

Reading Group Guide Inventing the Rest of Our Lives

“I wrote this book because I needed a guide through a bewildering new stage of life that my friends and I were entering,” says author Suzanne Braun Levine. Thirty seven million “boomer” women – from their late forties to late sixties – are at that stage, and there are few role models and little practical information or good advice about what women are experiencing.

Because of the prospect of a longer life span and better health, women turning fifty can look ahead to a Second Adulthood, at least as long as their first, and because of the opportunities and empowerment women have achieved, they have many skills and experiences that will carry them forward with confidence and daring.

Still, they are bedeviled by the question: What am I going to do with the rest of my life? Many find themselves wondering if they are going crazy, because they are suddenly dreaming big dreams and behaving in new ways just when everyone is expecting them to start fading away into humble grandmotherhood. Women who used to be so reliable, so on-call for others needs, so good at playing by the rules, are becoming unpredictable and worse, saying “no!” Levine reassures them that they are not alone. Or crazy. Instead, they are “pioneers who are writing a new script for a new life stage while they are living it.”

Inventing the Rest of Our Lives explores all aspects of the transition and asks readers to explore their feelings and experiences. To share your thoughts directly with Suzanne Braun Levine email her at info@suzannebraunlevine.com. She is eager to hear your thoughts on the book and your own “Second Adulthood.”

Discussion Questions

1. In the opening chapter, “You’re Not Who You Were, Only Older,” Levine confronts a common misperception among women beginning this transition: that the likes and dislikes, interests and commitments we established growing up will define the rest of our lives.
 - Discuss the validity of Levine’s claim, and then consider the evidence she provides, from the studies about regenerating brain cells and gender differences to the testimonials of the women she interviewed.
2. Levine asserts that with “Second Adulthood” comes a turbulent “Second Adolescence,” in which hormones rage and physiological changes begin to take place. She says that in order to get through this second adolescence, we need to see it not as an affliction, but as an important transition, as intense and transformative as the first.

- Discuss the parallels she draws between this first adolescence and the second – how convincing is her argument, and how valuable do you find her suggestions for coping and learning?
 - In what tangible manner can this insight change the ways in which a woman begins to change her life?
3. In the Chapter One, Levine introduces the idea of “Letting Go and Saying No,” and revisits it in Chapter Three, “Defiance.” She cites psychologist Fritz Perls’ comment that “maturity is the process of moving from dependency on the environment to dependency on the self.”
 - How accurate is her depiction of today’s 50+ women, with her former tendency to acquiesce to the whims and desires of others?
 - Do you find this particularly true in your own experience?
 - Discuss this idea of allowing oneself to experience – and voice – defiance, and how it can liberate oneself.
 - Consider the ways in which it can affect those around her – from family and friends to coworkers and society-at-large.
 4. In Chapter Four, Levine talks about the “Fertile Void” as an inevitable passage for every woman entering her Second Adulthood, and defines it as “a prolonged state of confusion” that occurs at the same time a woman begins to feel “impelled to take action.” This is juxtaposed with what she labels “Time Tyranny,” our impulse to keep up a multi-tasking, scheduled-to-the-last-second pace.
 - Discuss the significance of her emphasis on exploring the “Fertile Void” instead of “just getting through it.”
 - How does this suggestion in itself help to slow things down?
 - How helpful are the guidelines for exploration?
 - Discuss the difficulty of transitioning from a state of haste, to one of contemplation, and then back into one of action.
 5. Levine says that for many women the first step in “Recalibrating Your Life” is to consider their work life, and the role it will take in their Second Adulthood.
 - Discuss the “zig-zag” model of professional development and how it applies to your own life.
 - How does the work/family/self balancing act change as you look to the future?
 - How difficult is it to separate and reconcile financial concerns with what is important to you now in a job?
 - How will you make decisions about retirement and investments?
 - Has this discussion assuaged any of your concerns about employment?
 6. How relevant was the chapter “Rediscovering Your Passion, Facing Your Fear,” to you?
 - Discuss the importance Levine gives our interests or “passions,” and the role they can and will play in our lives.
 - How did “Joanne’s Story” and “Joanie’s Story” help illustrate the value of rediscovering (or discovering for the first time) a particular passion?

7. Part of recalibrating our life, is redefining, and in some cases, overhauling, our intimate relationships with others. Two new priorities women in Second Adulthood need to consider in these relationships are “authority“ and “space.“
 - Discuss the pitfalls and benefits that come with altering old loves and friendships according to new priorities, as exemplified in Chapter Seven (“Redefining Intimacy”).
 - Which stories had the greatest impact on you?
 - In what ways could you relate to these women and their renegotiations of marriage, parenting commitments, and life-long friendships?

