



CULTURE

Screw Wisdom

In a bold new memoir of female middle age, libido obliterates the usual clichés. LAURA KIPNIS JUNE 2017 ISSUE



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The Bitch Is Back: Older, Wiser, and (Getting) Happier BY CATHI HANAUER, EDITOR WILLIAM MORROW

Love and Trouble: A Midlife Reckoning BY CLAIRE DEDERER KNOPF

MIDDLE AGE LOVES its platitudes, chiefly the ones about hard-won wisdom and the many things that once seemed important but no longer do as you face down impending mortality and irrelevance. And don't forget the ones about small things that are far more important than you'd realized. Among the many indignities of aging is the irresistible temptation to reach for some menu of bromides and convey to the world those invaluable lessons about living.

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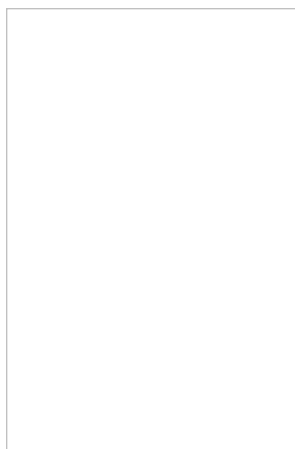
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This isn't exactly scintillating stuff, and for women writers the ground is especially well trod. The demise of your looks and sexual attractiveness (colloquially known as fuckability) a few decades before men suffer the same fate—sorry, we've heard it, and heard it some more. The condition is insulting enough minus the compensatory nuggets of sagacity about how not fretting over your looks is freeing, or about how getting laid is still fun just not that important, and guess what: Men aren't so crucial after all! Loving yourself is what really matters.

Then there's the mandatory wryness. God save me from wryness.

Admittedly I'm not the best audience for fare like this—I'm the kind of person who, upon encountering any version of the statement "I'm the kind of person who ...," instantly disbelieves whatever comes next. The little Freud in me hears dissimulation, overassertion, someone trying to strong-arm the world into seeing her in a flattering way, like an aging film star through a Vaseline lens. Over dinner recently, an acquaintance (single and approaching a certain age) returned repeatedly to the theme of not wanting to be coupled. She wondered why people kept insisting she get coupled, and proleptically bemoaned how much narrower her life would be were she coupled. What I heard was someone desperate to couple.



WILLIAM MORROW

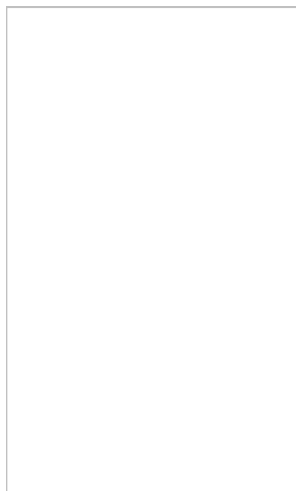
Having confessed to what an enormous bitch I am, I can only assume that the reason I wasn't invited to contribute to the latest volume in the *Bitch* franchise, *The Bitch Is Back*—successor to 2002's best-selling *The Bitch in the House*—is my obvious failure to fit the profile prescribed by the subtitle, *Older, Wiser, and (Getting) Happier*. While I'm definitely older, I've learned nothing, and given the state of things, I feel pretty sure the only people getting happier are the ones who are heavily medicated.

The problem is not that I'm uninterested in reading about how others are navigating such midlife quandaries as whether to get Botox, or how to spice up sex after 30 years with the same boring husband when you were never that into sex in the first place. I'm as fascinated as anyone by the sex lives of my peers, their medical conditions and romantic travails, their weight gains and other life exigencies. And don't get me started on that eternal heterosexual-female quandary: Men—monsters or just perpetually disappointing?

But the midlife progress report is a deadly genre for a writer; that way lie banality and drab prose, or so I found myself ungenerously reflecting while perusing *The Bitch Is Back*. There's plenty to identify with, and an admirably diverse selection of life experiences on offer (arranged marriage, transgender marital dilemmas, cancer, loss of a child). Many of the writers have proved their literary bona fides elsewhere. Still, I could have done with fewer updates from contributors to the first *Bitch* volume, who catch us up on the past 15 years as though we're all at a high-school reunion. I noticed I was doing more skimming than pondering. Having the editor, Cathi Hanauer, frame certain essays with arm-twisting commands didn't help: "Read her story. Get inspired. Make the world better. Live your life, Live your life, Live your life."

