Carolyn Heilbrun, lamenting the lack of opportunities for older women to find “something new, something not yet found” in their lives, comments that “if we could discover a word that meant ‘adventure’ and did not mean ‘romance,’ we in our late decades would be able to free ourselves from the compulsion always to connect yearning and sex. . . . The reason for the predominance of sexual aspiration, I have decided, is that no other adventure has quite the symbolic force, not to mention the force of the entire culture, behind it” (103). Contrary to Heilbrun’s assumption, this volume suggests that Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and other contemporary women writers illuminate a new kind of midlife and older woman’s adventure, one that is spiritual in nature, enabling new ways of being and becoming, but open-ended and capable of great variation in practice. These journeys of the spirit do not leave behind the body; indeed, they are often posited on the variations in the body as it ages and decays, forcing the protagonists to confront the slippage between what they can imagine of, and for, themselves and their painful reality.

Very often the contemplation of physical and/or mental loss sets in motion a retrospective movement—a long look back as the woman of a certain age tries to assess where she has come from, assimilate the twists and turns along the way, and decipher a shape or pattern to the journey. At times the process of seeking this pattern precipitates a breakthrough to a new, more capacious sense of self, an acceptance of modes of self-knowing or being not possible earlier. Sometimes the process of reassessment is slow and thoughtful; at other times it is
quickened, propelled by a traumatic experience or a sudden loss that heightens the awareness and shatters old psychic barriers. These inner journeys occur at different levels of development and reach different stages of self-awareness, revealing not only the challenges and difficulties of the older years for women but also the unique opportunities that such challenges provide to acquire a new perspective on one’s self and one’s life—to find (or make) a place or space, a vantage point, from which to view one’s past, one’s sense of self, even the workings of one’s mind.

My understanding of spirit and of the formulation of this space of detachment comes in part from the work of Ken Wilber, a theoretician of consciousness. Integrating and extending the various maps of self-development of many thinkers, including Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, and Carol Gilligan, Wilber has formulated a comprehensive theory of both individual and collective, subjective and objective evolution. Dividing all of evolutionary development into nine nested spheres or waves of developing consciousness along the river of life from matter to spirit, Wilber posits nine stages of expanding individual development, each of which consists of a different worldview experienced by the self inhabiting or identifying with that stage. These stages begin in infancy and continue over an individual’s entire life. However, they are not rigidly separated from one another, and individuals do not necessarily pass through all the stages.

The first six basic stages of the evolution of consciousness, some form of which is common to almost all developmental schemes, begin with infancy and continue over an individual’s whole life. The first three are associated with the “archaic” (“hatching of the physical self”), “magical” (“birth of the emotional self”), and “mythical” (“birth of the conceptual self”) worldviews of the infant, toddler, and young child (Wilber, Brief History 147–53). While these stages are not as relevant to this study as the worldviews of later domains of self-identity, we do see aspects of the mythic worldview in the tribal identity of the aboriginal woman discussed by Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez in chapter 10. The next three stages—the rule/role, conventional self (concerned with social scripts); the worldcentric, postconventional self (able to judge and think for oneself); and the centaur, integrating self (able to integrate body and mind)—are the major focus of this study. It is not uncommon in the fictional characters discussed, as in life, to find individuals remaining at the fourth or fifth stage of spiritual development. They may possess a self-identity that requires conformity and is highly
conventional, adhering to the social scripts of their family or group (fourth stage). For example, Iris Chase in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* struggles to deal with family scripts decreeing that she act like a “lady” and sacrifice herself for her family, as Earl Ingersoll explains in chapter 4. Or an individual may reach stage five, where she can think for herself and formulate her own moral standards. The fruits of this stage free women to begin to question cultural scripts about aging. Many of the characters in this study are engaged in this enterprise, but none experiences it more self-consciously or painfully than Sarah Durham in Doris Lessing’s *love, again*. Obsessively scrutinizing her awakening to erotic desire, she watches, like an attendee at a play, her fevered response to a young actor with whom she is erotically preoccupied, and she surveys her troubled dreams, which connect present chaotic emotions with past, even infant needs. But Sarah’s particularly troubled retrospective journey ultimately frees her to accept the next stage on her spiritual journey, the detachment that leads to the integration of the mind and the body (see Virginia Tiger’s discussion in chapter 1 of Sarah’s obsessional state).

Wilber’s sixth stage, which captures the new integrating potential of the self, is particularly interesting for this volume. Able to hold together the body and mind in one integrated awareness, the self for the first time is no longer purely ego-based, hence Wilber’s characterization of this stage as the “centaur” self. Here the observing self can stand apart from the mind and observe it as an object (*Brief History* 174). We watch the survivor in Lessing’s fictional memoir begin at this stage, capable of surveying both her present thoughts and her past behavior. Her self-conscious observation of her mind and feelings is imaged in part through her watching various avatars of her younger self, brought to life via the stages that her ward, Emily, rapidly passes through, while her ability to conjure up buried, unconscious feeling is captured by “looking through” the wall of her apartment (see chapter 2). The survivor’s growing ability to accept both past selves and past evolutionary stages of civilization brings to the fore the profound new acceptance of self and others that can characterize this stage. Wilber calls it a break through—an ability “for the first time” to “vividly grasp the entire spectrum of interior development” (Wilber, *Integral Psychology* 51, emphasis in original).3 Here the observing self no longer thinks that the stage it has reached is superior to all the others. Rather, it is capable of appreciating the value and need for all the various stages of self-development. This profound new acceptance, of self
and others, helps elucidate the sense of inclusiveness that characterizes many of the women adventurers examined in the present volume. It enriches Sharon Wilson’s discussion of the mythic figure of Medusa in chapter 3, the symbol of the older woman’s acceptance of formerly frightening or monstrous aspects of herself, which she now embraces as the source of her creativity and strength. We see an example of this new acceptance in that other mythic voyager, the narrator in Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House*, who voyages deep within to discover the autonomy to continue to create in her later years, as Kathryn Van-Spanckerken explains in chapter 6.

