



Between a Rock and a Hot Place

By Tracey Jackson
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Introduction

As she approached her fiftieth birthday, Tracey Jackson found herself bombarded at the gym, at parties, in conversations with friends by a catchphrase on everyone's lips. "Fifty is the new thirty" and the endless magazine articles, photos, and T-shirts proclaiming the new aphorism had apparently bloomed out of a collective sense of denial, masking the true fears of a generation unwilling to relinquish their youth.

With a comedy writer's training and a screenwriter's eye for detail, Jackson skewers the myth in *Between a Rock and a Hot Place*, a hilarious, bare-knuckled, and ultimately practical appraisal of what middle age *really* means today. Willing not only to face the elephant in the room, but to put him under a (large) microscope, Jackson confronts the truth about death, work, and sex in what the French call the "third age," using poignant, laugh-out-loud stories from her life. Jackson examines the changing

roles of motherhood and wifehood; the necessity of planning a "career after your career"; the unvarnished reality of our aging bodies; and the generational shift in our perception of age ("Tight abs was not a phrase my grandmother had ever heard. And even if she had, her response would likely have been, *Who needs that when you have a girdle?*").

Turning fifty is a wake-up call but one that can be greeted with a plan. Recounting the changes she went through, the things she learned (and things she didn't) en route to fifty, *Between a Rock and a Hot Place* navigates, with unsparing honesty and unerring wit, the confusion and uncertainty of the most significant uncharted transition in our lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the opening chapter of *Between a Rock and a Hot Place*, Tracey looks back in time to try and figure out how "fifty" has changed over the years. How did we even get to a place where one can actually assert that, "fifty is the new thirty"? Tracey uses her grandmother and her mother as examples of how fifty has changed over the last few decades. When you look back in your own life, how were your grandmother, aunts and mother different at fifty or sixty than you are today? What changes do you see in older women today compared to those of yesteryear? Do you think we're better off, or worse? Are we trying too hard, like Tracey's mother, or was it better to buy a big girdle and eat some more cake like Tracey's grandmother?
2. Why fifty? Tracey bases much of her book on why fifty is not the new thirty. Why do you think fifty is such a turning point both psychologically and emotionally? Why do you think many people consider fifty as the beginning of being old? Do you see it this way? Also, why is thirty such an appealing age? What changed in your life between these two decades?
3. Many people think every book about fifty-year old-women is another menopause book. While *Between a Rock and a Hot Place* is not exclusively a health book, menopause does play a part. In chapter two Tracey deals with her own battle with menopause and the conflicting information that doctors and society send her and our way. Menopause affected many things in her life: her mood, her libido, her sense of self. How has menopause changed your life? What differences do you notice in your quality of life? Like Tracey, do you grapple with seeking relief through HRT, or are you happy to sit it out? Do you think society overplays or underplays the importance of this enormous change in a woman's life? How can we help and support each other as we enter this stage of life, which is far more than just a phase?
4. Tracey writes rather graphically about her sex life and the changes in her sexuality over the last several years. She misses the way she felt at thirty and in her early forties. She tries to bring it back, but comes to the conclusion that we have to adapt with the times and do our best with where we are now. Do you share these feelings? How important a role do you think sex plays in our lives as we age?
5. Tracey talks about the fact that when we get to our fifties many of the roles we have played start to shift. Our children leave home, our parents pass away, some of our friends get sick (and a few don't recover). Many of us lose our jobs. What surprised Tracey was that no one had properly prepared her for this. No one actually tells you, "Guess what? Your world is going to look very different in many ways starting soon. It's not all bad, but get ready." Do you think we should be prepared in advance? Do you think that the way society preps little girls for the second third of life (college, marriage, career and kids) but leaves out the last third is harmful? How would you prepare your daughter? What do you wish your mother or older mentor had told you?
6. When Tracey loses her job as a Hollywood screenwriter she is thrown for a loop. After spending several months in a funk, she pulls herself together and follows the advice of a quote she finds from Virginia Woolf: "Arrange whatever pieces come your way." How do you relate to this? If you needed to start arranging your pieces, would you know what or where they are, or would you have to dig deep to find them?
7. Tracey wrote the book from her personal experience of turning fifty. Not everyone goes through everything at the same time. However, when groups of women get together to start a dialogue, we find that pretty much everyone experiences several life-altering events around this age. Tracey likes to call it the "list of three." For her the turning point came when she lost her job, her daughter left for college, and her closest friend since childhood died suddenly at the age of 51. What is your list of three? How have these events altered your life or the way you look at the world?
8. If you ask a woman over fifty how she feels about her looks, she will invariably reel off a list of complaints. While beauty is only skin

deep, we are a culture that cares a great deal about appearance. Tracey is open about her commitment to decelerating the physical aging process. Some people may find this shallow; they think, just get on with it, be gray, fat and happy. What's your take? Do you think society holds women to stricter standards than men on this front? What part do you think this plays in the increase in the use of fillers and plastic surgery? If you could alter anything in your appearance, what would it be?

9. Tracey feels that the biggest problem with looking at our lives and shaving off those twenty years is that if we do this we end up making choices that are not in sync with where we are—be they financial, emotional or professional. She says, "I think this is one of the giant lessons in adapting to age without losing your mind: we must let go of what was and begin accepting what is." Do you agree with her? What decisions are you making now that require you to accept where you are on the wheel of life? Are you attached to the past or moving steadily into your future?

10. Tracey maintains that one of the reasons we don't embrace aging is that we are afraid of it—part of the reason being that our society embraces the young, but tends to ignore the old. The truth is, we don't have many older female role models. Tracey says we have to go out there and find some positive role models that show us how to live engaged, interesting lives well into our eighties. Tracey has three women in her life she looks up to in this way. Can you think of three women over the age of sixty-five you can look to as examples of women who have aged successfully and happily? If not, go out and find some—they are out there!

11. If we let our fears rule us they will hold us back. Tracey says, "The moral, of course, is that if we run toward our fears, they lose their power and ultimately disappear . . . 'Fate loves the fearless.' There is no better time to be fearless than in your fifties; if you really put your mind and your energy into it, you can make amazing things happen." Can you imagine embracing this philosophy as your own, and if so, what kind of a difference do you think it could make in how you live your life?

About the Author

A screenwriter for seventeen years, Tracey Jackson has written and sold films to all the major studios. She blogs on her own website and for the *Huffington Post*. She lives in New York City with her husband, Glenn Horowitz, and two daughters. You can follow her on Twitter @TraceyJackson4.