

Be an Outrageous Older Woman

By

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Editor's Note: *This book review is for the generations of women and men who have not had the opportunity to know Ruth Harriet Jacobs (1924-2013) and the many facets of her work during her career as a sociologist, gerontologist, researcher, educator, poet, and author of nine books and many chapters in scholarly books. Start here and feel free to familiarize yourself with more of Ruth's legacy of writing and ideas.*

J. A. R.
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When first published in 1991, the book *Be an Outrageous Older Woman* (HarperCollins, ISBN 0060952539) was far ahead of its time. Its continued relevance demonstrates the insightfulness of Ruth Harriet Jacobs, as well as to how slowly ideas about women and aging have changed. Trained as a sociologist and gerontologist, Jacobs identified and challenged the negative attitudes toward and treatment of older women. When Ruth and I met as participants in a Wellesley Seminar in the early 1980's, she was old enough to be my mother and playful enough to be my daughter. About a decade later, Ruth and I were concurrently Fellows at the Five College Women's Center for Research on Women housed at Mount Holyoke College, where she was researching and writing this book. In both settings, Ruth was outrageous in the most wonderful ways. She wore flamboyant comfortable clothing, wrote and recited funny poems, and encouraged the sharing of food, ideas, and sociability among our professional colleagues. She also served as a mentor to me and many others. I continue to be grateful for a particularly useful piece of professional advice she offered me about publishing several decades ago.

Ruth's ideas about being an older woman were in sharp contrast to the cultural views of old women as invisible, no longer attractive, and no longer sexual. She thought women should wear age proudly – to see reaching senior citizen status as an achievement. Her book *Be an Outrageous Older Woman* calls upon women to

reject negative stereotypes – in both our attitudes and behavior. She interweaves stories, poems, sociological research, and personal examples to make her points. Her advice is full of humor and fun. In the opening chapter, she tells readers that “the book will give you recipes for . . . being a magnificent older woman who takes what she can from life to be happy, to be productive, and, above all, to laugh” (p. 3).

Reading this book is like taking a class in understanding the pressures felt by older women, and the rage many women feel towards institutions and individuals that exert these pressures on them. It offers ways to rethink your identity that free you from these forces. Ruth reminds her readers of the pressures on younger women to be beautiful, alluring, and selfless. These qualities do not lead to successful aging, because the standards of beauty and allure are youthful, and selflessness does not prepare for children leaving home, divorce or widowhood, or retirement.

Because we internalize the standards of our culture, women carry these stereotypes within ourselves. Change requires thinking differently, as well as acting differently. Although some change is required by losses beyond our control, such as widowhood or illness, some change is by choice. She tells of rejecting her role as unhappy wife, getting a divorce, returning to school, and changing her own identity when she was in her 40s. Whether by happenstance or choice, changing one's identity is challenging.

This book consists of seven sections: **Becoming Outrageous; Advocating for Yourself with Professionals; Remarkable Me; Housing Yourself Outrageously; Outrageous Companionship; Moving from Rage to Outrageousness; and Graduation.** Each section is filled with information, advice, stories, poems, and encouragement.

The first section includes multiple types of practical advice for becoming outrageous. Chapter Two provides steps for facilitating change and resisting slipping back into the old routines. Chapter Three tells the story of a woman who made successful change in her identity, and it provides “Rules for Parents Relinquishing Children to College” (pp. 38-41). Chapter Four discusses relationships with adult children, or what Ruth likes to refer to as “descendants” because they are no longer children and should not be thought of or treated as though they still are. This is a very powerful chapter because it addresses what is expected from daughters, as their mothers age, and how mothers have been blamed for many of the difficulties that daughters face – often unfairly. Ruth discusses the problems between adult children and their mothers from a variety of points of view. Her advice is designed to reduce pain, increase understanding, and minimize hurt. She respects that adult offspring often choose different paths than their parents, while encouraging ways to communicate across differences.

The second section addresses the problems older women often encounter when dealing with medical professional and employers. When seeking paid work or health care advice and assistance, for example, Ruth encourages older women *not* to accept mistreatment from helpers. Her research and that of others documents that older women often suffer from social and individual oppression, often coupled with financial, physical, and sexual losses. When they seek help, they often face ageist and sexist attitudes that lead further self-depreciation. She presents two scenarios that illustrate mistreatment and provides many handy tips as to how to stand up for oneself and get the best assistance. Among those pieces of advice, “Be courageous and persistent,” (p. 91) deserves notice.