Furthermore, a desire for inclusiveness, an understanding that “each level . . . is crucially important for the health of the overall spiral” (Wilber, *Integral Psychology* 51), has helped guide my choice of the diverse kinds of introspective women’s journeys at various stages on the developmental spiral that compose this volume. The appreciation of inclusiveness helps us honor the way in which the aboriginal woman discussed by Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez in chapter 10 embraces her ancestors and her culture while integrating a new spiritual tradition into her life. Here we encounter a woman dwelling within the mythic consciousness of Wilber’s third stage of spiritual development. Rather than seeing her development only in individualistic terms, Angela Sidney experiences her life course in terms of the stories and myths of her tribe. It is in the context of her storytelling that we most fully appreciate Sidney’s ability to integrate the different worlds of her mythic and shamanistic tradition with her historical experience and her embrace of first Anglicanism and later the Bahá’í Faith.

An attempt to honor the diversity of women’s spiritual struggles also guided my inclusion of essays that examine the unique structural shapes of the retrospective journeys of older women whose lives have been damaged by physical and sexual abuse. It is not the disturbed mother but her abused early midlife daughter who makes the retrospective journey that allows her to accept both her mother and herself in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, as Sandra Singer explains in chapter 9. An even more problematic self-acceptance is achieved by elderly, seemingly demented Mala Ramchandain with the help of Tyler, her nurse and coadventurer in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Jeanie Warnock, in chapter 11, explores the way in which Mala Ramchandain finds an image of healing and wholeness in the mirror of her nurse Tyler’s love and, further, how Tyler mirrors back wholeness to Mala through his cocreation with her of her life narrative.
What is particularly interesting for my purposes about Wilber’s formulation of stages of self-evolution is that he extends them to include transpersonal, postconventional realms, and he connects these spiritual domains to the earlier modes of self-knowing and self-being. These transpersonal domains extend self-identity to embrace all the cosmos and, beyond that, the realm of the divine. Wilber’s connection of these more mystical, transpersonal realms to the earlier, more psyche-bound domains of self-identity allows us to understand the wide variety of searches and journeys undertaken by the various protagonists and heroines that this volume examines as all part of one evolving movement of consciousness from matter toward spirit, at whatever stage or phase individuals find themselves. An acknowledgment of the transpersonal throws light on the mystic experiences of Doris Lessing’s midlife protagonist in Memoirs of a Survivor who becomes capable of seeing the phenomenal world irradiated by the face of God. Further, it gives insight into both the spiritual journey of Lessing’s timeless male/female retrospective narrator, Johor, in the first part of Shikasta and into the more limited retrospective diary of teenaged Rachel in the second half. Finally, it allows us to understand Lessing’s own spiritual coming of age in Shikasta, where she portrays not only her own development but also that of all of humankind as a journey along a spiritual spiral (see chapter 2).

My choice of envisioning the spiritual development of the midlife and older woman in this volume as a dynamic spiral of consciousness—a movement back that facilitates the move forward, a revisiting of the past enriched by the perspective of the present that leads to a transformative future—is drawn in part from one particular map of consciousness that Wilber presents, the work of spiral dynamics developed by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, based on the work of Clare Graves. Providing the striking image of individual and cultural growth as the movement along a developmental spiral, Beck and Cowan posit that at each stage of growth individuals and societies revisit earlier concerns and understandings from a more mature perspective, so that each self-world “transcends and includes its predecessors” (Wilber, Integral Psychology 47). Furthermore, Beck explains that “the Spiral is messy, not symmetrical, with multiple admixtures rather than pure types” (qtd. in ibid. 48). Thus the evolving individual does not leave behind earlier phases of growth; rather, these continue to be available as resources the individual can draw on and revisit. In addition, different aspects of an individual’s makeup (identity, needs,
moral stance) may develop at different rates and be at different levels on the spiral.

These insights help us better understand the complex nature of the retrospective journeys undertaken by various characters in the works examined in this volume. The look back by a more developed self to earlier modes of being and understanding allows the various female characters in this volume to pick up the “dropped threads” of self that were stranded at earlier levels of development. Sometimes the maturing self carries forward earlier modes of feeling or thinking contained within rigid frames of obsession or neurosis that prevent further development. The look back by more developed aspects of the psyche can heal or free these damaged or imprisoned parts of the psyche and include them in the more developed self’s ongoing growth. Debrah Raschke and Sarah Appleton show how each of Atwood’s three protagonists in *The Robber Bride* revisits earlier modes of feeling and behaving that were the traps set by previously undeveloped or stagnant aspects of self (see chapter 5). More controversially, Sharon Wilson argues that Iris Chase in Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* learns to pick up her dropped hand (“lying unmissed in Laura’s photograph”)—the symbol of “her ability to express feelings openly”—and tell her story (see chapter 3).

