

“Surprising Developments”

Midlife in Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Both *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) have been described as Alice Munro’s texts of “growing up” (Warwick 204). Whereas the earlier book traces the maturation of Del Jordan into a young woman, the linked stories of *Who Do You Think You Are?* follow its heroine, Rose, into middle age. Having briefly attended university, gotten married and divorced, and established a career as a television interviewer and actress, Rose is around forty when, in the last two stories, she returns to her hometown of Hanratty to assist her stepmother Flo in moving to an old age home. As a text about aging into midlife, *Who Do You Think You Are?* does more than simply range beyond the “season of youth” that is the traditional preserve of the *Bildungsroman* (Buckley vii); it draws attention to age itself as something of an unremarked category in a form ostensibly concerned with getting older. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, the characters’ ages go mostly unmentioned; by contrast, *Who Do You Think You Are?* persistently foregrounds the ages of its characters in a way that both registers and resists the process whereby the number of a person’s years has become a defining aspect of identity in twentieth-century culture. The interrogation of age norms in *Who Do You Think You Are?* can be read as a critique of how this preoccupation with chronological age contributed to a cultural devaluation of midlife by enabling the figuration of the entry into middle age as a traumatic and turbulent period of rupture from a more desirable youthful identity.

Gordon Collier has recognized *Who Do You Think You Are?* as a text that grapples with the disquieting alterity that aging can involve, particularly in

the penultimate story, "Spelling," which depicts Rose's encounters with the dementia-afflicted and "inaccessib[le]" Flo (52). For Amelia DeFalco, Rose's struggle to achieve even a momentary connection with Flo testifies to the "difficulty of responding ethically to [the] radically altered subjectivity" of "those suffering the severe debilitations of old age and illness" (84). DeFalco's reading of "Spelling" positions the story as an early precursor to Munro's later interest, in stories like "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (2001), with "the changes of aging into old age" (75), and with the ethical dimensions of caregiving in the midst of current concern over the "crisis" of population aging. As a midlife text, however, *Who Do You Think You Are?* can be more productively read in the context of concerns specific to its own time. The 1960s and 1970s were the years when the so-called "midlife crisis" rose to cultural prominence, and a plethora of psychological and self-help texts worked to define it as a difficult period of transition affecting both men and women, during which the middle-aged subject, newly aware of the increasing proximity of death, either learns to accept, or persists in denying, the new reality of the aging self. By emphasizing the anxiety, stress, and upheaval that could accompany this process, these therapeutic texts figured midlife as a problem, and implicitly promoted themselves as the solution.

The popular literature of the midlife crisis is marked by a preoccupation with identifying the precise age range during which midlife anxiety might be expected to begin, and is grounded in the assumption that chronological age functions as a natural and universal measure of human development. Munro's text challenges this assumption by drawing attention to age consciousness as a recent phenomenon produced and sustained in particular social and institutional contexts, and by exposing the midlife crisis as a narrative that is historically and socially situated. In a direct critique of the way in which therapeutic literature of midlife prioritizes age as the defining aspect of identity, Munro's text insists on how awareness of age is mediated by other factors including gender, and, more importantly, class: by focalizing the narrative through the eyes of a protagonist from a poor family who moves up the social ladder through marriage and career, Munro characterizes the midlife crisis as a construct that advances a particularly middle-class narrative of development as the human norm, and generates a false impression of the middle-aged as a homogenous generational constituency. Making visible the differences that age elides, Munro's text questions a cultural tendency to attribute unhappiness in midlife primarily to age, rather than inequities of class and gender. By working to demystify

the concept of middle age as a timeless essence, *Who Do You Think You Are?* exposes the midlife crisis as but one among many possible narratives of middle age, not all of which are characterized by a debilitating anxiety about getting older. In contrast to the popular conception of midlife as triggering a frightening sense of disjunction from a younger self, Munro figures Rose's middle age in a way that emphasizes the continuity of subjectivity that is as much a part of aging as is physical change. The text advances a view of midlife as a habitable mixture of continuity and change that not only emphasizes the possibility of happiness for individuals in middle age, but facilitates the recognition of connections among different age groups at a time when divisions between the young and the middle-aged were often figured as profound and unbridgeable.

