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# Sex And The Seasoned Woman

Author of the classic bestseller *Passages*

# Gail Sheehy



*Sex and the Seasoned Woman  
Pursuing the Passionate Life*

— Read by the Author —



## Synopsis

A seasoned woman is spicy. She has been marinated in life experience. . . . She can be alternately sweet, tart, bubbly, mellow. She can be maternal and playful. Bossy and submissive. Strong and soft. . . . The seasoned woman knows who she is. She could be any one of us, as long as she is committed to living fully and passionately in the second half of life. In her most groundbreaking work since *Passages* and *The Silent Passage*, bestselling author Gail Sheehy reveals a hidden cultural phenomenon—increased vitality in women’s sex and love lives after fifty. *Sex and the Seasoned Woman* is the story of an intimate revolution taking place under our very noses. Boomer generation women in midlife are open to sex, love, dating, new dreams, exploring spirituality, and revitalizing their marriages as never before. This is a new universe of passionate, liberated women—married and single—who are unwilling to settle for the stereotypical roles of middle age and are now realizing they don’t have to. As life spans grow longer and as societal constraints continue to loosen, older women—once free of the exhausting demands of young children, needy husbands, and demanding careers—find themselves ready to pursue the passionate life. They embrace their “second adulthood” as a period of reawakening. Written in Sheehy’s singularly compelling style, combining interviews and research, this book gives voice to more than a hundred fascinating and colorful women. The inspiring stories tell of wives who reinvigorate their marriages after their children leave the nest as well as divorced, widowed, and long-single women who find new dreams and new loves. Sheehy delineates a crucial link between cultivating a new dream and reopening the pathway to intimacy and sexual pleasure. She also examines the latest medical breakthroughs addressing symptoms that have unnecessarily curtailed women’s sex lives. From women who find their sexuality reawakened by a younger lover, to couples whose marriages survive health crises and grow stronger, to women who finally find a soulmate in their sixties, to stories from seasoned sirens in their seventies, eighties, and even nineties, these portraits cover an enormous range of experience. In them, Sheehy locates the universal patterns that enable us all to recognize and understand our own lives. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Bestselling author and cultural observer Gail Sheehy made history with the publication of *Passages*, which was an international bestseller, appearing in twenty-eight languages. She followed up with *The Silent Passage*, *New Passages*, and *Understanding Men*—*Passages*. Sheehy is also the author of *Hillary's Choice*, a biography of Hillary Clinton, and *Middletown, America*, about a New Jersey town devastated by the World Trade Center attack. A contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* since 1984, Sheehy is the recipient of the Washington Journalism Review Award for Best Magazine Writer in America.

Chapter 1 When Is It My Time? My first glimpse of what I came to recognize as a seasoned woman came in a chance encounter at an Oakland restaurant. A popular entertainer who was seated at the next table overheard me talking with my husband about my book. She leaned over to ask what it would be about. “It’s about sex, love, and dating among women over fifty,” I blurted out. The entertainer’s dinner companion rolled her eyes: “She’s the poster girl for dating and sex after fifty!” The entertainer, whom we’ll call Bebe to protect her anonymity, was eager to elaborate. Bebe had been raised in the South with parents who were in love until the day they died. She had fully expected that she, like they, would marry for life. And happily, she had enjoyed an extended sexual honeymoon with the man she married in her twenties. It was in her forties that Bebe began to notice the cracks in their marriage. “But it’s like you see a hairline crack in the wall in your California house and you say, ‘Not to worry.’ A couple of years later, you notice the crack is now a quarter inch wide—don’t panic, it’s a plaster thing. Then one big shake and the whole house tumbles down and you say, ‘Wow, how did that happen?’” In retrospect, she understands. Her frustration with her marriage was an echo of the complaint that

