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## 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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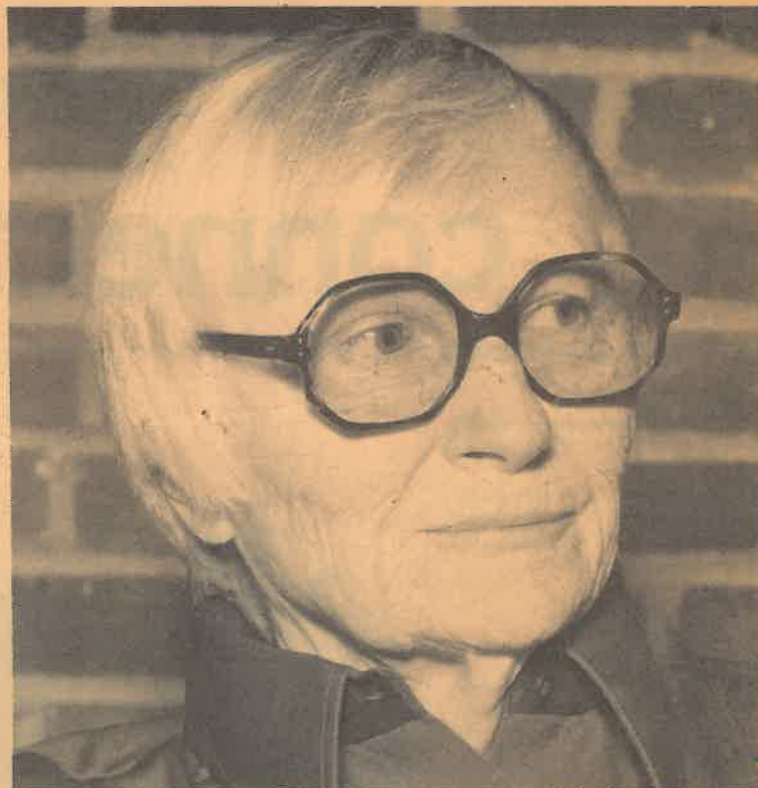
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# Look me in the eye



Honor Fraser

Feisty, sparrow-like, spry—what picture comes to your mind when you hear those words? Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich pluck these words directly from articles about old women.

In their book *Look Me in the Eye*, Macdonald refers to herself defiantly as an “old woman, not an “elderly” or “senior citizen.” She considers these euphemisms patronizing.

Macdonald, who is seventy-one, co-authored *Look Me in the Eye* with Cynthia Rich, her fifty-year-old lover.

Macdonald and Rich contend that we have failed to accord personhood to old people. That we shuttle them out of sight, servicing them rather than interacting with them, and that we tell them that the only acceptable way to behave is to try to deny their age. But, after all this they tell us that ultimately “they” are “us.”

Old women are the particular focus of the authors. They give us frightening statistics on the plight of old women.

85% of all old women who are single or widowed live near or below the poverty line.

In the year 2,000, one out of every four persons will be over fifty.

By the year 2,030, one out of six Americans will be over sixty-five. Most of them will be women.

Seven % of old white men live in poverty; 47% of women do.

Women are also engaged in that great game of ‘passing.’ In speaking of the hazards of passing, Macdonald says that since “so many old people themselves have lived a lifetime of fear, contempt, and patronizing of the old, it is easy to see why most old people refuse to define themselves as old.”

She calls passing (except as a consciously political tactic for carefully limited purposes) one of the most serious threats to selfhood.

Macdonald faces her own age courageously, refusing those axioms that say, “You’re only as old as you feel,” “You don’t look your age,” etc.

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 menstruation, 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 “. . . lying 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 portentous 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 feels, 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 Gin* by June Arnold and *Prism* by Valerie Taylor). These bring mixed responses from the author. But she gives such a rousing thumbs-up to May Sarton’s *As We Are Now* that she makes me want to rush right out and buy it.

As Macdonald cheers on May Sarton, she delivers a gentle slap 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 Wollstonecraft, 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,

so will come old women. None of us must stay invisible.

We thank Macdonald and Rich for prying this little wedge open still further. Now it’s time for more old women’s voices, old lesbian’s voices.

So very little has come out on this subject that we drink this rapidly as on a hot summer day

we down a cold glass of lemonade and greedily ask for more.

—Angela Bowen

*Look Me In the Eye*, by Barbara Macdonald with Cynthia Rich. Spinster’s Ink, San Francisco, \$5.95, is available at New Words in Cambridge.