

PUBLISHING NOW

Kathleen Whyman asks why middle-aged heroines seem to be under-represented in commercial fiction

Female protagonists are primarily in their twenties and thirties, or the story revolves around an inter-generational friendship involving a young millennial befriending an elderly, but feisty, grandmother type. There's very little in between.'

This statement was made by a fellow author and, having asked around, it's a sentiment felt by many. But it doesn't make sense, either from the emotional aim of providing readers with relatable content or from a business perspective. Aside from the fact there are so many women in public life proving how kick-ass you can be in middle age, the statistics also show this demographic is a prime readership market.

According to Nielsen in 2018, only 10 per cent of adults are heavy buyers of fiction (someone who reads more than 10 to 20 books per year). However, among female readers aged 55 to 84, the figure almost doubles to 19 per cent, which is a significant increase.

'This isn't a statistic that should be dismissed when one thinks of reading or writing about interesting, engaging and relatable characters,' says Emily Glenister, associate agent at DHH Literary Agency. 'Women become more interesting with age. This has to do with experience in life and the heavy physical changes that occur, which have a direct impact on emotions,

influencing decisions, relationships and so on. I love reading stories by and about women who have lived a large chunk of their lives, who have real-life experience and who can put all that down on a page in a way that entices and interests the average reader. Even better are the stories featuring middle-aged, and older, protagonists and *not* having the story be about that.'

Katie Seaman, senior commissioning editor at HQ, HarperCollins, agrees. 'We'd love to see a gripping crime thriller or a fun romantic comedy with characters over 40, but where their age isn't the focus,' she says. 'Instead, the focus is on brilliant storytelling whatever the genre.'

'I'd love to see more stories featuring women in their 40s and 50s,' says Sally Williamson, senior commissioning editor at Transworld. 'For me it comes down to a great story pitch. If a writer can come up with a brilliant concept with broad appeal, then it really doesn't matter what age the protagonist is.'

Fewer cocktails, comfier pants

Sara-Jade Virtue, brand development director at Simon & Schuster, describes herself as an older female protagonist.

'As I've grown older, I'm less able to connect to novels where the main character is going through the first stages



Simon & Schuster's
Sara-Jade Virtue

of falling in love,' she says. 'I'm much more drawn to stories of starting over, of women reclaiming their lives after they've lost their identity to motherhood or marriage. I adore multi-generational, uplifting tales that cross age boundaries, but I'm constantly seeking out that sweet spot of "fewer cocktails, more comfy pants" in love stories too.

'I don't think it's true to say that there is "very little" in between the novels aimed at the 20s or the 70s reader,' Virtue goes on to say. 'It is out there, but you definitely have to look harder for it. We're actively seeking a broad and diverse range of books for everyone, regardless of identity or background.'

'Now, more than ever before, publishing is trying to be truly inclusive,' echoes HQ's Seaman. 'We want to publish books that all readers can relate to – not just in terms of ethnicity and sexuality but age too. Inclusivity is at the heart of what we do, and that extends to finding books with protagonists of all ages. We know that women over 45 buy more fiction than any other group, so we'd welcome seeing more novels with characters in that age range.'

'The publishing industry has much work to do when it comes to breaking down the barriers of representation,' agrees Glenister. 'But I've never come across a publisher who is turned off by an older female protagonist. So if you're a fabulous, older woman in the absolute prime of life and are thinking about writing, then my God, do it! Your stories deserve to be heard, and I know one agent in particular who would love to read them!'

• Kathleen's novel *Wife Support System* (Hera Books) is available in paperback, ebook and audiobook



DHH agent
Emily Glenister



Transworld's
Sally Williamson