

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME: 32 Women on Life After 50

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Atria

Nonfiction Anthology

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I let it slip to a same-aged friend last week that I was really “enjoying” a new book of collected memories and reflections by women --- women like us, more than half-a-century old. Women whose cumulative life experiences are by now at least half-and-half joy and sorrow, but more likely burdened with an excess of the latter, defined and resisted in myriad ways.

But the words had barely left my mouth when I realized I probably hadn't chosen them very well. How, she retorted a nanosecond later, could I possibly “enjoy” that much immersion in the harsh realities of life's shorter half? And did I *need* to know the post-50 trials and tribulations of individuals who have made a far more enduring mark on our generation's culture than the other 99.9 percent of us?

The truth is, I *did* immensely “enjoy” IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME, and I *did* need to know the remarkable depth and range of thoughts, feelings, fears, risks, joys, wounds and failures that editors Emily W. Upham and Linda Gravenson invited their 32 literary guests to share.

And indeed they are all guests, gathered at a richly surreal and logistically improbable party --- some of the brightest minds and fullest hearts of the English-speaking female world, exquisitely chosen and sympathetically welcomed.

Some of their names are immediately resonant --- like renowned actresses Claire Bloom and Jane Alexander; women's activist and cultural icon Erica Jong; medical pioneer Dr. Christine Northrup; and Marta Casals Istomin, widowed by not one but two legendary musicians. Yet they are no greater than first-among-equals alongside more than two-dozen imaginative and passionate sisters from the arts, academia, business, the media, and a robust variety of interwoven vocations, combined as only women like these can do it.

Each fills her unregimented cluster of pages with distinctive colors of mature personality and temperament, sometimes guided by unobtrusive interview questions, but more often holding forth in a cascade of honest yet experienced wisdom, revealing strength and vulnerability as constant companions. Enfolded in that wisdom, even when reluctantly borne, are the permutations and scars of inevitable loss, the ravages of illness and injury (their own and others'), the deaths of loved ones, the erosion of personal resources, the relinquishing of cherished skills, the impending curtailment of freedom, and trading away the familiar for the unknown.

In nearly every case, their impressions of lives honed by the past but being lived very much in the present seem destined for this moment of invitation, distilled in sharp clarity, defying the vagaries and random cruelties of time. That they all come up fighting in their own way is really no surprise.

But if it all stopped there, IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME would amount to no more than a wry sidelong glance at lives toasted with half-empty glasses; we got this far, so what? It's the other side of the equation that gives greatest meaning to the whole, a side that resoundingly and harmoniously defeats the cynical “so what?” factor. Whether subtle and subversive, feisty and eccentric, or cleverly illuminating, each woman's revelation of optimism and anticipation about her future affirms the power of taking risks, embracing self-discovery, and daring to take on new “rules of engagement” in the game of life.

While choosing a mere three examples is about the most difficult thing I find myself doing --- for each one in her moment of encounter was “the best” --- I can't help sharing several highlights along a fascinating journey.

There is the striking immediacy of Marta Casals Istomin, widowed in succession by the deaths of cellist Pablo Casals and conductor Eugene Istomin. Behind the headlines, however, she has long been a renowned arts administrator in her own right, sharing how it is to live in the international spotlight. Having chosen career over children, being an ambiguous figure to her own family, and focusing on the public preservation of both her husbands' contributions, all adds up to a stoic yet engaged loneliness that's tinged with nobility rather than martyrdom.

In a softer and more poignant light, I was enthralled by Katherine Weissman's journey apart from her longtime role as a contributing editor of *O, The Oprah Magazine* to a place where so many of us fear to go at almost any age --- our own bodies. Without missing a single cringing observation, she catalogues her post-60 physical attributes with the keen and practiced eye of the visual artist she is. Weissman's avocation for the arts became a potent catalyst for embracing time's physical changes in our bodies rather than shunning them. Her genius is that she does so without a trace of narcissism; the full-length mirror becomes a doorway to new visions of beauty.

And finally, there is revered Canadian novelist and humanitarian Frances Itani, whose compelling imagery of the love she carries for her deceased younger sister transforms a burden of loss into a flame of passion for serving others in an astonishing variety of contexts. Like my own young niece (just 19 when she died a year ago, in June 2009), Itani's sister was taken by an aggressive and cruelly debilitating malignant brain tumor called glioblastoma. As brains tumors go, they are the-worst-of-the-worst. Itani could have witnessed this horrific loss of her sibling's mobility, faculties and personal awareness with the same paralyzed horror that has numbed and divided my own family, but instead she wrapped it up gently in what she describes as an invisibly attached "bundle" of love. From that shining bundle she has drawn inspiration, creative energy, and a powerfully affirmed personal presence for the past 25 years.

What better "last word" for the most memorable anthology of wise voices I have ever read? Thank you, sisters. Every one of you!

--- Reviewed by Pauline Finch

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