

Navigating the Messy Middle

A Fiercely Honest
and Wildly
Encouraging Guide
for Midlife Women

Ann Douglas

Author of bestselling *The Mother of All Books*® series



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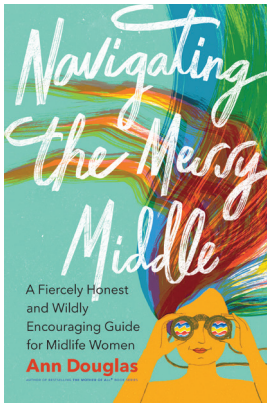


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NAVIGATING THE MESSY MIDDLE:

A FIERCELY HONEST AND WILDLY ENCOURAGING GUIDE FOR MIDLIFE WOMEN

Roughly 68 million North American women currently grapple with the challenges of midlife, faced with a culture that tells them their “best-before date” has long passed. In *Navigating the Messy Middle*, Ann Douglas pushes back against this toxic narrative, providing a fierce and unapologetic book for and about midlife women.



Ann Douglas gives us the context, the compassion and the courage needed to understand the challenges, gifts and opportunities that midlife presents. It reads both like a manifesto and a heart-to-heart with your closest friends—**Brandie Weikle, Editor & Publisher, thenewfamily.com**

IN THIS DEEPLY VALIDATING and encouraging book, Douglas interviews well over one hundred women of different backgrounds and identities, sharing their diverse conversations about the complex and intertwined issues that women must grapple with at midlife: from family responsibilities to career pivots, health concerns to building community. Readers will find a book that offers practical, evidence-based strategies for thriving at midlife, coupled with compelling first-person stories.

Areas of interest that Ann Douglas speaks to:

- The growing body of research and resulting scientific literature focused on analyzing what is necessary to thrive in midlife. Douglas translates abstract research findings into powerful insights and strategies that every woman can apply to her own life.
- Douglas interviews multiple subject-matter experts, sharing their unique insights about aging, wellness, career pivots, building community, and finding meaning at midlife.
- The unexpected, but predictable, midlife roadmap that developmental psychologists have identified as a midlife “to do list” of sorts—a set of psychological tasks that tend to take up a lot of space in our brains at midlife.

ANN DOUGLAS is a bestselling parenting author and a frequent contributor to CBC Radio. She is the creator of the Mother of All Books® series, which have sold over half a million copies in North America to date. She lives in Highland Grove, ON.

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WOMEN’S HEALTH/SELF-HELP
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For more information, or to schedule an interview with **Ann Douglas**, contact:

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ANN DOUGLAS BIO

Photo by
Neil Douglas



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For decades, **ANN DOUGLAS** was Canada's go-to expert on all things parenting. Now that her kids have grown up and left home, she's turning her attention to the glorious messiness that is midlife. And she hasn't just been researching it, she's been living it: trying to find her own way through all that messiness—career curveballs, mental and physical health challenges, a house fire, relationship highs and lows, the death of a parent, and so on.

Ann is the author of twenty-five non-fiction books, including many bestselling titles in the parenting category, such as *The Mother of All®* series, and a passionate and inspiring speaker who delivers keynote addresses and leads small-group workshops at conferences and online events.

She and her husband Neil live on a lake in rural Ontario, where she is hard at work trying to teach herself how to write a novel and paddle a kayak (but not necessarily at the same time). Visit anndouglas.ca for more details.

A Conversation with Ann Douglas:

- *Why “the messy middle”?*

Because midlife itself is messy—especially for women. It’s a time in our lives when our roles and responsibilities are changing and we’re trying to connect the dots between past, present, and future—to figure out who we’ve been, who we are, and who we hope to become. And, at the same time, we’re being faced with all kinds of confusing messages about what it means to be at midlife. “Midlife is magical!” “Midlife is miserable!” What we eventually figure out is that it’s actually a little of both. The truth is somewhere in the middle. The messy middle! I thought it was important to be really honest about that.

- *This book is based on conversations with more than 100 midlife women. What kinds of things did you talk about?*

Short answer? Pretty much everything!