8. Levine describes Second Adulthood as “a time of delightful serendipity” but “also a time of great vulnerability.”
 - Discuss the “both/and way of thinking” that she introduces in Chapter Eight (“Confronting Adversity”) and the emphasis she places on attitude and flexibility in coping with unexpected adversity.
 - Discuss the two different kinds of safety networks she illustrates with testimonials – “the kind a woman builds for herself and the kind she plugs into.”
 - What parts of these stories are universal?
 - How does your own community of friends and family compare?

9. Consider Levine’s idea of “Making Peace with What I Cannot Change,” and how it applies to your own life.
 - With which menopausal changes on her list have you already caught yourself fighting a losing battle?
 - Did anything on her list of “potential sources of catastrophe” catch you off guard?
 - Discuss the relevance and importance of the information within Chapter Nine about the aging body and our changing self-awareness.

10. In Chapter Ten (“Generations: Graduating from Our Child Voice to Our Parent Voice to our Own Adult Voice”), Levine confronts the “culturally defined roles” women assume throughout the course of their early lives, and the “personal authenticity” that becomes a goal in later years.
 - Discuss how we accomplish this by examining our place inside a particular generation, and in contrast to women in previous and future generations.

11. When Levine talks about women in their Second Adulthood “Becoming a Critical Mass,” (chapter 11) she cites voting power, economic clout, and leadership skills as evidence of the impact they have upon society.
 - Consider your own involvement in these areas and how you and your peers may already be changing the world.
 - Would you have ever conceived of this possibility on your own?
 - How many new possibilities does this chapter add to your Second Adulthood, and your understanding of it?

12. Before reading this book, had you ever before considered the years from age 50, onward, to be a Second Adulthood?
- Discuss how *Inventing the Rest of Our Lives* changed your perception of retirement, menopause, and the concept of “aging gracefully.”

A conversation with Suzanne Braun Levine

Q: At the end of *Inventing the Rest of Our Lives*, you describe being tentative about finishing the book and reentering your own Second Adulthood. How would you characterize that transition from analysis back to practical experience? What parts of this book have you found yourself revisiting for insight and guidance?

A: My biggest challenge was to find my own voice – as a writer with opinions worth sharing, and as a woman who needed to overcome a life-long fear of speaking up and talking back to those I disagreed with. I only found my writer’s voice in the second rewrite of the book and I am still struggling with my woman’s voice and my true Suzanne voice every day.

Q: In “Riding the Spiral” you describe how “an occasional phrase or insight spoke directly” to you, through your many conversations with women about entering their fifties and beyond. Since writing the book, what new anecdotes and bits of wisdom have you gleaned from your peers? If you were going to add to this book, what would you emphasize?

A: As I talk to women about the book I am struck by how important it is for us not to feel we are alone. That is why the phrase “circle of trust” has become even more meaningful to me. The other point that I find especially hard for women to accept is that they have to be patient with themselves as they go through this big transition. We have to stop pushing ourselves and trust that the instincts and individual strengths we have will take us where we need to go – even if we don’t know where that is when we start.

Q: What is a woman in danger of losing if she allows her Second Adulthood to pass by without reflection and self-motivated change? Why is this issue such an important one for women in their fifties and beyond to consider?

A: As we keep telling ourselves, the alternative to getting old – not living long enough – is worse; the same applies to second adulthood – we’re going to go through those years one way or another, so we might as well have as much adventure, satisfaction and life experience as we can. For many women, this turns out to be the best time of their lives.

Q: What has been your experience when talking to men about Second Adulthood? (Are they sympathetic or antagonistic? Do they “get” it?) You mention the stereotypical, male mid-life crisis, but do you think men experience a masculine version of Second Adulthood? Or is it a uniquely female phenomenon?

A: It is definitely different for women, partly because of the unique revolution in women’s experience over the last thirty years. Also, I think menopause gives women a dramatic watershed between these stages of life. I often meet men who feel as lost as women and as stymied by the question, What will I do with the rest of my life?, but I

don't think they have the same kind of energy or curiosity or willingness to change that women of my generation do right now. This may be different for future generations of men.

Q: Can women who don't fall into this age group learn from this book? What information do you find especially pertinent to women of all ages and situations?

A: I was totally unprepared for the response of younger women to the book. They seem as eager to get a grip on what life after fifty is like as their mothers are. I have come to understand that as the younger women look ahead, they want to see how the family/work/self equation that I mention plays out beyond family or intense career years. I also believe that they are looking to my generation to become role models who will guide them through this uncharted territory.