I'D BEEN TRYING to figure out why this well-meaning volume left me feeling so peevish when I read Claire Dederer's latest memoir, *Love and Trouble*, whose subtitle, *A Midlife Reckoning*, would seem to put it dangerously close to *The Bitch Is Back*'s wheelhouse. Except her subtitle could as easily have been *Getting Stupid Every Day*. I immediately cheered up—I believe I've found in Dederer a peevishly kindred spirit.

I was not expecting this, since I recalled her previous book, *Poser: My Life in Twenty-Three Yoga Poses*, as rather weighed down by the figuring-things-out imperative, despite some irreverence at the expense of a "generation of hollow-eyed women, chasing virtue." That's how Dederer anointed her circle of North Seattle enlightenment-seeking mothers, who were busy ensuring their worthiness by pureeing their own organic baby food. An obsession with moral cleanliness, she shrewdly observed, fueled their preservative-free lifestyles and yoga practices. Not that she was entirely immune from the condition herself. But as a participant-observer mocking the native rituals while sipping the delicious local nectar, she made sure to toss in a fair amount of eye-rolling for the benefit of yoga haters and purity shunners like myself.



KNOPF

Love and Trouble is a different sort of animal. Though Dederer continues to perambulate the virtue theme, this time she does so as an apostate. The effect is to unleash a dangerously rambunctious writer on the world. The quippiness of *Poser* has deepened into something stylistically far more distinctive. Sentence for sentence, a more pleasure-yielding midlife memoir is hard to think of. To hedge the accolade slightly, I suspect some portion of the pleasure was narcissistic on my part: I kept recognizing myself in these pages, especially in their evocations of middle-aged befuddlements, and of the surprisingly long half-life of adolescent inchoateness.

Still burdened by an overinsistent libido despite her crumbling body ("There's really no dignified way to go to seed as a woman"), Dederer is, by her account, a perpetual

hot mess. But so are a lot of the middle-aged women she knows. She and her girlfriends meet for crying sessions, sobbing self-indulgent buckets of tears for no particular reason. She kisses men (and the occasional woman) who aren't her husband, and fantasizes about men who aren't her husband while in bed with her husband. All the sins and impurities that yoga was meant to cleanse apparently flourished instead. She lusts after a short-story writer encountered at a literary conference; an email flirtation ensues, eventually discovered by her husband. (In *Poser*, she and her husband virtuously shared an email account and a laptop, the Information Age version of a marital chastity belt.)

This is all quite a treat: a 50ish lady memoirist with no epiphanies in sight. Nothing's figured out and nothing's getting better, except Dederer's prose, which has acquired a wonderful sordidness.

It's not really what memoirists say about themselves that tells you who they are; it's the structure of their metaphors. Metaphors are a way of smuggling in backdoor meanings, and Dederer embeds them in her sentences like shrapnel. An old couch her toddlers played on is "as stained with shit and vomit and blood as the backseat of Travis Bickle's taxi." "The sun [in Utah] was unforgiving, like a Mormon rapist." She roots around in old letters "like a truffle pig." Her own previous memoir, its feminine themes wrapped in yoga (a quintessential "lady book," she acknowledges), reminds her of a scallop wrapped in bacon.

Rather than telling you what to think of her, she's immersing you in an idiosyncratic consciousness. For Dederer, even when it's sunny, things are filthy, swinish, thrillingly violent; sedate middle-class lives are a little sickening. Femininity, too, conceals a wealth of dirtiness beneath the pretty frills. Dederer is suitably ambivalent about being slotted into what she regards as the obviously lesser gender, but instead of trafficking in uplifting slogans, she savors the secret squalor. She finds creative work-arounds.