Interrogating the role of chronological age in the production of identity adds a new dimension to the discussion of midlife in Munro's work, which has so far focused on the body as the primary site of resistance to the cultural devaluation of the aging self. Reading a selection of stories published between 1982 and 1994, Peggy Martin argues that they privilege the "materiality of the aging female body" in a way that enables characters to "claim a new space in which older women do not have to become garish, invisible, or pathetic" (83, 84). Embodiment remains a key issue in scholarly debates about fictional representations of middle age: the productive sense of bodily awareness that Martin ascribes to Munro's characters stands in stark contrast to Helen Paloge's more recent contention that the body constitutes the "missing element" in contemporary fictions that repress the reality of the aging body even as they claim to address it (5). With its emphasis on chronological age, *Who Do You Think You Are?* reminds us that it is not the body alone that tells us we are growing older, but an age-conscious culture in which identity is measured in yearly increments, and birthdays, some more than others, are interpreted as occasions of disjunction rather than continuity. Maintaining a critical stance toward chronological age as a means by which awareness of middle age is socially produced, Munro creates a context in which the middle-aged heroine's acceptance of her aging body becomes possible.

Historian Howard Chudacoff has attributed the increasing age consciousness of twentieth-century culture to developments in science, industry, and communications that "stressed numerical measurement as a means of imposing order and predictability on human life and the environment" (5). He argues that it was precisely the intensification of age consciousness that helped to bring middle age into being as a distinct stage of life:

the stratification of society into peer groups based on age combined with increased life expectancy in the post World War I period to focus attention on what had previously been regarded as a “fleeting, vacant transitional period between adulthood and old age” (107). The emergence of developmental psychology, in particular the work of Erik Erikson, was especially influential in providing a vocabulary that enabled discussion of middle age in the second half of the twentieth century. Departing from Freudian models that limited the formation of subjectivity to early childhood, Erikson conceptualized adulthood as a dynamic period of continuing development, and divided the entire life span into eight stages, each with its own particular “identity crisis” to be resolved (247). For Erikson, the crisis corresponding to the years between forty and sixty-five is one of several that must be grappled with over the course of a life; by the 1970s, however, the years around forty had come to be seen as a particularly crucial period of transition, and “the mid-life crisis” had passed into the popular lexicon.

The term originated in a 1965 essay by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques, who theorized that arrival at the mid-point of life brings men and women into a newly pressing awareness of death. For Jaques, the main task of this period is a process of accommodation to this awareness: fantasies of omnipotence must be surrendered, depressive anxieties overcome, until the subject, ideally, reaches a point where the “enjoyment of mature adult life” becomes possible (512). While Jaques locates the onset of this process “around the age of 35” (502), later texts that popularized the midlife crisis are marked by a preoccupation with trying to define its chronological parameters in increasingly precise terms. Roger Gould’s *Transformations* (1978) locates the onset of midlife anxiety in the decade between ages thirty-five and forty-five. In *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* (1978), Daniel Levinson doubts “that a true Mid-life Transition can begin before age 38 or after 43”; it “ordinarily has its onset at age 40 or 41 and lasts about five years” (191). This increasing preoccupation with chronological age in therapeutic literature of midlife often seems calculated not only to identify, but also to exacerbate feelings of anxiety associated with the attainment of specific ages. Nowhere is this more visible than in Gail Sheehy’s *Passages* (1976), the midlife text that Munro’s readers at the time were perhaps most likely to have been familiar with.¹ Sheehy introduces her text by giving an account of the crisis, amounting to a complete breakdown that she herself suffered at thirty-five, when she was “confronted for the first time with the arithmetic of life,” an experience

she describes as, “quite simply, terrifying” (5). While Jaques acknowledges the “inner chaos and despair” (511) that can accompany the awareness that one’s life is likely half over, Sheehy writes of this awareness with a language approaching that of gothic horror: the “deadline decade” between ages thirty-five and forty-five brings one face to face with “the specter of death,” a “private, unmentionable gargoyle” (351); the passage to midlife is a confrontation with “the dark side” that releases a “cast of demons. Every loose end not resolved in previous passages will resurface to haunt us” and “buried parts of ourselves will demand incorporation” (358).

