2 Fiction or Polemic? Transcending the Ageing Body in Popular Women’s Fiction

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In this chapter I examine the representation of older female characters in contemporary popular fiction. I do this with reference to social and cultural discourses of ageing, feminist criticism and age studies, and the work of a selection of contemporary women writers of popular fiction from the UK and Australia. I reflect on how they depict ageing heroines and succeed (or otherwise) in relocating traditional relationship-based concerns of romance fiction, to focus on the needs, ambitions and aspirations of the central characters where often the ‘romance’ narrative is displaced or absent. I begin by analysing Elizabeth Buchan’s Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman (2002) and Fanny Blake’s Women of a Dangerous Age (2012). These novels feature women in their late forties and fifties experiencing abrupt and unpredicted changes in their personal and professional lives; while their age is not explicitly cited as the cause of these changes, both novels exhibit a consciousness that images of retreat and decline are dominant in culture and that there is no acceptable way to behave as an older woman. The central part of my discussion will consider the fiction and criticism of Liz Byrski, who has spoken out about the near invisibility of older and old women and whose novels explicitly position older women at the heart of the narrative. I will then explore responses to ageing in Bridget Jones: Mad about the Boy (2013) and examine whether Helen Fielding succeeds in having Bridget ‘grow up’. In the latest addition to the cycle, Bridget Jones, to the dismay of many, has passed 50 and is no longer the hapless singleton she was in the 1990s. The possible conceptual disjunction between women growing older and women growing up, placed in the context of postfeminism’s tendency to ‘girl’ both women and feminism, will shape the core critique offered in this chapter.
While most chick lit heroines contemplate ageing and being single past thirty with dread, late middle-aged and older characters in women’s popular fiction are moving out of full-time childcare and sometimes full-time employment. They generally continue to fulfil the role of carer – to elderly relatives, to grown up children, or to men accustomed to having domestic affairs maintained by their partners. Often they are motivated by some unresolved past conflict or tension to travel somewhere, or divorce or bereavement may force significant life changes. This journey, physical or spiritual, is reminiscent of Leslie Kenton’s notion of the ‘crone’s retreat’: ‘the first step in any initiation is isolation, some kind of withdrawal from our ordinary lives so that we can confront the changes taking place in our bodies and the transformations in our lives and so we can come to terms with what within us is dying and make way for something else to be born’. Kenton’s view is that the transitions of ageing are ritually honoured in ancient tribes and valuable to the women who can spend some time alone to reflect on the changes that have occurred to them now that their busiest years are drawing to a close. To focus on this stage of women’s lives is to concentrate on an area still rarely depicted in popular or middlebrow fiction. If monogamous love and heterosexual desire to a large extent underpin what might broadly be defined as ‘romance’ in the popular fiction domain, what takes centre stage in the fiction that depicts an older woman’s life? The portrayal of older characters in a genre that broadly favours narratives of courtship and unfettered romantic love raises feminist issues for the writer, regardless of their political affiliations. In diverse ways, in focussing on women in their 40s and beyond, each of the writers discussed in this chapter has to challenge the reductive stereotypes of the ageing woman, as these two-dimensional images prove inadequate for the realisation of a convincing central protagonist.

Mainstreaming middle age

Elizabeth Buchan’s *Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman* and Fanny Blake’s *Women of a Dangerous Age* both focus on two women who share a man in common. In Buchan’s novel Rose’s long marriage to Nathan ends abruptly when he reveals an affair with her younger colleague and friend, Minty. In *Women of a Dangerous Age* Lou and Ali, in their late 50s and mid-40s respectively, meet on holiday in India, where they are both travelling alone – Lou to mark the transition out of a long marriage and Ali about to move in with her lover after years as his mistress. Their shared interest in fashion and design compensates for the fact that they