The complex structures of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* are both built around the special difficulties of picking up the dropped threads of a childhood truncated by physical and sexual abuse. In the case of Sidda Walker of *Divine Secrets*, Sandra Singer shows how the novel’s structure imitates the shifts in time and the activation of different levels of self that Sidda experiences as she peruses the Ya-Ya Sisters’ scrapbook, which captures disturbing, not fully understood childhood memories (see chapter 9). For octogenarian Mala Ramchandin, the dropped threads of lost aspects of the self are much more extreme. A victim of childhood incest, Mala has dropped not only access to her inner world but also the ability to relate to the outer world, as Jeanie Warnock explains in chapter 11. At the beginning of *Cereus*, the terrified old woman has spent almost all her adult life totally withdrawn from the human community, lost to language itself, and caught “in the endless repetition of the moment when she was left alone to face her father’s violent rage” (see chapter 11).

Wilber’s developmental schema provides the guiding images for most of the chapters in this study, although only chapter 2 explicitly
uses his work. The powerful structural image of retrospective spiritual development provided by Wilber, applied to the culturally and individually diverse range of midlife and older women’s life journeys examined in this collection, yields richly meaningful results. Responding to the unique challenges of the individual retrospective narratives they examine, the various articles throw light on some of the most interesting theories of aging. For example, a number of the essays in this volume interrogate in some manner the trope of the older woman looking into a mirror. Aging studies theorist Kathleen Woodward has compared this search for identity with that of the infant in the Lacanian mirror stage, as Roberta Rubenstein elucidates in chapter 7. Woodward explains that whereas the infant, according to Lacan, discovers a physical unity in the mirror that belies his or her psychic disorientation, for the older person the mirror often plays the opposite role, revealing an inner unity that belies their physical deterioration (Woodward, “Mirror” 68).

Several essays explore varied ways in which the mirror makes visible not just the continuity with an established self but also the image of a self in gestation, a new self that is coming into being. This new self neither denies the previous reality of the midlife or older woman nor is limited to that reality but instead includes the previous “I” in the more holistic self that is emerging. Thus, as in Wilber’s theoretical model, the evolving self found in the mirror image of older women protagonists in a number of essays transcends but includes earlier senses of self. Rubenstein explicitly interrogates the changing meanings of self implied in the numerous mirror-gazing occasions that occupy Fay Weldon’s protagonist in Rhode Island Blues, tracing Felicity’s development through the changing nature of her reflections. Rubenstein captures the evolution in Felicity’s self-identity whereby she integrates her past and present, developing a deeper sense of what Wilber calls the centaur self.

For the three midlife women discussed by Virginia Tiger in chapter 1, mirrors are sources of self-knowledge and “the reclamation of psychic regions.” Sarah Durham in love, again by Doris Lessing, surveying herself in the mirror at both the beginning and then the end of her year of erotic obsession, finds in her changed image the means for evaluating the cost of her painfully acquired self-knowledge. Avey Johnson, the protagonist of Praisesong for the Widow by Paule Marshall, by comparison, does not recognize the elegantly dressed stranger when her gaze falls upon her mirrored image at the beginning of her inward and outward journey. She must voyage into her personal and ancestral
past to find the cultural reflection of the self not shown in the gilded cruise-ship mirror, while Candida Wilton in Margaret Drabble’s *The Seven Sisters* must look into the mirror of the *Aeneid* to find her way home to a self willing to fully engage in life as she grows older. Tiger ends her exploration of these three heroines’ encounters with mirrors that reflect their spiritual journeys with a poem by a contemporary American poet named Kathryn Levy called “The Middle Way,” which directly addresses the problematic nature of the mirror sighting for the woman entering midlife. Gazing into the mirror, the narrator sees

\[ \ldots \text{nothing} \]
\[ \ldots \text{but death stared back—the worst} \]
\[ \ldots \text{kind of death} \]

\[ \ldots \text{the kind that goes on} \]
\[ \ldots \text{and on} \]

I think most, if not all, the contributors to this volume will agree that the cultural script that has made this vision so painfully familiar for many women is now being rewritten by the works and characters examined in this volume. If Rubenstein and Tiger directly address the nature of the mirrored gaze in their essays, the mirror is implicitly figured in a number of other essays. In my chapter I extend mirroring to the transpersonal realm, exploring how the luminous face in *Memoirs* achieves in the transpersonal domain what the mother’s face provides for the psychic development of the infant in the first stage of life. D. W. Winnicott argues that the mother’s face provides the first mirror for the infant, reflecting back the baby’s behavior and helping the infant achieve a sense of autonomy and trust in the environment (111). The luminous face, in contrast, reflects not the survivor’s outer behavior but her innermost spiritual being, a potential that she slowly moves toward acknowledging, until by the end of her memoirs, she is able to not only encounter the luminous center of self but also see the reflection of the divine face illuminating all aspects of reality (chapter 2). Again, the evolution in the mirrored image reveals the trajectory of developing self-identity proposed by Wilber. In this case the Survivor reaches the second of the three transpersonal stages mapped by Wilber, the “subtle” or “deity mysticism” phase of the transpersonal (191).