In contrast to the way in which such popular midlife texts isolate particular ages in the middle years in order to generate anxiety about them, Munro’s stories of Rose’s midlife never mention her age at all. In fact, Rose’s precise age is mentioned only once in the entire book: in the story “Mischief,” she is twenty-three when she has an affair with her friend Jocelyn’s husband, Clifford (122). In the later story “Simon’s Luck,” her daughter Anna’s age is given as seventeen; since Rose married after one year at university and gave birth to Anna early in the marriage, we can infer that she is in her mid-to-late thirties in that story, and in her late thirties and early forties in the two stories that follow it. It is by drawing attention to the ages of other characters that Munro situates Rose’s midlife within a wider context that destabilizes the authority of chronological age as a measure of identity. Age in this text is fundamental to how the characters view themselves and each other; at the same time, however, it is oddly unstable, and characters’ attempts to determine people’s ages are often marked by a speculative quality that exceeds precise description. This is especially visible in the first story, “Royal Beatings”: during “the years when Rose was nine, ten, eleven, twelve,” and her half-brother Brian was “five or six,” her stepmother Flo might tell a story about encountering a flasher on the bridge home from town, a boy “eighteen, nineteen years old” (13). In “Wild Swans,” the teenaged Rose travels to Toronto on the train, and the first thing she notices about the “minister” who sits next to her is that he appears to be “between fifty and sixty years old” (64).

These are just two examples of how Munro’s text repeatedly stages the conflict between the impulse to fix someone’s age to a precise number and the inability to do so, and registers tensions arising from the intensification of age consciousness in North American culture. Moreover, the text draws attention to how certain assumptions regarding age and identity that were increasingly taken for granted over the course of the twentieth century did not in fact always exist. In the title story, for example, Rose’s high school

English teacher Miss Hattie Milton refuses to see “any difference between teen-agers (she did not use the word) and students in Grade Four” (207-08). While schools were primary sites for the production of age consciousness, Miss Hattie’s refusal to use the word “teen-agers” signifies her rejection of the age-based peer groupings that became a defining characteristic of twentieth-century culture, and this is central to the story’s figuration of her waning influence in Hanratty. Munro’s insistence on age categories as historically situated departs from contemporary writings on midlife grounded in a conception of age norms as timeless essences. Jaques, for example, argues for the universality of the midlife crisis by illustrating his theory with examples drawn not only from among his own patients, but from the biographies of an array of composers, painters, and authors (ranging from Michelangelo to J. S. Bach to Goethe) whose creativity can be argued to have undergone a “decisive change” in their late thirties (503). In place of this notion that the experience of midlife was the same in 1665 as it was in 1965, Munro’s text substitutes an awareness of age norms as changeable entities whose meanings shift over time.

The text’s destabilization of chronological age as a universal measure of human development continues when Rose leaves Hanratty for university, and gains insight into the economic basis of apparently natural age norms. Living with Dr. Henshawe, a retired English professor who opens her home to “poor . . . bright girls” (77), Rose is initiated into the equation of growing up with moving up that is a central ideological component of the *Bildungsroman*, a form that, as Patricia Alden writes, “link[s] the individual’s moral, spiritual, and psychological maturation with his economic and social advancement” (2). Munro’s text unsettles this generic association of maturity with the attainment of middle-class status through the figure of Dr. Henshawe, a woman “in her seventies” who almost never appears without her *leitmotif* of girliness (71). Rose feels able to borrow a raincoat from the much older woman because the garment attests to the latter’s “classically youthful tastes” (88). Compare this with Flo who, while still in her early thirties, wears the same “print housedresses” that “a woman of fifty, or sixty, or seventy might wear” (11). The lack of any distinction between widely disparate ages characterizes working-class West Hanratty as a world where people are seen to become old much earlier than in Dr. Henshawe’s milieu; the so-called “old men” who sit outside Flo’s store, dying slowly of “the foundry disease,” may well be younger than Dr. Henshawe, an old woman who embodies a middle-class ideal of aging well by appearing not to age (5).

Far from being a reliable measure of identity, chronological age is shown to have very different meanings in different social contexts.

While the text emphasizes age identity as contingent on class positioning, its affluent characters are not reliably aligned with any uncomplicated concept of maturity or adulthood. When Rose's wealthy fiancé Patrick quarrels with his sisters, their voices strike her as "astonishingly childish. . . . They had never had to defer and polish themselves and win favour in the world . . . and that was because they were rich" (81). A similar developmental instability characterizes Rose's fellow scholarship students at university: the girls are "stooped and matronly," the boys "babyish-looking. . . . It seemed to be the rule that girl scholarship winners looked about forty and boys about twelve" (76). In reality, the scholarship winners are young adults close in age to Patrick and his sisters, yet despite the fact that they have clearly spent considerable effort in polishing themselves and winning favour, this has not resulted in the attainment of an identity more reliably "mature" than those born to a life of privilege. Indeed, their over-eager compliance with the narrative of maturation that identifies growing up with moving up results in a maturity that signifies as "docility," and whose apparent privilege brings no authority, but only dependence on the charity of others (76). Foregrounding the way in which class difference complicates perceptions of chronological age, the text makes visible the economic disparities among people of the same generational cohort.