We talked about our hopes and dreams and our worries and regrets, plus our ongoing struggles, big and small, to make sense of this middle chapter of our lives—a time when our bodies, lives, and relationships tend to be in flux.

We acknowledged our feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm—the fact that midlife is a time of life when we tend to be carrying an exceptionally heavy load and when we’re relied upon by an awful lot of people.

We celebrated the brilliance of our midlife brains: their ability to spot patterns and solve problems in a way that simply wasn’t possible when we were younger.

And we talked about what we want most for ourselves, the people we care about, and our planet moving forward—and the role we see ourselves playing in that.

A Conversation with Ann Douglas:

● *In your book, you talk about the fact that midlife is a life stage that has tended to be poorly researched, at least compared to other life stages. Could you talk a bit about that?*

For many years, there was a lot of interest in studying the beginning stages of life and the end stages of life, but the middle stages—adulthood itself—was pretty much ignored. Then, starting in the 1970s, there was a lot of interest in talking about the so-called “midlife crisis,” but no one was really studying how things played out in middle adulthood in any kind of sustained, scholarly way.

The situation began to improve as we headed into the 1980s, but too often, studying midlife meant studying midlife men (and often midlife executive men in particular). And when scholars remembered to focus their research on women, the women that they studied were almost always white, middle-class heterosexual women.

In recent years, researchers have started to take a much more intersectional approach to studying the lives of midlife women. This is important because there’s no such thing as a “typical” midlife woman. As scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw have noted, social and political identities like race, class, gender, sexual identity and age intersect with one another in a way that amplifies both inequality and privilege. In other words, midlife isn’t experienced the same way by all women.

In my book, I highlight a few of the more noteworthy findings that have emerged from this much more intersectional approach to studying midlife women: the fact that white women are more likely than Black women to experience heightened levels of what researchers call “declining attractiveness anxiety”; and the fact that Black women are far less likely to obsess about their weight at midlife than white women. And that’s just two very specific examples.

A Conversation with Ann Douglas:

● *Your book contains a couple of detailed chapters about midlife women's health. What are some of the more surprising or noteworthy things you learned while researching this book?*

A couple of things really jumped out at me.

First of all, sleep. I guess I'd always known on some level that midlife can be an exhausting life stage for many women, but I hadn't recognized just how sleep deprived the majority of women actually are. Roughly 59 percent of perimenopausal women and 40 percent of postmenopausal women report sleeping fewer than seven hours a day, which means that the majority of midlife women are routinely missing out on the seven-to-nine hours of sleep they need each day to function at their best. Is it any wonder that so many midlife women feel like they're sleepwalking through their lives some days? And it's not enough to tell midlife women to "just get more sleep," by the way. The current generation of women really resents that kind of simplistic self-help advice—and they're practically allergic to messages about self-care. They're much more interested in having deeper conversations about what's actually robbing them of sleep—the deeper systemic issues that conspire to rob women of sleep.

The other thing that I learned—and that really surprised me, actually—was just how anxious midlife women are about aging and about experiencing declining health in particular. Only one in five midlife women actually manages to steer clear of this particular worry ("declining health anxiety," according to the researchers). It's hardly surprising, given how many messages our culture gives us about the importance of "aging well" and not becoming a "burden" to anyone else. It's a simplistic and wrong-headed narrative—and one that causes a lot of harm to midlife women.

A Conversation with Ann Douglas:

- *What would you say to a woman who is terrified about heading into midlife or going through menopause?*

I would tell her that midlife has been my very favourite life stage. By the time you arrive at midlife, you have a lot of living under your belt. You know yourself so much better than you did when you were younger, and you've learned to be kinder to yourself. That makes life so much better and easier. Or at least, that's been my experience.

And as for all those scary stories she may have been hearing about menopause? I would tell her that there's a solid body of research to show that menopause is a whole lot less scary when you're looking at it from the vantage point of the rear-view mirror. Only five percent of women who have actually been through it describe it as a really big deal.