Mirrors can prevent as well as assist new self-creation, as Raschke and Appleton argue not only in relation to Zenia’s “bad girl” mirror-
ings in *The Robber Bride* but also in the role that Laura, Iris’s “good” sister, plays in *The Blind Assassin*, her confusing goodness increasing Iris’s ambivalence and limiting the emergence of her new self-understanding (chapter 5). Ingersoll, as well as Raschke and Appleton, remark on the special mirroring of the writer’s desires that occurs at the end of *The Blind Assassin*. Ingersoll notes that the nearness of death gives special poignancy to Iris’s final dream—that her memoir may be read by her granddaughter. Thus the aged writer Iris holds up to us the writer’s longing for a reader, even if only one, to attain what Ingersoll tellingly calls “the ‘atonement’ of art.” Perhaps Iris’s final longing is also a mirror for Atwood’s own concern and that of many of the women writers examined in this volume for a reader able to respond to their protagonists’ emerging selves.

The retrospective journey explored in this study in which a female character is led by inner or outer forces to examine earlier episodes and aspects of her life bears much in common with what geriatric specialist Robert N. Butler, “who coined the term ageism” (Waxman, *Hearth to the Open Road* 30), has called a “life review.” He theorizes that it is “a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts” (Butler 66). Butler connects this process to “the realization of approaching dissolution and death” and believes that normally the “revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated” (ibid.). Butler goes on to state that “in the course of the life review . . . hidden themes of great vintage may emerge, changing the quality of a lifelong relationship. Revelations of the past may forge a new intimacy, render a deceit honest; they may sever peculiar bonds and free tongues” (ibid. 75). Butler’s “life review” seems to be a particular instance of the dynamic of retrospective growth theorized about by Wilber and discussed above—impelled by the approaching end to consciousness, the self is often motivated to pick up the lost threads of unfinished psychic business or climb to a higher vista of self-identity by which to survey the past. Butler’s account of the effects of the life review almost perfectly describes the dramatic revelations that emerge from Mala Ramchandin’s assisted life review in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (see chapter 11) and from Iris Chase’s complex retrospective account of her involvement in her sister’s death in *The Blind Assassin* (see chapters 3, 4, and 5).

While Butler connects the life review to an awareness of approaching death, it can, in fact, happen at almost any time of life after the
self has developed enough to have an earlier stage to look back on, as age theorist Margaret Gullette points out in *Aged by Culture* (149). However, as the following essays will demonstrate, it is beginning in midlife that the pattern of women’s retrospective spiritual journeying most powerfully manifests itself. The midlife need to investigate life’s meaning and purpose has been remarked on by a number of theorists of human development, beginning with Carl Jung. As one Jungian theorist writes, at midlife a “crisis threatens . . . [that] is at bottom a spiritual crisis, the challenge to seek and to discover the meaning of life” (Hart 99).

The search for meaning and wholeness at midlife is a human need, but women’s midlife spiritual adventures seem to follow a unique trajectory. Psychiatrist David Gutmann, who specializes in studying men and women in later life, characterizes postmenopausal women as achieving an “inner liberation” that manifests itself in new empowerment, autonomy, and willingness to take psychic risks (133–34). This female midlife renaissance may be due in part to increased concentration of testosterone in their blood (ibid. 181–82), as well as to the lessening of responsibilities in the home. Furthermore, Gutmann notes that the “rebirth” of the “postparental” woman may be preceded “by a period of extreme malaise” in early middle age (156, 157). In recent years, this midlife female trajectory has been portrayed by women writers with particular clarity and force, and half the essays in this volume explore the rich opportunities for women’s spiritual adventuring of the new midlife narratives. These developmental stories of women of a certain age often begin with the woman at midlife experiencing a depression, unexplained malaise, or the falling apart of her world (see examples of this pattern in chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9) as she must face the loss of a familiar stage of self-identity and encounter the fear and uncertainty that accompany the venture into unknown territory. Further, she must defy still-powerful cultural scripts that celebrate youth, beauty, and romance as the markers of women’s happiness (the triad whose loss is acknowledged with agonizing pain by the poem with which Tiger ends her essay). However, midlife and beyond narratives of spiritual becoming need not deny the body. The midlife or older woman need not become sexually “invisible,” as Kathleen Woodward notes in the introduction to *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (xiv). Erotic desire, still a problematic dimension of aging, is considered by Rubenstein one of the last frontiers of feminism (see “Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age”), and her essay in this
collection on the fairy tale–like romance of the octogenarian protagonist in Fay Weldon’s *Rhode Island Blues* encourages our appreciation of an alternative to the usual cultural scripts on aging (see chapter 7).

In general, the conception of spiritual adventuring celebrated in this volume honors what Wilber calls the immanent and the transcendent dimensions of spirit—its embrace of the natural world, relationships, community, and sensual fulfillment, as well as its aspirations for eternal existence and closeness to the divine. While Wilber notes that these conceptions of spirit are tied together in Plato, the West has traditionally acknowledged the ascending motif of movement from “the Many to the One . . . the Absolute . . . [the] Good,” while ignoring Plato’s equal emphasis on the descending movement of spirit, whereby “the One empties itself into all creation . . . [so] the entire manifest world [is] seen as the . . . embodiment of the Good . . . and to be celebrated as such! The greater the diversity in the world, the greater the spiritual Glory and Goodness” (*Brief History* 227–28). The spirituality celebrated in works discussed in this collection embraces both otherworldly ascent of the spirit (see especially chapters 1, 2, and 3) and this-worldly descent (found in a number of chapters). Both need to be acknowledged and integrated to show the richness and breadth of the river of spirit as it flows through human life.

