

THE MIDDLEPAUSE

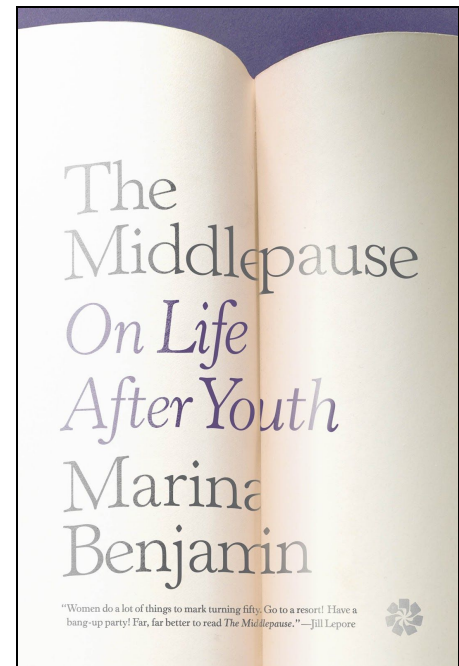
On Life After Youth

by Marina Benjamin

A Reading Group Guide

The Middlepause offers a vision of contentment in middle age, without sentiment or delusion. Marina Benjamin weighs the losses and opportunities of our middle years, taking inspiration from literature, science, philosophy, and her own experience. Spurred by her surgical propulsion into a sudden menopause, she finds ways to move forward while maintaining clear-eyed acknowledgment of the challenges of aging. Attending to complicated elderly parents and a teenaged daughter, experiencing bereavement, her own health woes, and a fresh impetus to give back what's been given to her, Benjamin emerges into a new definition of herself as daughter, mother, citizen, and woman.

Among *The Middlepause's* many wise observations about no longer being young: "I am discovering that I care less about what other people think." "My needs are leaner and my storehouse fuller." "I have always had a knee-jerk distaste for the idea that age is all in the mind . . . it is not possible to fully appreciate what it means to age without attending to what the body knows." "You need a cohort of peers to go through the aging process with you. A cackle of crones! A cavalry!" Marina Benjamin's memoir offers comfort and companionship to women going through the too-seldom-spoken-of physical and mental changes in middle age and beyond.



About the Author

Marina Benjamin is the author of two previous memoirs, *Rocket Dreams*, short-listed for the Eugene Emme Award, and *Last Days in Babylon*, long-listed for the Wingate Prize. She lives in London and is currently a senior editor at the digital magazine *Aeon*.

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Questions and Topics for Discussion

- 1 Has this book influenced how you think about midlife? How so?
- 2 Marina Benjamin writes: “It’s more a mental menopause I’ve been struggling with,’ one friend told me, ‘with every significant choice I’ve ever made suddenly up for review—education, career choice, where to live, children; even your key relationship, which is so established, it requires work.” Have you felt this way? If so, how have you handled such a personal review?
- 3 Benjamin claims, “Any decision to take estrogen is political.” Do you agree?
- 4 “If my daughter and I tussle it is because each of us, not just her, is striving to find her own ground.” Have you felt similar tensions in your relationship with your children?
- 5 A small accident—a fall—“foreshadows a state of collapse.” Have you suffered a fall, or another instance in which you felt your confidence undermined by your body? If so, how did it affect how you relate to your physical self?
- 6 “It is a truism that when a parent dies you’re suddenly confronted with your mortality But I have come to believe that with this awareness of succession one also begins to scratch around for loose threads that might be tied back into the previous generation Think of it as a kind of emotional darning.” If you have experienced the loss of a parent, how do you feel about Benjamin’s reflections?
- 7 “Many of us spend the first halves of our lives running away from the source . . . severing our connections along the way, only to embark on the second half attempting to find the way back.” Do you see this pattern in your own life? What do you understand and, possibly, value, about your background now that you did not in your younger years?
- 8 Benjamin and her late friend Kirsty Milne’s friends gather and promise to hold an annual “unforgetting” for their friend. If you could host such an “unforgetting,” who would it be for? What would the ideal “unforgetting” for this person involve?

- 9 Benjamin writes that she approaches mirrors with “renewed trepidation”: “I police my features for signs of decay. . . .” How has your relationship with mirrors, reflections, and appearances evolved?
- 10 “I have always had a knee-jerk distaste for the idea that age is all in the mind. . . . It is not possible to fully appreciate what it means to age without attending to what the body knows.” What do you think of this notion of bodily knowledge?
- 11 Benjamin criticizes self-help books, while admitting how alluring they can be. Have you read any self-help books? If so, what was your experience of them?
- 12 On page 133, Benjamin quotes a passage from Colette’s novel, *Break of Day*: “An age comes for a woman, when, instead of clinging to beautiful feet that are impatient to roam the world . . . the only thing that is left for her is to enrich her own self.” How would you define such enrichment? What would enrichment of the self consist of in your own life?