

[View in browser](#)



Follow Stella on social



STELLA FOSSE



VAMPIRES OF A CERTAIN AGE

If you've read [*Vampires of a Certain Age*](#), please post your honest review on Amazon, Goodreads, or wherever you like to review books. It's the best gift you can give an author. And if you haven't yet read the first installment of the Matriarchal Vampire Series, the time is right, because the prequel is coming!

Buy [Vampires of a Certain Age](#) ebook direct from the Stella bookstore, [here](#).

Hobson's Choice (And a Third Way)

Imagine you are a film actress. In your twenties and thirties you make a movie a year: delicious roles where you play the ingenue, the love interest, the young bride. You've heard rumors that at forty the tap runs dry, but as you ride the waves of success, it's hard to believe it will ever end. Then you turn forty and the phone really does stop ringing. No calls from your agent, no scripts to review.

Years go by. You're not making movies but in every other way life is grand. You have lovers, you go to the gym, you take up abstract painting. And then, finally, a script comes your way about a woman in a love triangle. But that's not the role you're offered. You are up for the part of the grandmother with dementia.

Do you take the part and play a role that has nothing to do with life as you're living it (and everything to do with gendered ageist stereotypes)? Or do you turn it down and forego practicing your craft?

"Take it or leave it" is the classic definition of [Hobson's Choice](#), an apparent choice that is really no choice at all. I've been thinking about that while on the horns of my own related dilemma.

For the past several years, my partner and I have been developing [CroneHub](#), a website to showcase the culture of older women. There are so many riches, from books to podcasts to movies that remind us how vibrant our lives can be. Not to be a Pollyanna about it, because we know there are challenges to growing older, but I envision this website as a place to find inspiration: from books like Joan Price's [Naked at Our Age](#) to organizations like Ashton Applewhite's [Old School](#)

[Hub](#) to TED Talks like Mariann Aaldi's "[Ageism is a Bully... Stand Up to It!](#)" Yet, when I began looking at the wider culture of older women, I realized that our culture also reflects the difficult choices that women have had to make. As we approach the launch of the website, I must make my own tough decision: whether to include or exclude the cultural artifacts of other women's Hobson's choices.

[Sunset Boulevard](#) is the ultimate example. This 1950 classic is ranked among the greatest movies ever made. The story centers on Norma Desmond, a former silent movie star who plots her return to the screen post-midlife, a goal which the movie couches as delusional. Her butler writes Norma fake fan mail, while a struggling young screenwriter flatters her about a script he despises that Norma wrote for her comeback. At the end of the movie, when newsreel photographers film her arrest for murdering the screenwriter in a jealous frenzy, Norma believes they are shooting her comeback movie and delivers the classic line, "Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my closeup." This is a movie that portrays an older woman trying to buck the gendered ageist Hollywood system, but instead of exposing that system, it shows the woman herself as evil and insane. Yet the movie is also a classic, for which Gloria Swanson (herself a former silent movie star) won a Golden Globe award.

Mae West turned down the role of Desmond because she refused to portray a has-been, but Swanson loved making the movie and cried when filming was over. In contrast to the character she played, [Gloria Swanson](#) was a powerful figure in Hollywood: a producer with her own production company as well as an award winning film and television actor. She was secure enough in her success that playing this demanding role was exciting, not threatening. As biographer Lon Davis wrote, "Gloria Swanson was not Norma Desmond. Unlike her delusional screen counterpart, Swanson was fiercely realistic. She was also a good actress. Judging by the number of people who think she was Norma Desmond, maybe a little *too* good."

Now I'm faced with this difficult choice: Include *Sunset Boulevard* in CroneHub because of Swanson's brilliant performance? Or exclude *Sunset Boulevard* because it reinforces the absolute worst aspects of gendered ageism?

Or step outside that Hobson's Choice binary and find a third way?

The Path Geena Davis Invented

When her successful movie career ended abruptly on her fortieth birthday, [Geena Davis](#) built her own third way. She founded the Geena Davis Institute, whose motto is, "If She Can See It, She Can Be It." Davis uses her influence to jawbone Hollywood executives about the roles offered to older women and other marginalized people. Her Institute reports on the problems with how older women are portrayed in film. Their report, "[Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten](#)" evaluated the top grossing films of 2019 using the Ageless Test:

In order to pass this test, a film must have:

1. At least one female character who is 50+ who matters and is tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect; and
2. That character must be presented in humanizing ways and not reduced to ageist stereotypes.

The results of their analysis showed stark difference between female and male characters over fifty.

Female characters 50+ are more likely than male characters 50+ to be shown as:

- senile (16.1% versus 3.5%)
- homebound (16.1% versus 2.4%)
- feeble (19.4% versus 5.9%)
- frumpy (19.4% versus 4.7%)

And overall,

- 25% of films had no female character age 50+
- 49% had a female character portrayed in a stereotyped way
- **A mere 28% had a non-stereotyped female character aged 50+**

Davis knew from experience that media shapes perception in the real world. When Davis portrayed the president of the United States in the 2006 show [Commander in Chief](#), a study found that 78% of those who watched the show took the idea of a female candidate more seriously.

Which begs the question: ***How has the on-screen parade of demented and dying women over fifty affect public perception? Not to mention all the movies that ignore our existence altogether.***

"Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten" made these recommendations:

- **Cast More Women Ages 50+:** Increase the presence of older women in films, particularly in significant and diverse roles.
- **Increase Diversity:** Enhance the portrayal of older characters of all backgrounds, including more diverse races and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- **Avoid Stereotyping:** Commit to representing older adults as complex and capable individuals, avoiding clichés of physical and mental decline.
- **Promote Sexual Diversity:** Portray older adults as having active romantic and sexual lives, challenging the taboo against depicting older adults' sexuality.

