

Author's latest book provides insight into Navigating the Messy Middle



By Nate Smelle

Canadian best-selling author Ann Douglas is about to release the 26th non-fiction book in her catalogue, *Navigating the Messy Middle*. As the author of *The Mother of All®* series, which has sold more than 600,000 copies, Douglas is considered one of Canada's leading experts on parenting. Until recently, she said her life and career as a writer have been focused on parenting and writing about parenting. With her children having left home, Douglas has now focused her attention on what she calls "the glorious messiness that is midlife."

Sitting on the deck of her lakeside home in Highland Grove where she lives with her husband Neil, Douglas explained to *Bancroft This Week* how her research for the book relates to her own journey through midlife.

"I started to feel more and more removed from the experiences of parenting, because my kids are so much older. So, I started to think about what I wanted to do next, given that my whole identity was sort of wrapped into that life stage. At the same time, I went through a lot of personal ups and downs, that I talk about in the book," explained Douglas.

According to Douglas, the early part of her midlife was "a total rollercoaster ride." During that time, she was dealing with: mental health challenges; feeling really burnt out and depleted, and having to come back from that place; a house fire; as well as layers and layers of family challenges. "All the messy stuff," she said.

"I learned a lot from working through that," Douglas said. "I have done a lot of thinking, learning, and growing as a human being. It is sort of like the fascination when I was younger, when writing about human development in terms of parenting. It is that same fascination with human development, but this time I am focusing on a life stage that I am living through at the same time."

Douglas said the book is based on conversations she had with more than 100 women in midlife. During these conversations, she said they talked about their hopes, dreams, worries and regrets; plus ongoing struggles, big and small. Her intention, to make sense of the middle chapter of their lives "a time when women's bodies, lives, and relationships tend to be in flux, she explained.

"We acknowledged our feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm "the fact that midlife is a time of life when we tend to be carrying an exceptionally heavy load; and when we're relied upon by an awful lot of people," said Douglas. "We celebrated the brilliance of our midlife brains: their ability to spot patterns and solve problems in a way that simply wasn't possible when we were younger. And we talked about what we want most for ourselves, the people we care about, and our planet moving forward"and the role we see ourselves playing in that."

While Douglas's personal midlife journey began several years before COVID-19 first reared its head, the need to practice social distancing during the pandemic provided her with a perfect opportunity to dive into the writing project which eventually became, *Navigating the Messy Middle*. Describing the book as her 'pandemic project,' she said when she looks back on that time, she will remember how she spent the majority of the pandemic conducting research, and interviewing all the inspiring women featured in the book. Instead of dwelling on the fear and uncertainty that COVID-19 provoked, she said the pandemic gave her something positive to focus on.

'As we have went through the various years of the pandemic I had this feeling that it forced us as a culture to hit the pause button and rethink a lot of things,' Douglas said. 'And there's that natural reflection that's sort of built into the midlife experience. This is how I'm going to remember the pandemic: having all these heart-to-heart conversations with all these incredible women via Zoom; and then really reflecting on how we can dream together; how we can imagine a better world; and how we can think about enjoying on a personal level and within our own families the best possible quality of life.'

The main goal of her new book, Douglas said, is to inspire people to widen their lens of empathy, and think about how things could play out if their life was five degrees different. She also hopes it will encourage people to start thinking of the commonality and the connections with other people. Pointing out that women in midlife are often told that they are 'obsolete', and that they should just 'move on', Douglas views midlife as a life stage that is ripe with opportunities to create, grow, and contribute.

'I feel that I have spent decades learning how to write, so why would I walk away from it when I feel like I'm at the peak of my skills?' Douglas queried. 'It is the same with women in all kinds of different roles.' Lisa LaFlamme [a former Canadian television journalist, chief anchor and senior editor that was let go by CTV National News in August 2022] is just the most dramatic example of being told 'to exit stage left.' I want people to be real about midlife, and not to pretend that it's all magical, not to pretend that it's totally miserable. There is a lot of research that shows if you buy into the idea that it's all the time of decline, and you're basically just marching towards the end of your life, you put up with a lot of mental health complaints because you think it's inevitable. You put up with a lot of physical health issues as well, and you can actually die some 12 years younger than you otherwise would have.'

While the book is geared towards women, Douglas said it also highlights many valuable lessons which men can also learn from.

'It is a time in your life when you are taking in the view from all directions, and you're connecting the dots between past, present, and future,' she said. 'I think that is something that any person in midlife would want to do - to figure out who they were when they were a child, what's the same and what's different. And to figure out who they are now; and, who they want to become. That to me is the most exciting thing about being at this stage.'

On Wednesday, Oct. 5, Douglas is hosting an interactive online discussion that dives deeper into *Navigating the Messy Middle*. She encourages anyone interested in learning more about midlife to join the discussion. To take part in the conversation, or to purchase a copy of Douglas's book, visit her website at: www.anndouglas.ca.