

BOOK REVIEWS

Lillian B. Rubin, *Women of a Certain Age: The Midlife Search for Self*, New York: Harper and Row, 1979, 309 pp. \$10.95 cloth.

I have friend who routinely haunts bookstores and book stands while she awaits airplanes, buses, trains and husbands. My friend discovered this latest book of Lillian Rubin's before I was aware Rubin had published another. I appreciate her sending me a copy because I must confess I never would have gotten past the title of the book if not for my friend's insistence that it was well worth reading. All I could think was oh no, not another book on the midlife crisis.

I got past the title and this is definitely not just another book on the midlife crisis. Although the book is a study of middle-aged women, it is ultimately a book about all women and necessarily, about their men. Its appeal and its observations transcend any one age group of women because it is not just middle-aged women who have searched for self.

Rubin, who is a research sociologist and a family therapist, interviewed 160 women between the ages of 35 and 54. She probed their feelings about themselves, about work, marriage, sex, children, the future and the past. What emerges is a sensitive portrait of feelings perhaps every women has experienced at some time. We see in Rubin's women our mothers, our sisters, ourselves.

Rubin debunks the simplistic myth of the midlife woman suffering her suddenly "empty nest," unable to separate from her children. She applauds recent attempts by feminists to locate this midlife problem "not in the woman, but in a system of social roles and arrangements that makes it always difficult, sometimes impossible, for a mother to develop an identity that rests on alternative roles" (p. 14). But Rubin pushes beyond either of these theories by showing us the feelings and comments of women themselves.

Surprisingly, Rubin discovers that the person who often suffers the most when children leave home is not the mother, but the father. Rubin calls this

surprising at first—until I began to reflect on the different experiences men and women have in the family in general and in parenting in particular. Then it seemed reasonable that fathers would suffer the loss of children, sometimes even more than mothers. . . .

Rubin compared this process with the experience of fathers:

While mother has been feeding, tending, nurturing, teaching, watching and sharing inside the home, father has been working outside. . . . Consequently, he's not there to watch when his children take that first step. . . . He's not there to watch their development, to share their triumphs and pains. Then, suddenly, one day it's too late. One day they're gone—gone before he ever had a chance really to know them (p. 36).

Rubin's book contains many such surprising observations but much of her book is a statement of what feelings many women have realized in their personal lives but assumed they alone harbored. It is a statement of what many of us have known was true in our own lives but have never seen in print.

The beauty of Rubin's book is that it so deftly reveals the intersection of personal lives and societal expectations—what C. Wright Mills called “personal problems and public issues.” Rubin shows us women who are attempting to sort out societal expectations and the expectations of their husbands, and, through it all, discover who and what they are.

It is in fact a book C. Wright Mills would have been proud of, because Rubin returns us to a style sociologists seem to have abandoned as “methodologically suspect.” Rubin herself realizes this. In the book's appendix, she courageously states:

For too long now, concern with the method of research has obscured attention to its substance, with the result that social scientists are fast losing credibility and public support. Our quarrels about the value of hard versus soft data are irrelevant to the world and its problems, and unnecessary and distracting for us. . . . (p. 224).

Rubin's study appears to be methodologically impeccable. But she refuses to be self-conscious about her methodology. She does not let it interfere with the purpose and goals of her study—she refuses to wear her methodology on her sleeve.

Rubin has progressed since the publication in 1976 of her *Worlds of Pain* in which she appeared much more self-conscious about methodological issues. It is refreshing to see her moving beyond this—it's refreshing to see any sociologist moving beyond this.

Women of a Certain Age is similar in many respects to *Worlds of Pain*. Rubin's writing style in both works is much the same—to wordy, too melodramatic. She still has an annoying habit of portraying her subjects too much as victims. But her problems of style or emphasis are easily overcome by the importance and sensitivity of her work. In the future, I look forward to receiving from my friend more of Lillian B. Rubin's books.

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