Barbara Waxman’s study *To Live in the Center of the Moment: Literary Autobiographies of Aging* helps us find the relationship between the immanent and the transcendent figured in unexpected places. For example, in Audre Lorde’s autobiography Waxman discovers the desire to live intensely, to make the most of the moment, as a way to ward off fears of death and deepen and stretch the experience of the present (109). This desire may also be tied to powerful experiences of immanence in the embrace of the natural world or the celebration of the joys of work and love. These themes reappear in the present collection. We see a breadth of styles and modes of intense living portrayed in the chapters that follow, from the zany attempt by the three protagonists of Suzette Mayr’s *The Widows* to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel (chapter 8) to Yukon Native Angela Sidney’s poignant desire to “live [her] life like a story” (chapter 10).

In Florida Scott-Maxwell’s autobiography Waxman finds the desire for intense daily living characterized as the ascent of the self to “a new dimension of spiritual clarity” (*Center of the Moment* 170) that, in turn, must be balanced with the descending need of the aging body to submit to “natural limits” (Scott-Maxwell qtd. in ibid. 171). Several
chapters in this present collection deal with midlife and older women struggling to find this balance, sometimes in unlikely ways. Rubenstein explores one of the most “delicately realized” attempts in the efforts of eighty-three-year-old Felicity Moore of Rhode Island Blues to balance late-life love, and its accompanying revelations, with the limitations of her sagging octogenarian body (see chapter 7).

The essays in this volume cover works written by women writers in the last three decades. The earliest work, Doris Lessing’s Memoirs of a Survivor, was published in 1974 when Lessing herself was fifty-five. Interestingly enough, Margaret Gullette (writing in 1988) identifies 1975 as the year when culture “was giving its writers permission to overthrow the traditional decline view that the middle years are a time of devolution” (Safe xiii). While Gullette’s study reminds us of the powerful effect of culture on the writer’s vision, Gullette herself notes that great writers were creating midlife stories of progress before the mid-1970s. I might add that Lessing, in particular, has more often anticipated and shaped new cultural trends than been influenced by them. We saw this in the 1960s with her feminist classic The Golden Notebook (1962), which helped awaken a generation of women readers to the sound of adult women talking seriously about life, love, and politics. Her more recent writing on midlife and older women’s retrospective spiritual journeys continues to challenge contemporary attitudes, especially those concerning aging and spirituality.

As we have already seen with reference to studies by Butler, Gutmann, Gullette, Rubenstein, Waxman, and Woodward, the new narratives of midlife and older women’s “journey to age” have generated new critical responses by age theorists, psychologists, and literary critics; the present volume enters into a dialogue with earlier critical work. Several studies have defined new genres or mapped out new areas of interest that this present volume complements or supplements. In From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature (1990), Barbara Waxman defines “the Reifungsroman, or novel of ripening,” a genre of female fiction that “rejects negative cultural stereotypes of the old woman and aging, seeking to change the society that created these stereotypes” (2). Of particular interest to the present volume is Waxman’s description of the “internal journey[s made by some protagonists] to their past through dreams and frequent flashbacks [as] essential features of the Reifungsroman” (17). The present volume develops this area in great depth.

Also highly relevant to this volume are the essays exploring the creativity of the older writer and supplying new models of later-life
fiction found in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993), edited by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen. Foregrounding the unique expressions of creativity of the older writer, Wyatt-Brown and Rossen’s collection adds to our appreciation of the new models of self-imagining in the present volume. In particular, Constance Rooke’s essay defining the *Vollendungsroman*, “the novel of old age,” offers another helpful generic model (“Cheever’s Swan Song” 207). Besides defining the domain of the “universal” (the domain following death and preceding birth) as of special concern for the old writer, Rooke also provides insight into the potency of the last work and even the last pages written by the writer approaching death. These concerns throw light on the last pages that Iris Chase writes in her memoir in *The Blind Assassin*, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5 in this collection. Rooke’s insights into the universal domain are also interesting in regard to the cosmology of *Shikasta*, as discussed in chapter 2.

The last two chapters of Christine Sizemore’s study *Negotiating Identities in Women’s Lives: English Postcolonial and Contemporary British Novels* (2002), which look at identity formation in women of middle age and later, are also helpful to this collection. Sizemore examines women novelists from different locations who tell stories that reveal the “hybrid spaces between cultures where multicultural differences can play against each other.” In comparing works with similar themes from different cultures, she uses the “axis of age and the specific psychological ‘tensions’ that often accompany various ages in women’s lives” (7). The present volume continues Sizemore’s interest in the hybrid and developmental nature of identity formation. In particular, Brill de Ramírez centers her discussion of the personal and tribal stories of a Yukon Native elder in the context of “the catastrophic consequences of Euroamerican colonization,” particularly in the Klondike gold rush era (chapter 10). Wilson’s examination of the crone in chapter 3 also places works of Lessing, Atwood, and Keri Hulme in a hybrid context, noting that all three writers “grew up in colonized cultures” and are “explicitly or implicitly critical of both literal and secondary or metaphysical colonialism.” Warnock’s study of *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Caribbean Canadian writer Shani Mootoo begins by acknowledging the postcolonial emphasis in earlier studies of the novel before addressing what she believes is its more central concern with childhood sexual abuse (chapter 11).

More recently, Sally Chivers in *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives* (2003) includes contemporary film as well as narratives in her examination of cultural
constructions of elderly women, “in order to devise new standards and strategies for understanding late life” (x). Singer in chapter 9 also notes the commingling of these genres, reminding us of the important role played by film in the popularity of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood stories. Pairing theoretical and literary works in creative ways, Chivers offers refreshing new insights into such staples of old age as grandmotherhood, the nursing home, and elderly female friendships— institutions important to several of the works discussed in this volume (see chapters 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 11). All these critical works help us devise “new stories and readings of growing old” (Chivers xxvi).