Those stereotypes are out there in older movies, but Geena Davis and her Institute have clearly made a difference in the ways women past midlife are now portrayed in film. In marked contrast with *Sunset Boulevard*, Hollywood now makes movies like [Good Luck to You, Leo Grande](#), the empowering 2022 film starring Emma Thompson as a 55-year-old woman exploring her sexuality. Unlike Gloria Swanson's role as Norma Desmond, Thompson's role empowers women past midlife with a positive portrayal of sexual life after fifty.

The Third Way for CroneHub

The last thing I want for CroneHub is to reinforce negative stereotypes of older women. As the report recommended, I want to:

Commit to representing older adults [women in particular] as complex and capable individuals, avoiding clichés of physical and mental decline.

Yet I don't want to ignore the contributions women made when portraying stereotyped roles, any more than I want to ignore books about the real health issues faced by older women.

The decision we made for CroneHub is to include films that have significant roles for older women and invoke stereotypes, but to include a disclaimer pointing out that the film fails the Ageist Test and why it's

included anyway. This is, of course, a judgement call, and we may not get it right every time. I'm clear that Gloria Swanson's intense performance in *Sunset Boulevard*, a film that ranks as one of the most important movies of the twentieth century, deserves a place in CroneHub. Other films will be closer calls, and the dividing line may shift over time.

Movies are just one of the resource categories in [CroneHub](#). Other types of resources (books, podcasts, etc.) present their own challenges regarding what to include and what to leave out. I'll write more about those another time. In the meantime, do take a look at CroneHub and let us know what you think. We hope you will find resources that add to your knowledge and enjoyment of Crone Culture. And please give us feedback. CroneHub will continue to evolve.



And keep the pen moving, or the keys clicking.

All the best,

Stella,

stella@stellafosse.com

I'm Ready, Mr. DeMille

I'm thrilled to be part of Janine Vanderburg's [Build Your Own Boat](#) project, where she interviews women who are creating their own gameplan after midlife. Here's how she describes her mission:

What if the most powerful thing you could do right now — for your finances, your freedom, and your future — was to stop waiting for someone else to hand you an opportunity and start building your own?

Build Your Own Boat is the podcast for women in midlife and beyond who are done playing by rules that were never written with them in mind. Hosted

by award-winning 3x entrepreneur Janine Vanderburg, each episode features real conversations with women in midlife and beyond who made the bold decision to bet on themselves — launching businesses and creative ventures, building wealth, and rewriting what entrepreneurship looks like in the second half of life.

In addition to the podcasts themselves (mine is [here](#)), Janine is publishing an article about each of us (here's [mine](#)) and plans a book with the collected essays. I'm gobsmacked to be in the company of women like filmmaker [Melissa Davey](#), [Meg LaPorte](#) of [Art Against Ageism](#), and [Jan Golden](#) of [Age Friendly Vibes](#). And I'm inspired to keep building boats, including our newest venture, [CroneHub](#).

Build Your Own Boat

This Month's Blogs



Invent Your Own Goddess

Stella Fosse



What Are Women Made Of?

Susan Meyer

When pagan author Donna Henes was almost fifty she developed a surprising habit. She began praising herself over even the smallest thing. "Good girl!" she would say to herself if she took the stairs instead of the elevator, or if she really did drink eight glasses of water in a day. It dawned on her that she had been saying "Good boy!" to her dog for years, over the slightest thing; why not do that for herself? In her book *The Queen of My Self*, she writes,

"After a while, it became clear that I was not actually congratulating myself. Rather, I was blessing my Self. What a good girl am I. How incredibly Queenly. The practice of my Self-blessing became my sacred daily ritual, the most holy of all my personal rites. Every morning I would look deeply into my eyes in the mirror and bless myself. The more I valued and validated my Self, the more compassionate toward my Self I became. The more I blessed my Self, the more I counted my blessings, and the more blessed I, myself, became."

I suspect that [blessing ourselves](#) may be more challenging than blessing our pets. So I'd like to propose a work-around: What if

As I child, I remember reciting, "What Are Little Girls Made of? Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice."

Somehow, that never seemed right. The girls and women I knew were made of stronger stuff. Wanting to better define this, I began interviewing women as a graduate student and never stopped. I've interviewed over a hundred women over the past decades, almost all of them over forty, in search of a better definition. Now, I'd say we're made of grit, perseverance, curiosity, connection, and creativity, underscored by love and a sense of humor. Here are a few examples of women who truly showed themselves to be feisty, gutsy broads past forty:

A Woman Made Of...

Gabrielle's story shows grit, perseverance, creativity and connection. Her parents were political activists in South Africa. The family came to the United States when bombs were sent to their home. Having always worn uniforms to school, neither Gabrielle nor her mother knew how New York students dressed,

we each invent our own personal Goddess, and praise her? What if praising a Goddess that we create is a slightly sneaky way of blessing ourselves?

Are you game? Let's give it a try.

First, your Goddess needs a name.

[Read More.....](#)

so Gab's mother felt that Gab's best dress, lace tights and patent leather shoes would show respect. When she got to school and saw her Vietnam war era peers in torn jeans, tee shirts and shoeless, she called her mother to take her and her brother and sister home. She didn't feel comfortable in what the other girls were wearing and started making her own clothes.

[Read More.....](#)

Please Share this Newsletter!



Stella Fosse
400 Glen Creek Road, #5120,
Salem, OR 97304



You received this email because you signed up on my website, a social media site, took a class or bought from me.

You may unsubscribe at anytime, and come back at anytime!.

[Unsubscribe](#)