- *This book talks a lot about daring to imagine better—both for yourself and everyone else.*

That is a recurrent theme in the book, for sure. As I write in the early pages of the book, "Midlife requires a radical imagination: a willingness to tell ourselves new and better stories about our lives."

We need stories that honour our own unique journeys, that celebrate all the learning and growth that happens at midlife, and that highlight the importance of journeying through midlife with others.

There's so much to talk about—and I'm really hoping that this book will help to spark a lot of really important conversations between midlife women.

The **7** Biggest Myths and Misconceptions About Midlife



1

That there's anything even remotely resembling a one-size-fits midlife experience with a predictable beginning, middle, and end.

2

That a midlife crisis is inevitable or that you're doomed to feel miserable (the result of a dip in the much disputed "happiness curve").

3

That you're destined to feel devastated when your kids leave home and that you're doomed to spend the rest of your life languishing in a so-called "empty nest."

4

That arriving at midlife means that you've long since reached your "best before date" and it's all downhill from here: physically, mentally, and in terms of your relationships and quality of life.

5

That midlife is about totally reinventing your life in far-reaching (and expensive) ways; and that if you're not burning everything to the ground, you're somehow doing midlife wrong.

6

That your midlife experience will be similar to what your parents or grandparents experienced when, in fact, there are significant generational differences.

7

That you should expect to be financially set for life—that the majority of midlife women are able to indulge in endless luxury travel and/or enjoy endless "me time."

Questions that Ann Douglas can Answer On-air/In-print/On-line:

Ann Douglas is hoping that her book will inspire midlife women to reflect on the joys, challenges, meaning, and potential of this one-of-a-kind life stage and that they'll be eager to share some of their thinking with other women. Below is a list of questions that she drew upon in her interviews with the women who spoke with her for her book. Ann would welcome the opportunity to help facilitate that conversation—and to contribute some of her own stories to the discussion.

- What does society get wrong and right about what it's actually like to be a woman at midlife?
- What were your expectations of midlife? How have those expectations measured up to the reality? What would younger you find most surprising, most frustrating, or most exciting about the way your life turned out and/or the person you've become?
- What have been the high points and the low points in your own personal journey through midlife? What lessons have you learned or insights have you gained from these experiences? What strengths have you developed along the way?
- What does the view from midlife look like for you? Do you find yourself looking backward or forward? In what ways are you able to connect the dots between past, present, and future? In what ways are you able to spot evidence of both continuity and change?
- What are your hopes and dreams for yourself, your family, your friends, your community, and our world moving forward—and what role do you see yourself playing in attempting to realize those hopes and dreams?

What People are Saying About

NAVIGATING THE MESSY MIDDLE:

**A FIERCELY HONEST AND WILDLY
ENCOURAGING GUIDE FOR MIDLIFE WOMEN**

by **Ann Douglas**

“

I have appreciated Ann Douglas' insights on parenting for many years. She is kind, honest and clear-eyed, and much less patronizing than other relationships writers. She puts these skills to great use in Navigating the Messy Middle, which comes at a perfect time for me, as I try to evolve into the next stage of my life. The book shows middle-aged women that we're not alone and able to build community, while encouraging us to prioritize what makes our unique selves satisfied and happy. Thank you, Ann, as always

–Denise Balkissoon, Ontario Bureau Chief, The Narwhal & former Executive Editor, Chatelaine

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“

This book tackles the complex and often misunderstood topic of women's lived experience of mid-life, with insights from interviews with more than one hundred women. Written in a style that is both accessible and informative, Ann Douglas brings us a book which delivers on her intentions "to shine a spotlight on the radical, transformative potential of midlife". In these pages, the reader is invited into a cornucopia of women's stories, challenging the invisibility often associated with this stage of life, and ultimately drawing us towards a collective reimagining of the female life cycle

–Molly Andrews, co-director Association for Narrative Research and Practice

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“

If you're a woman facing the beautiful, messy, occasionally harsh realities of mid-life, this compelling new book from bestselling author Ann Douglas is for you. It offers a candid exploration of what it means to be a middle-aged woman in modern western society, a role which sees us at once indispensable and empowered, yet often invisible and ignored. It's an eye-opening read, and well worth your precious time