More than half the chapters in this volume focus on the works of Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood because both of these writers have, in recent years, explored with exceptional originality and depth the retrospective spiritual journeys of women of a certain age. Lessing, who at eighty-eight has produced a new novel (The Cleft), is a model for the continuing creativity, experimental courage, and fidelity to her own vision of the older woman writer. She has portrayed almost every conceivable aspect of midlife and older women’s “journey to age.” Lessing’s women embark on spiritual journeys that detour through erotic obsession, depression, cultural marginalization, and nostalgia. In most cases the movement forward is accompanied by a long look back that allows them to revisit, reevaluate, and reintegrate the past into their mature sense of self.

Atwood’s women “coming to age” are often, like Lessing’s, involved in retrospective experiences of self-definition and reinterpreted self-other communing. More earthbound and involved with their often problematic bodies than Lessing’s protagonists, Atwood’s older women must fight their way out of densely realized social contexts that, like a hydra, keep extending another tentacle when a previous one has been lopped off. Atwood foregrounds this exterior realm of behavior and place while mischievously interweaving cultural texts and contexts, such as horror stories, comic books, pop stars, mythic figures, science fiction, and quilts, seaming together the borders of the inner and outer, the individual and collective. Various stimuli in the present motivate the women’s spiral back—most often dialogues with those powerful others, present or past, who shared or shaped the structuring of their lives.

The last section of the book widens the examination of spiritual adventuring by women protagonists to include works by other contemporary women writers, including postcolonial and aboriginal women.
Introduction

New structures and experimental techniques enter the book’s conversation, such as fantastic journeys by older women picara figures (chapter 8), elder fairy tales (chapter 7), the role of film and the Internet (chapter 9), and the special shapes assumed by retrospective journeys for victims of childhood abuse (chapters 9 and 11). As well, the unique conflation of individual and cultural spiritual journeys in an aboriginal woman’s tales is examined (chapter 10).

Part I of the book, “Doris Lessing: Spiraling the Waves of Detachment,” focuses on Lessing’s female protagonists in midlife or later decades, often in combination with narratives of aging by other women writers. In chapter 1 Virginia Tiger conveys the complexity and variety of modes of midlife awakening in her exploration of not only the “interior” voyaging of “Sarah Durham, the sixty-five-year-old protagonist of Lessing’s love, again,” but also that of “Avey Johnson, the sixty-four-year-old protagonist of Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow, and Candida Wilton, the fifty-something protagonist of Drabble’s The Seven Sisters.” Tiger delineates three different kinds of spiritual journeys—the movement by love, again’s heroine “from erotic obsession to detachment, Praisesong for the Widow’s heroine from complacency to transcendence, and The Seven Sisters’ heroine from estrangement to engagement.”

Lessing’s exploration of the relationship between individual and collective spiritual becoming is investigated in my chapter titled “Navigating the Spiritual Cycle in Memoirs of a Survivor and Shikasta.” Drawing extensively upon the Sufi underpinnings of Lessing’s spiritual vision, I trace Lessing’s movement from inner-space to outer-space fiction, exploring Lessing’s mapping of her personal spiritual journey in the autobiographical novel Memoirs of a Survivor and her universalization and extension of this process to humankind as a whole in Shikasta. Extending the focus from the protagonist’s journey to that of the author herself, I argue that Shikasta is the product of Lessing’s own spiritual “coming to age.”

In “Through the ‘Wall’: Crone Journeys of Enlightenment and Creativity in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Keri Hulme, and Other Women Writers,” Sharon Wilson views older women’s creativity through the looking glass of Medusa, “mother of all the gods,” and, like Hecate, “the basis for crone figures in contemporary women writers’ works.” While Medusa is sometimes hated and feared, Wilson shows how Lessing in Memoirs and Marriages, Atwood in The Blind Assassin, and Hulme in The Bone People use “their Medusa vision to
discover creative possibilities within themselves.” Uncovering their reclamation of Medusa’s creative power, Wilson celebrates older women’s journeys to new growth and their ability for the first time to gaze on—and even embrace—shadowy, monstrous aspects of the self previously turned away from or denied. Exploring the journeys of a number of midlife and older women in Atwood’s poetry and fiction (as well as in the works of other women writers), Wilson moves us seamlessly to the second part of the book.

Part II, “Margaret Atwood: Doubling Back Through the Labyrinth,” focuses on Atwood’s devious narrative mirrorings of women adventurers in midlife and beyond. In “Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin as Spiritual Adventure,” Earl Ingersoll investigates not only Iris’s potential involvement in a crime, the suicide of her sister—the novel’s “whodunit” underpinning—but also Iris’s difficult, nuanced “triumph of the spirit” in her “contaminated but ultimately heroic” story. Ingersoll captures the novel’s tragicomic depiction of a physically and morally vulnerable narrator slowly and painfully creating her version of the past, of the truth, of herself. She may not have the time to finish her memoir, or, even more disturbing, she may not escape the “contamination” to “ensnare [her] readers, including [herself], in the ‘fiction,’ the ‘excusing yourself’ for the writer’s humanness.” Iris’s understanding of truth has also been complicated by her training in the feminine art of sacrifice. Ingersoll shows how not only are Iris and Laura bred for sacrifice but also, it seems, so are the men who die in the war. And finally, art itself demands sacrifice, as Iris acknowledges in commenting that “in Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys”—a comment that could apply to this volume as a whole.