One such work-around was to become a world-class slut—I use the word with utter respect—as an adolescent and into her 20s. She's often quite funny and pretty unrepentant about fucking her way through much of the Western world. Sometimes the sex was "accidental"—that is, she was passed out. Not all of this activity was particularly pleasurable or happy-making, but for Dederer the allure of sex lay in its mystical power to transport her out of herself while simultaneously grounding her. And she valued the sense of power it gave her over men. That adolescent "clueless bitch" is still breathing hard down her neck, well into middle age.

DEDERER REFUSES TO pathologize or regret any of this. Even more admirable is the way the restless sexual seeking of yesteryear is echoed in the memoir's restlessness of form. *Love and Trouble* is like the town pump of memoir idioms. We get first person, second person, lists, annotated maps, how-to manuals, a "case study" of a teenage slut replete with graphs, and two letters. Both are addressed

to Roman Polanski, whose violations of a 13-year-old girl occasion Dederer's reflections on the sexual encroachments that punctuated her own rather feral teenage years. She also spins out a rape scenario without betraying whether it's fantasy or reality. I was reminded of the formal promiscuity of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*—there, too, the real story is in the ruptures.

The memoir's constantly shifting vantage points allow Dederer to keep returning to the same themes without wearing them out. What knits things together is, of course, sex—the stranger-fucking of adolescence, the been-there-done-that of married sex, the illicit flirtations, all the men who were and are a delivery system for sex, sex as a delivery system for an elusive sense of self. And the power of sex to unravel everything you thought you knew about yourself. And the power of fucking men to rectify the injustice of not having been born a man in a world that favors them.

Dederer is startlingly frank here, and women aren't always the greatest fans of frankness on these matters. She's equally candid about masochistic yearnings to be passive, dominated, victimized, fantasy-raped—and also sexually adored in a way that will (hopefully) solve everything. Even the tedium of marital sex—a frequent theme in *The Bitch Is Back*, too—becomes, in Dederer's treatment, surprising stuff. “Marriage is essentially plotless, but a dick has a plot,” she writes, offering up a set of instructions on how to fuck your husband of 15 years. A lot of brio is required to put it quite so pithily.

Of course when it comes to plot, Dederer is on home turf: Memoirists are as involved in the mechanics of plotting as any novelist. Never mind what occurred in your life; it's the ordering of events into a story that matters. In lesser hands, that means retrospectively positing causes and effects: This happened because that happened first, like on a billiard table—this ball hit that ball, which went in that hole. We all do it, aided by therapists and well-meaning friends. My mother didn't love me, so I found a man who wouldn't love me either. My mother didn't love me, so I found a woman who would. Our stories vary, but we subject them to familiar geometries. We make the facts jump through familiar hoops, also known as tropes: traumas, dark moments, reversals, epiphanies. But causality is the mother of all clichés, and the clichés don't fall far from the midlife-reckoning industry.

After reading early chapters of the memoir, Dederer's agent wanted to know: Why all the sluttiness? So Dederer wonders whether she should frame a disturbing episode that took place when she was 13—a grown-up friend of her mother's hippie boyfriend climbed into her sleeping bag and frottaged her one night, though didn't go further—as the source of her later bed-hopping and adult incoherence. Maybe the “sleeping-bag thingy” is the key to everything?

Life is lived forward, but can only be understood backward, said Kierkegaard. To put it another way, midlife reckonings revise the events of the past to make the present

comprehensible. But Dederer, refreshingly unwilling to impersonate a billiard ball, dismisses as “a bullshit narrative construct” the idea that a single event can change your life. She even ups the ante: Maybe that teenage sexual encroachment was, at some level, desired? There’s no way to know, but reversing the causal arrows lets her do some hard thinking about the erotics of violation stories and how much pleasure they’ve yielded, and still do, in her psyche. Indeed, female masochism is a gift that keeps giving in Dederer’s hands. She gets as much mileage from it as Philip Roth did from Newark.

Some of us prefer to cast ourselves as the victim of events, using stories of injuries and affronts to dodge tougher issues, including the deep, intransigent weirdness of simply being female. At some point I realized (epiphany!) that the promiscuities of *Love and Trouble* were rather heroic: a case of stomping down the temptation to tell an easier story and look pretty in the world’s eyes. Would that we all managed to stomp down such temptations.

End of life lesson.

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