 8000 based on pre-publication orders from booksellers. The following year the



book was published in the smaller, cheaper B Format with an initial print run of 10 000 and was then reprinted twice that year, twice in 2006 and once in 2007, twice in 2008 and once in 2010. Four more novels *Food, Sex and Money*, *Belly Dancing for Beginners*, *Trip of a Lifetime*, and *Bad Behaviour* have followed a similar reprint pattern and all are now Australian bestsellers with the last two reaching NielsenBookscan's Top Ten fiction.<sup>24</sup> UK rights for *Gang of Four* were sold to Transita for publication in 2005, to Presses de la Cite in France for 2007 and Droemer in Germany for 2008. Translation rights for *Food, Sex and Money* were sold to Presses de la Cite in 2008 and published in 2009. All five novels are now available in Australia as talking books. My sixth novel will be published in April 2011.

Predictions about media disinterest and the need to be prepared for a 'slow burn' in terms of profile and sales although correct to some extent were not as severe as they might have been. There were some early and very positive reviews; others, while also positive, classified the book as 'hen-lit' or 'matron-lit' thus relating it to 'chick-lit'. Reviewers using this term demonstrated either a lack of understanding of the central theme of chick-lit which is the realisation of self by finding the right man, or their failure to notice that resolution for my characters is found through a range of very different means. The thematic core of the novels is of mid-life as an opportunity for change and self-realisation, and romance is only one, minor element of the life issues they explore. The novels suffer, as does much popular fiction in Australia, from Australian reviewers who appear not to understand popular fiction as a genre, and consequently review it as though it ought to be literary fiction. The classification 'women's fiction' is one that I wear with pride, but also with some frustration at the dismissive attitude of reviewers who do not actually read this genre. This, I believe, says more about the attitudes of reviewers of both sexes, to fiction which attempts to portray the reality of women's lives, their values and their aspirations. But what *Gang of Four* and the subsequent novels have lacked in media coverage has been made up for by support from book sellers and word of mouth from readers. Book sellers have strongly supported these titles through confident and optimistic ordering, prominent in-store displays, book signings and special offers for book clubs. Pan Macmillan has attempted to position the books as a crossover, straddling the top of mass-market fiction and literary fiction. Hence the covers are high quality

photographic abstract images as opposed to the stylized line drawings and pastels that characterise 'chick-lit' covers. This positioning was described to me as aiming for 'the Australian Joanna Trollope', in a similar way to that in which British novelist Patrick Gale has been positioned by his UK publishers as 'the gay Joanna Trollope'. Trollope's novels feature a wide range of central characters in different age groups but to date she has not ventured in to the world of ageing women for her central characters.

In October 2006 *Belly Dancing for Beginners* was selected by the Australian Women's Weekly (AWW) Great Read, as were *Trip of a Lifetime* in 2008 and *Bad Behavior* in 2009. And all five novels are listed in the AWW's list of one hundred favourite books. In 2006 *Food, Sex and Money* was selected for the Dymocks Book Club, and in 2007 for the Books Alive program funded by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, to promote reading in Australia and to support Australian Writers. The most satisfying element of this experiment in representational flattery, however, has been the consistently positive feedback from readers. In emails, letters and face to face women speak of their pleasure as well as a sense of relief in discovering representations of their own lives in contemporary fiction. The sense of being previously invisible is often expressed as a sense of validation that comes from seeing aspects of one's own life portrayed in a popular cultural form. Many women comment on no longer feeling invisible, and comments such as 'thank goodness someone is writing about women our age, we might as well be invisible' and 'I feel you are looking through the windows of my life' are typical of the response. I receive on average ten emails a week from readers.