Moving through the house of mirrors created by Atwood, we get another look at Iris as well as the three protagonists of The Robber Bride and their alter ego, Zenia, in Debrah Raschke and Sarah Appleton’s chapter, “And They Went to Bury Her’: Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin and The Robber Bride.” Noting the retrospective nature of Atwood’s midlife and older women’s search for identity, Raschke and Appleton argue that “the ultimate ‘answers’ are not always positive or affirming.” In particular, in The Blind Assassin, Iris’s journey is incomplete, her involvement in her sister’s death never adequately acknowledged. In contrast, in The Robber Bride, the three vulnerable protagonists complete the quest, confronting the power tactics of Zenia and their own inadequacies that she mirrors through her stories. Raschke and Appleton also take the reader
beyond the confines of the novel, relating Zenia’s ruthless manipulation to the power tactics of the two Gulf Wars. They read the text as urging the reader, “imperative[ly],” “apocalyptic[ally],” to “set boundaries on the exploitation of ‘raw’ power”—that is all we can do.

Kathryn VanSpanckeren traces a special kind of journey—that of mythic female descent to the underworld—in her exploration of the narrative voices in Atwood’s collection of poetry Morning in the Burned House. Adopting Atwood’s own predilection for mythological figures, VanSpanckeren images the five sections of the poem in terms of Psyche’s performance of four tasks given her by Aphrodite in order to find Eros, one of which was descent into the underworld. While no one poem fully captures the collection’s thematic concerns with aging and death (one section of the poem is a eulogy for Atwood’s father) or describes the journey to the underworld, VanSpanckeren argues that the poems as a whole “constitute this journey.” The “alchemical” transformation undergone by the old woman speaker in the last section leaves her with the power to dare to discover her own destiny in the years that remain.

Part III, “Spiritual Adventuring by Other Contemporary Women Writers,” examines the journeys of the spirit undertaken by older women in a variety of circumstances and cultural contexts, including essays on older protagonists in works by contemporary aboriginal and postcolonial women writers. Eros and the aged body are fancifully brought together in Fay Weldon’s “genial” manipulation of “the scripts for the aging” in Rhode Island Blues, according to Roberta Rubenstein in chapter 7. Whereas Lessing presents a realistic look at the miseries of elderly erotic obsession, Weldon celebrates the joy and sense of new possibilities of Felicity Moore’s attraction at eighty-three to William Johnson, eleven years her junior. As Rubenstein points out, Felicity is a rare character in contemporary fiction “who emphatically resists the cultural scripts of aging that assume erotic and emotional diminution.” Rubenstein also notes the special role this novel plays in Weldon’s oeuvre as it seems to constitute the author’s own wishful thinking at seventy-three about possibilities for “women who dare to challenge the conventional cultural scripts of aging.”

Another lively challenge to assumptions about aging, this time directed at the association of older women and stasis, is provided by Sally Chivers in chapter 8, “On the Road Again: Aritha Van Herk’s No Fixed Address and Suzette Mayr’s The Widows.” Chivers holds up to the older women’s experience the mirror not of symbolic travel back
through the imagination but of outrageous, amusing road trips that reconfigure how old age is constructed. Nowhere are cultural scripts more amusingly challenged than in *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* and *The Widows*. Chivers finds highly unlikely female picaresque characters in Van Herk’s wandering protagonist drawn irresistibly into a passionate affair with an nonagenarian lover and Mayr’s trio of older women friends headed back east to “take on Niagara Falls.” These fantastic adventurers “manipulate the realist novel and experiment with time and space” to open the way for new stories and new imaginative possibilities for old age.

The older woman’s journey back into the past can be particularly hazardous within the context of sexual or physical abuse, and the works exploring these problematic life reviews often take on unique narrative shapes. In Sandra Singer’s chapter 9, Rebecca Wells uses the retrospective journey of the abused early midlife daughter to compassionately portray the physical and mental suffering of both mother and daughter in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and its predecessor, *Little Altars Everywhere*. Perusing the scrapbook of her mother and her mother’s friends, Sidda Walker journeys through suffering to healing and love, aided by the intervention of both her mother’s friends and her mother, as Singer demonstrates. Singer also extends her examination beyond the confines of the two novels to encompass not only the film version of the *Ya-Ya* novel but also the intense female friendships formed through involvement of readers in Ya-Ya chat rooms and the regular online column by the author as other vehicles for reader growth.

A different approach is taken to women’s retrospective journeys in Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez’s “Surviving the Colonist Legacy of the Klondike Gold Rush: A Native Woman Elder’s Liberatory and Integrative Storytelling Turn.” In this look at the stories of an elder aboriginal woman told to anthropologist Julie Cruikshank and reproduced in her book, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*, Brill de Ramírez offers us a fascinating example of an aboriginal woman’s unique spiritual journey. Angela Sidney is able to reconcile her earlier shamanistic and Anglican spiritual practices with her late-life acceptance of the Bahá’í Faith through her ability to weave together a number of diverse threads: historical experiences with different manifestations of colonialism, Russian, American, and Canadian; powerful storytelling traditions that stress the “moral and ethical imperatives” of stories; and her ability to “interrelate . . . two
prophecy narratives.” Her openness to the various traditions and spiritual practices she is exposed to and her refusal to fall into the divisiveness often associated with colonized “missionization” is what defines her holistic spiritual and storytelling practice. In examining two of her stories, one personal and the other tribal, Brill de Ramírez notes how they both implicitly deal with the same difficult colonial experiences of her people and her family. While hardships are recounted, there is no rancor. Although her stories do focus on transformation, they are not, as Brill de Ramírez points out in a personal e-mail communication to the editor of this volume, about Sidney’s own transformation. “The focus is outward, offering potentially transforming stories for all our sakes.” For this aboriginal woman, the individual and the collective are inextricably combined: “the focus is on all coming together in unity” and “all becoming transformed through the sacred power of love, community and the sacred.”