In its emphasis on the social and economic differences that mediate perceptions of age and individual development, Munro's text participates in an emerging psychological critique of the class-bound nature of the Eriksonian theory of identity formation that underpins the midlife crisis narrative. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a shift among some psychologists from treating Erikson's concept of developmental "crisis" as a "deep-seated psychological universal" to recognizing that its successful resolution required a degree of choice and personal autonomy that rendered it "inappropriate for marginal and economically underprivileged groups" (Slugoski and Ginsburg 38). In Munro's text, the universalist view is represented by Rose's friend Jocelyn, who, in the story "Mischief," voices the opinion that "going to a psychiatrist was something that everybody should do at developing or adjusting stages of life" (119). The text presents Jocelyn's devotion to psychotherapy and its vocabulary of "developing stages" (or crises) as an ineluctable marker of her middle-class background, and her assumption that its tenets are applicable to "everybody" indicates her uncritical belief in the universal nature of her own experience. That the

working-class Rose has “difficulty” in “catching the tone” of Jocelyn’s use of the discourse of developmental psychology registers her own sense of exclusion from it, and undermines its claims to universality (136).

It is in the story “Simon’s Luck” that Munro specifically interrogates the midlife crisis as a developmental narrative that claims its applicability to all people in middle age. The story is focused on a party that Rose attends during a stint as a contract instructor undertaken to supplement her uncertain income as an actress. The host is a professor whose radical reshaping of his life suggests a desire to prolong his youth, and conforms to the kind of “familiar pattern” that often comes to mind at the mention of the midlife crisis (Jaques 511): “Only three years younger than Rose, but look at him. He had shed a wife, a family, a house, a discouraging future, set himself up with new clothes and new furniture and a succession of student mistresses” (167). The story’s attention to details like the man’s “velvet jumpsuit” and the décor of his apartment, its “jukebox, barbershop mirrors [and] old silk lampshades,” posits the midlife crisis as nothing so much as an exercise in consumption that purports to be a natural characteristic of middle age, but whose potentially liberating aspects are in fact available only to the middle-class men who can afford it (165). The resentful narratorial aside “Men can do it” aligns Rose with the man’s abandoned wife and family in a way that exposes the midlife crisis narrative of age-based anxiety as a convenient means to naturalize masculine self-indulgence and irresponsibility (167). If this man makes Rose aware of her lack of access to a similar means of escape from a “discouraging future” of her own, this is attributable at least as much to the class/gender nexus that has limited her educational opportunities and consigned her to a lower economic status as it is to her position in middle age alone.

The possibility that the cultural preoccupation with age anxiety functioned to provide affluent men with a convenient justification to act on marital dissatisfaction is reinforced when Rose refers to the “middle-age crisis” as a possible reason why her ex-lover Clifford wants to leave his wife; Clifford’s response, however, decouples his restlessness from his position in middle age: “I’ve been going through this ever since I was twenty-five. I’ve wanted out ever since I got in” (135). In contrast to the way in which an age-conscious culture invokes chronological age in order to divide identity over time into discrete segments, Clifford’s insistence on continuities between himself at twenty-five and in middle age issues a particular challenge to how the theory of the midlife crisis isolates specific ages in the middle years as

triggering a radical and frightening break with young adulthood. The text similarly repudiates this narrative of disjunction by representing Rose's own midlife as a time when the recognition of continuities within the self enables the acceptance of change.

