

READING ROOM

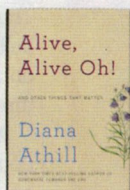
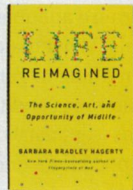


“Our default mode at midlife is entropy. But default is not destiny.... For every fork in the road, you are almost invariably better off making the harder choice.”

—FROM *LIFE REIMAGINED*
BY BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY

NOT FOR SISSIES

Two writers consider aging and decide it beats the alternative.



IF THE LAST 30 years of life are like an extended visit to a new country (inadequate infrastructure, disorienting surprises, failures in communication, unexpected fashions), I’ve

found the perfect travel companions.

In *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife* (Riverhead), Barbara Bradley Hagerty walks, bikes, and stumbles beside us through our 40s, 50s, and 60s and persuades us that not only is there no crisis, there’s mostly good news about these decades. She doesn’t say you’ll look as good in a bikini as you did at 20—I wouldn’t believe her if she did. But I don’t care much about bikinis these days, a feat that Barbara—her writing is so warm and open, we’re now on a first-name basis—counts among the benefits of getting to this point.

Although the book is much better than a feel-good guide or an inspirational homily, it does the work of both those things, and more. Hagerty is a serious journalist whose bout with illness (she’s a former NPR correspondent whose vocal chords froze) led her to examine what she calls the midlife monuments: career, marriage, generativity (connecting with others). She opens our eyes to useful, undeniable rules for strong second and third acts: “Engage with verve.... Autopilot is death.” “Aim for meaning and not happiness, and you will find both.” Locate your “rudder.” It



ILLUSTRATION BY *Martin O'Neill*

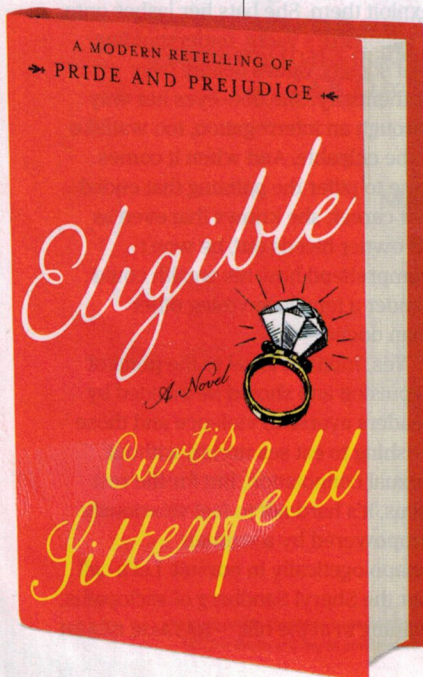
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will help you weather the winds, even if you can’t control them. I have a feeling I’ll be dipping back into this book whenever the waters get choppy.

An equally strong-minded and sage partner on the journey is Diana Athill, a British editor and memoirist who’s been demonstrating admirable *joie de vivre* and purpose for nearly 100 years. Her slim, very smart, and funny *Alive, Alive Oh!* (Norton) is a gift for every reader who is old or hopes to be. Athill writes about the luxury of a good wheelchair, the importance of passion, the unimportance of fidelity, and the necessity of appreciating even a diminished life. And she bluntly contemplates death.

At the heart of these tender, tough books is one unimpeachable lesson: Embrace it all, even the pain.

—AMY BLOOM



A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED

The author of *Prep* reimagines a classic.

TAKE THE Bennets, Bingleys, and Darcys and relocate them to 21st-century Cincinnati, and you’ve got the idea behind Curtis Sittenfeld’s latest, *Eligible* (Random House). Chip Bingley is a Harvard-educated doctor starring in a reality show much like *The Bachelor*. Jane is the eldest of the Bennet offspring, nearing 40 and unmarried. In Bingley, Jane’s mother—desperate to ensure that

at least one of her daughters leaves singledom behind—senses an opportunity. A barbecue (instead of a ball) is hastily planned as the venue for their introduction.

And Mr. Darcy? He’s recast here as a snooty surgeon from California who shares his disdain for Midwesterners with a party guest. Liz Bennet overhears. Frenemies are born.

Of course we’re talking a spin on Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. And while a purist might initially bristle at the interweaving

of original plot lines with contemporary elements including transgender marriage and the tech boom, even the most ardent Austenite will soon find herself seduced. The fun is in anticipating how Sittenfeld will break up the romance between Jane and Bingley and then reunite them; how the silly sisters—Lydia and Kitty—will embarrass themselves on American soil; and what will finally prompt the proud and the prejudiced to get over themselves and marry each other already. —LEIGH HABER