fortyish husbands used before feminism went mainstream: “I’ve grown and, unfortunately, she hasn’t.” In Bebe’s marriage, as in many more today, it was the husband who resisted taking risks to grow. It took her five years to get up the courage to ask for a divorce. She took that final step a few months before her fiftieth birthday. “You must be crazy,” she told herself. “You’re going to spend the rest of your life home alone watching reruns of *The Brady Bunch*.” But it wasn’t like that at all. Quite the opposite, she says; it’s been the greatest adventure of her life. The sociologist in me cast about for a context into which to fit this revelation. In fact, even while Bebe was settled into staid married life, a new public square of midlife singles was being flooded with divorced and never-married women and men. All the old rules were up for renegotiation. What was it like out there? I prodded. In the first couple of years after her divorce, Bebe said, she had felt shell-shocked. “I went through a stage of mourning and learning to be alone. But people kept coming into my path. I met men at the airport, the grocery store, at church. Because once I started opening my eyes, there were really men everywhere. It wasn’t like I was shopping, but they were flirting with me, talking to me, asking me out.” Her therapist told her, “You have a neon sign on your forehead that blares: Available.” “Pretty young women with firm bodies scared me as long as I saw myself as having to compete with them,” she explained. “But what I found is I’m not in the same pool as they are. The older men who are looking for twenty- or thirty-something hard bodies are not the men who would look at me to begin with. These are two different universes.” Bebe’s first dating experience turned the usual calculations on their head. He was a young man she met in church—and not just a little younger, fifteen years younger than she. “I was flabbergasted,” said Bebe. “I was thinking, ‘This gorgeous young man wants to go out with me?’ She bit the bullet and asked him, “Do you really know how old I am?” He said he didn’t care. She told him anyway: fifty. He didn’t seem fazed. He said she was smart and interesting and he just liked talking to her; he wanted to pursue it. I asked Bebe if it was a revelation to her to have sex with somebody that young after living so many years with her husband. Her eyes danced and her voice jumped an octave. “Oh, yeah! It was quite wonderful.” Bebe quickly qualified her expectations. “I never looked at him as somebody I was going to spend the rest of my life with. I don’t think he looked at me in that way, either. For six months we enjoyed each other’s company and had a lot of fun. I believe people come into your life for a reason. He was the one who came into my life to say, ‘It’s gonna be okay, you can do this.’” Getting over that hurdle was the

big one.Â• Most of our grandmothers would find this a strange conversation. Half a century ago, there were certainly exceptional 50-year-old women who had lovers, and married people in their sixties and seventies who still enjoyed each other sexually. But it wasnÂ•t the norm. As the boundaries of our life span continue to expand in startling ways, the social definitions of age have shifted with the force of tectonic plates, altering just about everything. Not all of us are as flashy as Bebe, nor do we all want to be, but I soon found that she is at the forefront of a trend. She is honest enough to admit that she misses some things about marriage. Â“When it was going well, we had great companionship.Â• But like most women over 50 who can afford to walk away from a relationship if it has become a safe but hollow shell, Bebe savors her independence. She may have a neon sign on her forehead blinking Available, but it doesnÂ•t advertise Looking for Husband. She is looking for fun, companionship, maybe intimacy, but definitely satisfying sex. Â“Sex and the Seasoned Woman is a book about a new universe of lusty, liberated women, some married and some not, who are unwilling to settle for the stereotypical roles of middle age. We are rediscovering who we are, or who weÂ•d set out to be before we became wrapped up in the roles of our First Adulthood, when our primary focus was on nurturing children, husbands, or careersÂ• or all three. Millions of women today have struggled through all the predictable crises of their Tryout Twenties, Turbulent Thirties, and Forlorn Forties, and are bursting out into a whole new territory. Men, as they approach their fifties and sixties and start feeling the push to retire, often get a little shaky, wondering, Who will I be once stripped of the robes and powers of my position in the workplace? Women have changed robes so many times, theyÂ•re ready to strip down and start fresh, feeling a boost of independence, exhilaration about what could lie ahead, and a surge of new powers. What makes a seasoned woman? Time. A seasoned woman is spicy. She has been marinated in life experience. Like a complex wine, she can be alternately sweet, tart, sparkling, mellow. She is both maternal and playful. Assured, alluring, and resourceful. She is less likely to have an agenda than a young womanÂ•no biological clock tick-tocking beside her loverÂ•s bed, no campaign to lead him to the altar, no rescue fantasies. The seasoned woman knows who she is. She could be any one of us, as long as she is committed to living fully and passionately in the second half of her life, despite failures and false starts. Single boomer women like Bebe are not the only ones who are actively, even aggressively, seeking romance again, declaring their right to sexual satisfaction, and dreaming new dreams. Their boldness has caught on with Â“ladiesÂ• of earlier generations who were taught that their role was only to oblige their husbands and pick up after their children. Margaret, an old friend and former radical who was still married to her only husband and

living in rural New Hampshire, confided to me how shocked she was to hear stories from her contemporary female friends who are divorced or widowed in their sixties or seventies.