Section 3 addresses the many ways that older women can enhance their pleasure, by means of traveling, writing, joining groups, cooking, and so forth. Chapter 9 stands out for directly confronting the idea that older women are no longer sexual. “Older people have the same needs and rights to sex as anyone,” (p. 133) although women are hampered by the double standard of aging. There are many more widows than widowers;

widowers often look for younger women to remarry; women without socially sanctioned partners are less likely to have sexual activity than their male peers. Ruth provides a clear and helpful discussion of age-related changes in sexual needs and abilities of both women and men, as well as a list of good sources for more information. She frankly discusses physical and emotional issues that often interfere with sex between aging sexual partners. This chapter is excellent for both women and men, and for partners to share and discuss. She also provides suggestions for other types of sensual pleasure, if sexual intimacy with a partner is unavailable or not desired.

Later sections of the book discuss housing – both solo and group options – including pros and cons of each. Chapter 11 is full of advice for living alone, including ways to enjoy time alone and with others, stay safe, and learn how to handle household problems when you do. This is increasingly important because older adults are living alone at a higher rate than ever before (Current Population Survey, via iPLUMS). Chapter 12 presents shared living options for singles, some very creative, such as renting to students or other seniors, or joining others in cooperative living. She does not discuss institutional living.

This book is written for and about older women, but it is relevant to almost everyone. Change is an inevitable part of the human experience. Young women will not always be young. Reading this book could help them think ahead, in order to build identities resistant to cultural stereotypes and roles, which will help them as they age. Men also face change as they grow and age. Although the male stereotypes are more favorable than female ones, they still are limiting. Strength, virility, and earning power typically decrease in later years. Illness, widowhood and divorce happen to men, as well as to women. Both my father and my father-in-law were older than their wives and fully expected that their wives would outlive them. Neither did. Because of gendered division of labor in marriage, older men may find themselves less able to take care of themselves, than are women. One 88-year-old man recently told me: “My wife buys all my clothes and does many things I could have done for myself but I have become dependent upon her.” Like the men in my family, he believes that his wife will outlive him. She may, but she may not.

Women do typically live longer than men, so many of them face years of widowhood, if they were married, as well as loss of siblings and close friends as they age, due to illness, death or relocation. Ruth emphasizes the importance of fostering multiple friendships and

ways to go about finding and making new friends. Friends serve many functions and form a vital part of the support system that aging people need. A portion of one of her acrostics highlights this:

Follow your interests,
Reach out to groups,
Invest in good causes.
Each place you go,
New friends may emerge,
Discover the joy
Seeking understanding,
Helping and being helped,
In these later years
Prime and precious. (p.230)

Even if younger women and men think they are free from stereotypes and limitations, they often have aging mothers. This book will help them understand their aging mothers (and probably their aging fathers, as well). Understanding and forgiving are important parts of Ruth's message. While no parent can possibly have been all that you would have liked her or him to be, most did the best they could.

This book is easy to read, but at the same time it evokes serious thinking. Ruth's first-person presentation takes the plight of many older women seriously, and provides helpful advice for them. In doing so, it expands understanding of gender and aging in our society, which will be helpful for all who peruse this book. It is hard to capture the combination of joyful/playful and serious/meaningful in a review. To that end, I present one of her many poems -- this one about bereavement.

No love is lost
even though the lover
turns away from us
or life.
Within us are the people
we have loved,
not as they were
but as we wanted them to be.
As our fresh grief
Softens to sorrow,
we suddenly discover
the lover's eyes in our mirror
the lover's words on our lips,
even the beloved's jokes
have become ours.
What reality has taken,
we have taken

for our own.
Nothing is ever lost.
Layers of our being contain all that has
lived for us
or that we imagined.
We exude
the strength
of our losses
and our gains glow
even in the dark. (pp. 258-259)

In addition to the many helpful aspects to this book, there are some limitations. Ruth focuses attention on mother/daughter relationships and neglects sons. As the mother of two adult sons, I had no trouble relating her ideas to my family configuration, but she does not extend in that way. Written in 1991, this book predates the reality of the internet becoming an integral part of older women's lives. FaceTime and Zoom dramatically increase opportunities for "visiting" with family members and close friends that live at a distance. The sources that are listed, while still helpful, are out of date. Nonetheless, for a self-help book to hold up as well as this one does--more than 30 years after its publication, is remarkable.

About the Reviewer: Michele Hoffnung is Professor Emerita of Psychology at Quinnipiac University. She is the author of many articles, books, and book reviews about lifespan development, women's roles, women's choices, and motherhood. Dr. Hoffnung raised three children who are now parents of her six grandchildren. Her most recent book is *Being Grandma and Grandpa* with Emily Stier Adler.