Martin argues that it is precisely through their "insistent focus on change" that Munro's stories figure the acceptance of the aging self (83); in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, however, this is accompanied by an equally insistent focus on continuity. Gerald Lynch's definition of the short story cycle as a genre particularly suited to registering tensions between "contrary pressures" suggests the extent to which the form of Munro's text enables its representation of aging into midlife as a process of negotiating the competing forces of continuity and disjunction (18). Individual stories often emphasize the way in which temporal existence produces baffling discrepancies between present and past selves: in "Royal Beatings," the young Rose struggles to see a resemblance between the "malicious" Becky Tyde, "a big-headed loud-voiced dwarf" who makes regular visits to Flo's store, and the portrayal of Becky in local gossip as the "mute" victim of her father's alleged abuse of her in childhood (8, 10). The dislocations of aging are stressed again at the end of the story, which leaps ahead in time to show the middle-aged Rose listening to a radio interview with a venerated old man whom she eventually recognizes as a local thug remembered from her Hanratty childhood. His transformation from "horsewhipper into centenarian" signifies the incongruity of identity as it changes over time, yet this discontinuity is countered by the middle-aged Rose's persistent ability to marvel at it, just as she did as a child observing the incongruities of Becky Tyde (25). This continuity between Rose's childhood and midlife selves is reinforced by the structure of the book as a whole, whose chronological ordering makes visible those aspects of her character that remain consistent well into adulthood.

The consistency of Rose's subjectivity as she ages is an important aspect of the book's interrogation of contemporary age ideology, since it is located in particular qualities that work to articulate an alternative narrative to that of the midlife crisis. For example, a susceptibility to surprise is an aspect of Rose's character that remains consistent throughout the book, and provides a critique of the language of predictability characteristic of the midlife crisis narrative. For example, Sheehy's text, subtitled *Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, is indicative of how the popular literature of midlife invokes chronological age as a source of both anxiety and reassurance, as something that enables people to prepare themselves for the onset of midlife

trauma by predicting the age at which it will most likely occur. Sheehy's emphasis on predictability as a panacea for midlife anxiety could not be more different from Munro's habitual "fascination with the unpredictability of everyday life" that manifests itself in what Ajay Heble terms a "poetics of surprise" discernible throughout her fiction (122). The recurrence of surprise in *Who Do You Think You Are?* functions specifically to challenge popular conceptions of midlife as either utterly predictable or debilitatingly traumatic. Rose's childhood intuition that "life [is] altogether a series of surprising developments" forecasts her later ability to regard the changes that attend her aging as an ongoing and unpredictable source of interest that can be both gratifying and unsettling (40).

Christopher Miller has theorized the dual nature of surprise as a phenomenon that "encompasses both discomfort *and* pleasure" ("Jane" 253, emphasis in original). The emphasis on surprise in Munro's text thus provides a welcome alternative to the affective climate of fear and anxiety with which the midlife crisis narrative invests awareness of middle age. When the middle-aged Rose inspects the County Home for the Aged prior to placing Flo there, Munro's text substitutes surprise for the "narcissism" and "aggression" that, according to Kathleen Woodward, have traditionally characterized encounters between the middle-aged and the old in Western literature (77). Rose's tour of the facility starts on the ground floor among the alert and able-bodied and proceeds to the top floor where "you might get some surprises" (195). One such surprise comes when Rose is introduced to a blind old woman who communicates only by spelling out words spoken by the people around her, including the one that Rose offers, the optimistic "celebrate" (196). By grouping this woman among the "surprises" that Rose finds in the County Home, Munro's text conveys Rose's initial consternation at what she sees, but in a way that also encompasses the sense of wonderment, celebration, and possibility that the encounter elicits from her. For DeFalco, this scene is significant for its insistence on the "incomprehensible, yet undeniable, personhood" of a woman in deep old age (84), but it also has important implications for the representation of Rose's middle age: her ability to move beyond her initial feelings of revulsion and despair and recognize the old woman's personhood indicates her departure from a prevailing midlife narrative that reduces the aged body to a trauma-inducing harbinger of the middle-aged subject's own future.

Rose's life is punctuated by other moments of surprise whose repetition provides reassurance of the continuity of her identity as she moves into

middle age. For example, as a newly separated woman living as a single mother, she discovers a “surprising amount of comfort” in the domestic chores she has to do in addition to her job at a radio station (148). Later on, when the sight of some dishes in a diner signals to Rose the return of her ability to appreciate the ordinary world after being unhappily in love, she is “surprise[d]” to discover that she “so much wanted, required, everything to be there for her, thick and plain as ice-cream dishes” (182). As midlife discoveries that conform to Miller’s definition of surprise as “the sudden admixture of the mundane with the pleasurable,” these moments run counter to the figuration of middle age as precipitating a frightening awareness of rupture from a former, more youthful self (“Jane” 242). Rose’s receptivity to surprise, and her propensity to surprising others, is by no means figured as unambiguously positive: after breaking up with her fiancé, it is her inability to resist the desire to “surprise him with his happiness” by reinitiating their relationship that leads directly to their disastrous marriage (103). It is simply the recurrence of surprises in Rose’s life, whether gratifying or unpleasant, that facilitates for readers a productive conception of how her identity in some part remains consistent despite the changes of aging. In contrast to models of midlife that rely on chronological age to tell us what to expect and when to expect it as they measure our increasing distance from youth, Munro foregrounds Rose’s susceptibility to surprise in a way that locates the continuity of her identity in the recurrent, unanticipated apprehension of a familiar response to the world.

