

WOMEN OF A CERTAIN AGE

JODIE MOFFAT, MARIA SCODA AND SUSAN LAURA SULLIVAN (EDS)

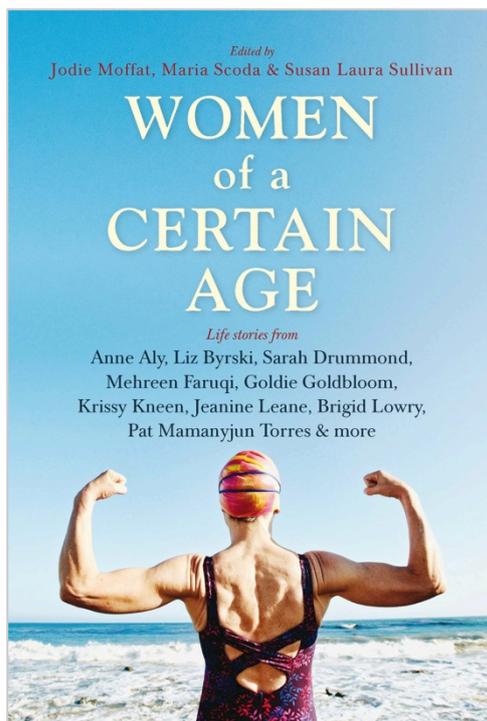
ABOUT THE BOOK

Certain women of a certain age definitely have their act together. But certain women of a certain age are not visible at all. As time passes, women face this contradiction: they are older, wiser, they are more certain of who they are, and of where they want to go – and yet sometimes still, they are not seen, and their voices are not heard. Fifteen voices from this space of celebration, affirmation, identity and survival tell life stories about what it is like to be a woman on the other side of 40, 50, 60 and 70.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Jodie Moffat commenced her law degree the year she turned 40 and graduated as a Juris Doctor at the age of 44. Jodie spent five years as a commercial litigator in the Perth CBD before taking up practice as a solicitor with a community legal service in 2017. She ran as the Greens Party lower house candidate in her hometown of Mandurah in the 2017 state election.

Maria Scoda is an experienced clinical and consultant psychologist working in private practice in the Sydney CBD. She holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from ANU, as well as a BA, with honours in psychology. In addition to her clinical work, Maria assists business executives to understand and manage complex relationship dynamics for better interpersonal relationships in the workplace and at home.



Susan Laura Sullivan writes fiction, essays and poetry. Her work has been published in *Westerly: New Creative*, *Plumwood Journal*, and *The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*, among others. She was shortlisted for the T.A.G. Hungerford Award in 2012, and currently lives in Japan, where she teaches English.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think it means to be a 'woman of a certain age'? What meanings does this anthology give to the phrase?
2. In her introduction, Jodie Moffat describes the *pall of invisibility* that comes with age. What *assumptions and presumptions that age deposits* on women have you personally encountered?
3. Is the acquisition of 'certainty' something that the women in this anthology experience? What are the different ways in which they move from a lesser degree of certainty towards a greater one?
4. Are there benefits in being 'certain'?
5. Do the contributors experience a gap between the way they see themselves and the way others perceive them as they age?

6. Where and what kinds of portrayals of ageing are apparent in our society? Do you think it is possible to identify, at least broadly, an attitude towards ageing in Australia? Or is this dependent on context?
7. Each piece in this collection is different in terms of voice, style and theme. Which one did you find to be the most moving or thought-provoking? Which did you find to be the most relatable?
8. In what ways does cultural heritage impact on identity in these stories?
9. What commonalities exist between these women because of their age, and despite cultural background and difference?
10. For the women in this volume, to what degree does ageing help to define the self? To what degree does it create opportunities for growth?
11. How do the various pieces in this anthology touch on the different experiences of ageing between men and women?
12. What would you expect to find within an anthology called *Men of a Certain Age*? In what ways do you think it might differ from this volume?
13. A number of women in the anthology talk about how others have defined them by their relationships with men, or how they have been pitted against men in their careers. How much do you think attitudes like this persist in Australia?
14. One of the recurring themes in the anthology is parental expectation – of feeling supported by or, conversely, of needing to be free from them. How much impact do you think generational change has had on women's lives over the last fifty years?
15. What are the most important insights about ageing that you took away from this anthology?

INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITORS

Was there a particular moment that inspired you to put together an anthology of writing by older women writers?

At a time when each of us was coming to terms with what it means to be middle-aged, Maria was growing increasingly disheartened by society's objectification and sexualisation of women and its impact on their mental health.

She felt it was important for older women to provide all women with an alternative discourse to that generally portrayed in the popular media. She wanted to highlight the substantive contributions older women continue to make to all realms of society, in part to counteract the concept that a woman's worth lies only in her youth and beauty.

At the same time, Jodie was experiencing firsthand the diminution of her professional worth in the corporate workplace, an occurrence she discovered was depressingly common for women of age. Maria approached Jodie with the idea of writing a book highlighting the stories of older women, stories which were not being told. In turn, Jodie contacted Sue. Sue had wanted to collate a similar kind of work for some time, and willingly stepped aboard.