–Catherine Clark, Co-Founder, The Honest Talk

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“

This is the midlife book we've been missing! In her inimitable style, Ann Douglas demystifies midlife and launches a conversation with inclusion, justice, compassion, and honesty at its core. Navigating the Messy Middle will be well-loved, dogeared, underlined, and passed from friend to friend. It will encourage continued conversations between women who, after reading this book, will know for sure that they aren't alone

–Sara Smeaton, Midlife Coach

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“

*Western culture has a way of disappearing women at middle age, and author Ann Douglas is having none of it. In *Navigating the Messy Middle*, Douglas challenges the prevailing narrative that women in midlife are a product past their prime - diminishing in value and increasingly irrelevant. Combatting this culturally prescribed march toward invisibility, Douglas centres a diversity of women who, through sharing their stories, weave an alternate narrative - a broader, kinder, more accurate, and more inclusive narrative that is ripe with the realities, possibilities, complexities and contradictions experienced by women in midlife*

–Kathryn Adams-Sloan, Chair of the Women's Caucus to the Canadian Association for Social Work Education

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*In *Navigating the Messy Middle*, Ann Douglas gives us the context, the compassion and the courage needed to understand the challenges, gifts and opportunities that midlife presents. It reads both like a manifesto and a heart-to-heart with your closest friends*

–Brandie Weikle, Editor & Publisher, thenewfamily.com

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*Our culture paints a vague yet bleak picture of menopause, and the result is a population of women who see their first hot flash as the beginning of the end. But midlife is about more than menopause. It's nuanced and multifaceted, and where there can sometimes be misery, there can also be magic, as Ann Douglas illustrates persuasively in her new book, *Navigating the Messy Middle*. Written clearly and compellingly with a mix of science-backed information and real-life stories, *Navigating the Messy Middle* will inevitably find a wide, appreciative audience. Reading it made me feel seen, understood and empowered, and my anxiety about this period in my life has been replaced by curiosity and optimism. If you buy one book about midlife, make it this one*

–Kim Shiffman, Editor-in-Chief, *Today's Parent*

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“

Ann Douglas puts it all on the line in her brutally honest and heartfelt account of women's complicated lives. She draws from a wide range of women's experiences to help us navigate this precarious time of our lives. Applying surgical myth-busting to harmful narratives that disappear middle aged women, Ann Douglas takes us on a life-affirming journey of 'becoming' while basking in the wisdom of women. This book couldn't have come at a better time. As women's rights are being rolled back, through her storytelling, Ann Douglas encourages all women to embrace their power and imagine a new future, a better future for all. Just the Kool-Aid we need to fuel the next wave of the women's movement and a cultural make-over for ourselves and the world we love. Reading it has been a bit of an emotional journey. I think most women will have the same reaction - feeling seen, validated and celebrated!

– Kelly Carmichael, Former Executive Director, Fair Vote Canada

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“

If we're lucky, we all occasionally have one of those evenings with friends where we vent about everything rattling around in our brains and lives, and realize that the answer to the question "Is it just me?" is a resounding no. This book is one of those evenings between two covers, delivered with Douglas's signature wisdom, perspective, warmth and wit

–Shannon Proudfoot, journalist

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“

In this comprehensive overview of mid-life, Ann Douglas weaves a powerful tapestry of narratives, rich with the colours of many voices. The result is a precious gift for women feeling lost, desperate, or alone in midlife, since Douglas reveals, vibrantly, how peril is outweighed by potential and that midlife can be a 'journey of becoming.' This is an important and much-needed book

–Beth Powning, author of *Edge Seasons: A Midlife Year*

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“

The best thing about Ann Douglas's perspective, as always, is her understanding that one-size-fits-all advice fits no one. Instead, in *Navigating the Messy Middle*, readers will discover an empowering guide to finding one's own way through the ups and downs of midlife, a time when seeking strength in connection, embracing the changeability of the physical self, and focusing on one's real values and priorities can create a powerful moment of (finally!) becoming

–Kerry Clare, author of *Waiting for a Star to Fall*

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