It is the social, dialogic aspect of surprise as something that both “com[es] from within and seiz[es] the self from without” (Miller, “Wordsworth’s” 413) that enables Munro to represent the continuity of subjectivity in a way quite different from models of selfhood, pervasive in aging studies, that locate that continuity in an interior, unchanging, essentially youthful identity that is concealed behind the “mask” of the aging body (Featherstone and Hepworth 371). As DeFalco observes, “this insistence on ‘core’ youthful selves betrays the dread of change that provokes aging subjects to reject an altered self rather than admit to transformative identity” in which both change and continuity can be accommodated (6). Munro’s text indeed draws attention to how the pervasive alignment of youth with the notion of a “true” self at times threatens to inhibit Rose’s acceptance of her altered self in midlife. For example, as Rose freshens up in front of a mirror before the party in “Simon’s Luck,” she is discomfited by the presence in the room of the hostess, a young graduate student named Shelley. In contrast to Rose, whose “reddish

brown hair was dyed at home,” Shelley is described as a “true blond” (164). This choice of words would seem to confirm the characterization of aging as a descent into artificiality, the loss of a more authentic, youthful identity. Other details, however, disrupt this apparent privileging of the authenticity of youth: Shelley’s hair is further described as “thick and straight as if cut from a block of wood” (164); the image yokes together two organic yet disparately textured substances whose combination is strikingly artificial. Shelley’s “waif-style” vintage outfit elicits the narrator’s appraisal that “such clothes took looking for,” indicating that the young woman’s appearance is as carefully contrived as Rose’s own (164). Rose worries that her own dress is “wrongly youthful,” but this is qualified by the supposition that “perhaps she was not slim enough to wear that style” (164). The comparison introduces a note of conjecture into the well-worn satiric narrative of the aging woman desperately trying to look young; also, by reminding us that Rose was never slim, even as a young girl, it complicates the way in which the narrative initially appears to privilege age as the primary difference between the two women. Subtly destabilizing the presumed superiority of youth, Munro challenges the inevitability of age anxiety, and creates an atmosphere in which acceptance of the aging body becomes possible. Looking into the mirror, Rose sees “lines [running] both ways under her eyes, trapping little diamonds of darkened skin” (164), and the description encourages readers to see value, rather than deterioration, in the marks of aging by connecting them with materials suggestive of great worth.

By the end of the story Rose no longer seems troubled by her aging. She is helped in this by landing steady work on a television series that requires her to play a character older than she is. As he applies special aging techniques to her face, the make-up man “joke[s] that if the series [is] a success and [runs] for a few years, these techniques [will no longer] be necessary” (183). The idea that the marks of aging on Rose’s face, which for the time being have to be approximated with cosmetics, will eventually become real, overturns the “mask of ageing” trope which identifies authenticity with a youthful interior self concealed within a deteriorating bodily facade (Featherstone and Hepworth 371). Instead, this moment in Munro’s text would seem to evoke Barbara Frey Waxman’s figuration of aging as a process of “ripening,” in which the subject journeys toward “personal authenticity” (59) and the assumption in middle age of a “new, truer self” (19). Yet a closer look suggests the way in which this scene invests midlife with value without reproducing the prejudice implicit in the notion that certain stages in life

are more “true” or authentic than others. To her colleagues on the show, Rose remarks that she is “getting the distinct feeling of being made of old horsehide,” and “slap[s] her creased brown neck” for emphasis (183). This articulation of midlife resilience, far from signalling the emergence of a “truer self” in middle age, actually shows Rose “beginning to adopt some of the turns of phrase, the mannerisms, of the character she was to play” (183). In contrast to the idea of “ripening” that assigns value to midlife only by framing it as more authentic than youth, Rose’s appreciation of her middle-aged self is grounded in the persistence of her life-long attraction to assuming multiple, simultaneous identities through acting. The text thus provides readers with a model of midlife that rejects notions of an essential, interior self that either stays the same or improves, and instead figures midlife subjectivity as both continuous and open to multiplicity and change.

