Review of Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism by Barbara McDonald with Cynthia Rich in Equal Times Dec. 18, 1983

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She urges us to take the same interest in our aging bodies as we did with our pubescent ones. Why shouldn’t we examine our withering, drying, shrinking bodies with as much curiosity as we did our budding breasts, our pubic hair and our menopause, and then our pregnant bodies, and still later our menopause? she asks.

It’s all part of a continuum, she tells us, and equally fascinating at the other end of the line. MacDonald describes herself honestly: blue eyes with a gaze “usually steady and direct. But I look away when I am struggling with some nameless shame.”

She talks about liking the sound of her voice, and at one point says, “When I was younger, some people, lovers mostly, enjoyed my singing, but I no longer have the same control of my voice and sing only occasionally now when I am alone.”

She describes her hands “with the brown spots of aging” and her arms “...living with my arms clasped around my lover’s neck, I see my arm with the skin hanging loosely from my forearm and cannot believe that it is really my own.”

The courage MacDonald shows in charting her course as an old woman encourages us to face the journey we all will take with a lessened sense of fear, and with a heightened sense of anticipation. She lets us know that by looking old people in the eye, we are preparing ourselves for that last quarter of our lives that we will all—black and white, female and male—spend as old people.

Neither of the authors are exciting writers, but there are some important issues to be looked at here and they do a good job of it—in a pleasant, rather than ponderous manner. It’s like a couple of friends sharing information and observations with us. And some of MacDonald’s observations linger.

So often we think we know how an experience is going to end, so we don’t risk the pain of seeing it through to the end. We never really know the beginning or the middle, until we have lived out an ending and lived beyond it.

We don’t suddenly age, we spend the last quarter of our lives dying; we are in that process for ten to twenty years or so.

Although MacDonald’s voice is the one we hear from most often, and whose story it really is, Cynthia Rich’s input is valuable. The interchange of chapters between them is a good device, relieving MacDonald’s voice now and then with Rich’s. It’s clearly MacDonald’s story, though, and it is to her that we return to get an inkling, a glimmer of how it feels, really being, to be old.

And knowing how old age feels puts McDonald in a fine position to review three novels by other old women.

Two are about aging lesbians (Sister Girl by June Arnold and Peace by Valarie Taylor). These bring mixed responses from the author. But she gives such a loving thumbs-up to May Sarton’s As We Are Now that she makes us want to rush right out and buy it.

As MacDonald cheers on Mary Sarton, she offers a snapshot of disapproval to the women’s movement. She devotes two chapters to her disappointment in this direction.

One is called “An Open Letter to the Women’s Movement.” The other chapter sets the title of the book. It is called “Look Me in the Eye.”

In these two chapters, she chastises the movement for giving lip service to the condemnation of ageism without raising consciousness about what ageism really entails. She gives us concrete and sometimes amusing examples of her complaints.

When MacDonald goes out to women’s events, concerts, marches, restaurants, she is always the oldest woman there. She does not even see any other old women.

In fact, she gets the feeling that younger women are surprised at seeing her there, although the women on their posters and whose example they follow are more likely to be MacDonald’s age than theirs, women like: Mary Weldon, Gertrude Stein, Emma Goldman. Ironically, she says the only women her age she sees are on the posters. “Where are the women my age?” she asks.

They are here among us, waiting and locked up with their stories as women were until the new wave of feminism fifteen years ago; as black women were until the last few years. As Latina women and native American women are emerging.