How did you go about selecting the contributors?

We have many friends and colleagues in this loosely defined age group. Sue contacted some writers of her acquaintance who agreed to contribute to the proposed anthology. They suggested other writers, including Liz

Byrski, who has a long-standing interest in the topic. Drawing from a number of articles concerning the wider role of older women in Australian society, Sue approached writers such as Krissy Kneen and Pam Menzies. Krissy also suggested black&write, who in turn put us in touch with Aboriginal elder Jeanine Leane. We were keen to include the experiences of more Aboriginal women, and Fremantle Press recommended Pam Mamanyjun Torres. Some contributors were friends or family, such as Charlotte Roseby, Tracey Arnich and Jenny Smithson – each with unique stories of their own. Others were also welcome suggestions from the publisher. We sought out voices and experiences we thought representative of many cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Nearly all responses were enthusiastic, even from the women we ‘cold-called’. This willingness to share stories reinforced the importance of telling them. In fact, we had to knock back some outstanding narratives and storytellers simply because we couldn’t fit them all in.

Did you give the authors a theme or a question as a starting point?

Yes, we wanted to look at the mythological archetypes of the **Maiden, Mother and Crone**, and asked our writers their reactions and responses to them. We further asked writers to apply these archetypes to their real world experience, using the flexible divisions of **Home/Homeland, Work, and Relationships/Identity**.

Contributions were fairly evenly divided among these three sections. We were pleasantly surprised by the diversity of narratives.

What surprises or confirmations did you experience in reading the contributions?

We received very positive responses from both professional and lay writers to our proposed theme and the manner in which we shaped our call for submissions. We feel this enthusiasm encapsulates the importance of the anthology. This confirmed our view that older women are strong and certain in themselves, or definitely working toward being so, no matter how diverse their backgrounds and life experiences may be.

Jodie found that diminution of women of our age was a recurring theme among the stories, whether casually in everyday life or more entrenched in a professional work situation, or in the domestic imbalance of power between men and women, adults and children.

Education was often mentioned. Whether it was or wasn’t readily available to our writers due to their sex or circumstances was of great importance. Some contributors had parents who encouraged them in gaining an education in spite of societal norms. Others missed out, had family who missed out, or had to fight against the same norms for their right to an education. Within the anthology, learning is presented as a tool of power and communication and, most of all, as necessary for advancement.

The need for movement or travel featured in a number of works. Cases of harassment and abuse were also threaded throughout the stories, as were accompanying themes of silence around said abuse in the face of societal and behavioural pressure. Survival is a recurring theme, as is triumph.

We were humbled by the beautiful and life-affirming stories our authors wove in the face of trying circumstances; some being part of everyday interaction, some potentially life-destroying. Many stories were awe-inspiring, and thus surprising. The anthology’s authors write of rising above low expectation, be it biologically or societally mandated, again and again.

Why do you think it is important at this point in history to promote older women’s voices?

There are many benefits to being an older female in our current times. For one thing, our number is increasing, so in theory our voices should be more prominent. We have learnt many ways of surviving, adapting, fighting, controlling and sidestepping in the name of maintaining our identities and recognising our worth, and in making our voices heard. We need to do this because women of all ages are still

underrepresented in decision-making bodies, such as politics, or in the governing strata of corporations and major institutions.

Without representation, we have no voice, despite our numbers. If we do not fight to have a voice, we are complicit in erasing ourselves from active public participation. The odds are already stacked against being heard, so we need to shout louder. If human rights encapsulate all, then we need to make sure we protect ours.

The fight to be heard is important because society still needs to change the way it sees women, and celebrates and promotes them. If women want validation for their contributions beyond a stereotypical patriarchal definition, then it's important that women validate themselves first. This book is a step toward women being seen as a viable and important part of a wider cultural norm, one that includes both sexes. It is a step toward presenting ourselves as whole at every age, and rejecting limitations of only being valued as younger ephemeral objects of desire.

The capacity of our female bodies to procreate has often been used to define us. It was not that long ago that women were equated with property and their rights were few. That situation still exists in parts of the world. The recent rise of groups wishing once again to govern women's bodies, and thereby defining women by their bodies, should serve as a warning that if our voices are taken from us, the consequences for us are dire. Therefore, we speak.

But women have always been women. Nothing has changed of our elemental selves but for the ageing of our bodies and the physiological adjustments that this necessarily entails. Older women's voices have come to be through lived experience and times of great physical change. Acknowledging those voices is important because it informs new generations that it is perfectly acceptable to remain yourself despite the inevitable biological shift, and to keep on speaking out and expressing yourself, despite this change and the sociological changes that accompany it.

What would you like readers to take away from their experience of reading *Women of a Certain Age*?

You have a wealth of experience and knowledge that come from the lives you've lived and are living. These are your stories. Please share your own experiences with your family, friends and colleagues. Always be proud of all your achievements, including having made it this far. There is so much further to go. Keep going.



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