### ***Conclusion***

Since the turn of the century there has been a slight increase in the media's interest in older people driven, presumably, by the fact that the first of the baby-boomers passed through their late fifties and into their early sixties during this period. This generation, accustomed to speaking out and demanding attention, may be paving the way towards broader forms of representation for older people. There are more newspaper-style publications openly targeted at seniors, although in many cases they are either owned or part-owned either by financial institutions or companies in the business of retirement housing, and are produced as promotional tools for their products and services. There has



also been a growth in information websites for older people, generally and some specifically devoted to ageing women. There is, little or no change in the representations of older women in mainstream women's magazines, and Australian popular television drama and film still ignore this significant sector of the audience. During a publicity tour for *Bad Behaviour* in 2009 a Melbourne radio interviewer took issue with my claim that ageing women are underrepresented in popular television. He was able to cite one example, he said, Rebecca Gibney's character in *Packed to the Rafters*, was an 'old woman as a central character'. Gibney was 45 years old at the time and her character was pregnant. It's interesting that this observation of Gibney and her character as 'old', came from a man in his late sixties and that one example of an 'old' woman seemed to him to represent evidence of balance. I suspect he is not alone in his misconceptions.

Early in 2010 I was approached about the screen rights for *Belly Dancing for Beginners* by two producers who recognised its potential as a television series. While I was delighted at the prospect I made it clear that I would only be interested if the ages of the central characters – three women aged, 54, 58 and 60 – remained unchanged. The producers agreed and disappeared to write a formal proposal. When the proposal arrived the ages of all the characters had been dropped and the youngest was now in her early forties. The proposal also included a requirement to further develop the roles of younger characters to give them equal status and profile with the older characters. So the book which achieved great success as a story about aged women began to look like something entirely different as a television series. This change at such an early stage in negotiations convinced me that once the producers pitched to the networks the ages would be forced lower still, and I declined the offer.

My own experience as a writer of mass-market fiction is proving rewarding both financially and in terms of feedback from readers in the target audience, as well as from middle-aged men and much younger women. Each new title makes it easier to attract publicity for the next and produces a spike in sales of the previous ones. Book clubs are a particularly strong market for these novels and have proved willing to pay the higher price of the trade paperback rather than waiting up to 12 months for the release of the smaller, cheaper B format. A number of booksellers around the country have expressed their surprise at this as clubs buying in bulk are usually prepared to wait for the cheaper

edition. Feedback from booksellers suggests that book clubs' willingness to buy at the higher price is due to the fact that most book club members are women over the age of 40 and these are the only titles featuring mature Australian women in realistic situations grappling with issues of mid-life and ageing.

It is surprising that to date no other Australian author has attempted to specifically address this market and no other publisher has attempted to establish an over-50's list. This is a stark contrast to the UK where Penguin, Piatkus and Harper Collins are actively seeking titles in this range, and the USA where many major publishers are establishing lists specifically targeted at women over 50. This in itself leads me to question whether one of the problems may be a lack of creative products – novels, television and film scripts - being pitched to publishers and producers. Perhaps the cultural attitude to women and ageing in Australia is not only about a perceived disinterest on the part of print, TV and film executives, but about writers who recognise that there is an uphill struggle involved in placing creative products in this genre. Fiction's influence on the imagination, its ability to show rather than tell, can create attitudinal change more effectively than other attempts at public awareness. Perhaps what is needed is for older women to make their voices heard as consumers of cultural products.

An additional question is whether feminist theory can rise to the challenge. In *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism*, Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich pointed out that feminism had ignored the issues of ageing for older women.<sup>25</sup> In recent years this has been addressed to some extent in terms of the attention paid to older women's health, retirement alternatives and care arrangements, and by the emergence of older women in positions of power and influence in the media, business and government. It has not, however, changed in terms of representation in popular media, television, film and fiction, and it is representation that has the power to influence self-esteem and self-empowerment. Women are returning to the workforce with the benefit of high levels of education, more disposable income and greater expectations than their mothers and grandmothers, it is to be hoped that these trends may lead to the erosion of the double standard of ageing and the birth of an age of representational flattery in which older women have a significant share.



## NOTES

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