“They’re having romantic escapades with young guys, they talk about erotic discoveries, a couple of them have fallen in love again, but they want relationships beyond conventional marriage.” Margaret still thought of herself as the free spirit who had walked the wild side in the 1960s. “I was the rebel, and they were the stick-in-the-muds. Now I’m the old married fuddy-duddy.” But you do not have to break up your marriage to change your life. Long-married women are also waking up to the possibilities of postmenopausal sensuality and proposing new contracts to shake the staleness out of their relationships and release their deferred creative energies. I met a California couple in which the husband had given up a stressful career as an attorney to help his wife pursue her dream: opening her own bookstore. Life partners who help each other feed and grow their passions can enjoy the magnified rewards of a marriage revitalized in middle life. Counting Backward Just how old is a seasoned woman? I define it very much the way Auntie Mame’s friend Vera did when asked, “How old are you, anyway?” “Somewhere between forty and death.” It’s not over at 45 or 50, “it’s being sex, intimacy, discovery of a new identity and a new passion in life. On the contrary, it begins all over again. Today, 50 is the start of a whole new cycle. You may have already lived an entire adulthood, but now you are at the beginning of another one.” a portion of the life span that I identified in 1995 as our Second Adulthood. Women’s lives are long and have many seasons. As contemporary women, if we’re healthy, we will likely be around longer than our mothers were. As I first reported in *New Passages*, epidemiologists say that a woman who reaches the age of 50 free of cancer and heart disease can expect to...

I first found out about this book in January, 2006 when Parade Magazine wrote 2 pages about it. I was shocked at how much I saw about my self in those short pages. Feelings which I thought I alone had and then to see it on paper and to know that others of "seasoned age" were feeling the same things made me feel vindicated and that I was not "one of a kind." Needless to say, as soon as it came out, I read it. Sheehy comes up with categories and then elaborates on them. It was very easy to place myself in one. To my way (60+ years) of thinking, this is not a book about titillation but about feelings and enlightenment. It helped me reassess my life and goals because at this age, "it ain't over till it's over" and we should enjoy each day to the fullest. Thanks Gail. You and I are the same age and we have "grown up" together from "Passages" to "The Silent Passage" and now to this book and each one was timely to my age at the time. I have recommended the other books to

close friends as I read them and now have purchased several of these books to give to close friends so they, too, can find the Seasoned Woman in themselves.

I love Gail Sheehy but this isn't one of her best books. There was nothing groundbreaking that I hadn't already read somewhere else. Try Pathfinders. That WAS groundbreaking.

Gail Sheehy does her homework!

I am a great Gail Sheehy fan, but as a male this may be one of the best to understand the fair sex we so appreciate in our lives.

I loved Gail Sheehy's "Passages" and have, for many years, used the concepts in it in my work. Her great gift is to collect examples of complex human behavior and add value by then having these seemingly random observations come together into a sensible, useful pattern. She creates "buckets" and then deepens our understanding by explaining the contents of these buckets with insightful personal illustrations and storytelling. Honestly, I'd not followed her career since that time, and read this book on recommendation of a friend. I was enormously glad I did. Sheehy's pervasive curiosity and optimism inform every page. After being exposed to a fairly rigorous framework for viewing women after age 40, we learn that 40% or so are into or ready for functioning as "seasoned women." These are courageous, life-embracing people who have learned but not become embittered, and who enjoy life from a platform of risk acceptance out of self-confidence in these learnings. It's not a retelling of "Sex in the City." If you're looking for endless dishing, you might come away really disappointed. However, there is plenty of wonderful storytelling. And the stories are not just about finally ending WMD\* marriages. They also affirm the deepest satisfactions of long-term relationships and disclose some wisdom about how to keep those relationships viable and, more importantly, personally rewarding for all concerned. My personal understanding of how women at this age think and function was deepened immeasurably. And I was left with a great optimism about the future we all share. "Life is what we make it." Optimism is a choice, and the wisest choice any of us can make. I thank Gail for giving us all this wonderful book.

What I find so offensive and patently dishonest from this book is the double standard of characterizing men and women. An example of this is the snide nasty way she refers to men who leave a relationship for a younger woman. But for the women in her examples it is honored and

freeing- they got the young buck. Her disdain for men throughout the book is apparent. The whole read, while flowing and easy is set on creating a reality through sketchy examples of women's life stories that seems manipulated to fulfill her vision of how the world should be. There are some empowering nuggets, but taken in context of the whole message and journey in the book ultimately it is simply a sad display that will offer little real help to women and men who will come to realize that this the real world and Gail Sheehy is living in a fantasy world.

Gail Sheehy's **SEX AND THE SEASONED WOMAN: PURSUING THE PASSIONATE LIFE** also enjoys a reading by the author as it surveys women's love and sex lives after 50. Boomer women in midlife are still open to sex, love and marriage changes: Sheehy describes how, using interviews and research to fuel her insights.

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