Munro’s text privileges an understanding of selfhood in middle age as a combination of stability and transformation, and represents Rose’s midlife in more constructive terms than previous critics have claimed. Susan J. Warwick is critical of the multiplicity that defines Rose’s subjectivity, arguing that her “assumption of roles and poses implies the failure of knowing ‘who she is,’ and signifies her “lack of a fully developed sense of self” (220). Ildikó de Papp Carrington’s similar perception of Rose as an “arrested adolescent” (137) is perhaps attributable to Rose’s midlife capacity for surprise, given the extent to which “the fading of surprise from life” is assumed to be an expected feature of aging (Miller, “Jane” 247). This critical condemnation of Rose’s “failure to ‘grow up’” (Warwick 219) suggests the pervasiveness of what Margaret Morganroth Gullette identifies as Western literature’s “master narrative” of midlife that identifies maturity with disillusionment, and is an indication of how far Rose’s story departs from such a narrative (148). Gullette’s important work on midlife fiction supplies a context for reading *Who Do You Think You Are?* as part of a larger canon of texts that answered a growing demand for optimistic midlife narratives as baby boomers began to enter adulthood in increasing numbers in the 1970s. While Gullette goes so far as to claim the emergence of the “progress novel” as a new genre that “overthrow[s] the traditional view that the middle years are a time of devolution,” we have already seen how Munro’s text exposes the limitations of concepts like “progress” which, like “ripening,” imagines aging into midlife as a process of inexorable improvement (xiii). The figuration of aging as progress may well enable a life narrative that “dares to prize the middle years more than earlier stages,” but its failure to encompass the losses

and challenges that can accompany the transition into old age threatens to displace the anxieties about change and finitude that characterize the midlife crisis onto a later stage of life (Gullette 5). Munro's text suggests that the key to entering midlife with equanimity does not lie in any conviction that the middle-aged self is an improvement over a younger self, but in the recognition of these selves as both different and the same. Importantly, this view is characterized as one that can potentially be sustained into later life: when Rose visits Flo in the County Home, readers are invited to see in Flo's "obstinate and demanding" behaviour an exaggerated yet recognizable version of the "willful [and] stubborn" younger woman they have already come to know (DeFalco 83). If this scene, as others have pointed out, shows the importance of recognizing the continuing humanity of those radically altered by old age, my focus on how aging is represented across the text as a whole suggests the extent to which this ethical response to the old is linked to Rose's ability to recognize and appreciate continuities within herself as she ages into midlife.

Given that Rose achieves a hard-won if momentary sense of connection with her stepmother, an old woman altered almost to the point of being unrecognizable, it is significant that the text does not include any such connection between the middle-aged Rose and her own daughter, Anna. Perhaps this testifies to how the differences between the young and the middle-aged were conceptualized at the time in particularly crude and adversarial terms. Written in the wake of the famous dictum "Don't trust anyone over thirty"² that worked to legitimize prejudice against the middle-aged and suppressed the differences within what was actually a diverse group of people, Munro's challenge to the dominance of chronological age as an index of identity protests the reductiveness of defining people by the number of their years. The teenaged Anna's icy remoteness toward her mother reminds Rose of her ex-mother-in-law, Anna's grandmother; while mother and daughter apparently remain estranged for the rest of the book, this chain of associations nonetheless crosses generational boundaries in a way that invites readers to recognize age identity as shifting and unstable, and to question an atmosphere in which the divisions between youth and middle age are seen as natural and absolute. Insisting on the continuities between age groups, as well as the differences within age groups, that a narrative like the midlife crisis elides, Munro's text invites us to reconsider the centrality of chronological age to our perception of who we think we are.

NOTES

- 1 Listed by a Library of Congress survey as “one of the 10 most influential books of our time,” *Passages* spent over three years on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was translated into twenty-eight languages (“Gail Sheehy Bio”).
- 2 Commenting on the “prejudice against adults” that created a “big problem about how to be an adult in this period,” Munro attributes this dictum to Abbie Hoffman (Sheila Munro 209). The phrase was apparently coined by UC Berkeley student activist Jack Weinberg.

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