The last essay in this collection traces a particularly harrowing late-life journey from silence and insanity to human interaction and sharing. In “‘Soul Murder’ and Rebirth: Trauma, Narrative, and Imagination in Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night,” Jeanie Warnock thoughtfully explores the complex narrative structure of Cereus Blooms at Night, particularly focusing on the intertwining between the first-person outer-frame narrative, in which Tyler, the nurse of elderly, withdrawn Mala Ramchandain, gradually wins Mala’s trust, and the inner narrative of Tyler’s “imaginative re-creation” of Mala’s memories. Drawn from Mala’s utterances and other sources, this inner narrative is split into different time frames, replicating the way these coexist within the present of Mala’s consciousness. Mala is enabled to undergo a life review by proxy through Tyler’s loving ministrations that partly heal the trauma of childhood and early adult sexual and physical abuse by her father. Most interestingly, Warnock explains how Tyler’s kindness to Mala in the present “reverberat[es] back into the past,” helping change Mala’s understanding of earlier levels of herself. Here the retrospective conarrative of Mala and Tyler not only transforms the present consciousness of the voyager but also reshapes her memories of the past.

All three sections of the book provide richly suggestive encounters with midlife and older women’s spiritual struggles. The works chosen do not highlight the breakthrough to any one kind of being and knowing; rather, they celebrate many richly varied kinds of retrospective journeys that midlife and older women take along the spiral of inner
growth. Often their spiral-like journeys back through self-assessment and self-discovery lead to new self-acceptance, sometimes even to a new level of consciousness. Along the way, some women adventurers acquire greater levels of detachment from previously polarized or limited modes of knowing and being and attain attachment to more holistic and spiritually attuned senses of self and other; at times, they become capable of witnessing the whole panorama of humankind’s struggle to attain higher stages of integration and becoming. A few dare to embrace the transpersonal on their way to being more fully human.

The essays examining these works reveal the circumstantial richness, spiritual challenges, and inner integrity of each character’s journey, wherever it takes her. Each of the writers contributing to this collection has likewise explored with integrity and thoughtful appreciation the various adventures undertaken by the midlife or beyond women characters, responding with sensitivity and openness to the difficulties and obstacles, as well as to the successes and breakthroughs that confront the women characters on their journeys along the life spiral. Over and over, we are privileged to discover not the decline into age but the evolution of individuals throughout the life course. The creative works and the essays that celebrate these evolving journeys are adventures of the spirit possessing a symbolic force and cultural resonance worthy of our deepest yearnings. These studies not only enlarge our understanding of women’s “coming to age” but also bear witness to literary experiences that are “potentially transformative aesthetic transaction[s] between reader and text” (Waxman, Center of the Moment, 2–3). As the editor, I have benefited from reading the textual encounters captured in these studies and, as a contributor, I have gained from my own interaction with Lessing’s transpersonal spiritual adventures. I am deeply grateful for both opportunities. I hope that readers similarly will be enriched by their responses to these explorations of midlife and older women’s adventures of the spirit.

Notes

1. I have chosen to use Ken Wilber’s model of spiritual development for its breadth and depth. Like James Fowler’s well-known study, Stages of Faith: The Psychology for Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, Wilber covers the first six stages of spiritual development. However, Wilber’s map of consciousness continues with three more stages of transpersonal spiritual devel-
opment. Furthermore, Wilber’s model of the development of consciousness is much broader than just stages of faith. It maps the evolution of individual and collective, subjective and objective consciousness. Within the domain of individual subjective consciousness, it encompasses the nine rungs of the ladder of self-awareness, the corresponding examination of the climber at each rung, and, finally, a look at the worldview of the self at each stage, including a different self-identity, self-need, and moral sense. “This model of consciousness development is based on the work of sixty or seventy theorists, East and West” (Brief History 132), of whom Fowler is only one.

2. Characterizing all of creation as consisting of an ever-expanding series of concentric circles or spheres, Wilber describes each sphere as corresponding to a “level . . . of being and knowing—ranging from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit” (Integral Psychology 5). Wilber explains that within this “Great Nest of Being,” each larger sphere “transcends but includes its juniors, so that this is a conception of wholes within wholes” (5). Wilber identifies four quadrants associated with each sphere through all the waves of the Great Nest. These quadrants represent both individual and collective development viewed from the inside (subjectively) and the outside (objectively). For example, corresponding to the five stages of matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit are five kinds of technological/economic development: “foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and informational” (Brief History 40). Thus, as Wilber summarizes, “The worldview is the mind, the base is the body, of Spirit. These bodyminds evolve and bring forth new worlds” (ibid. 58, emphasis in original). I am only examining the evolution of self-identity.

3. Wilber draws this understanding from the work of Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, who, in Spiral Dynamics, characterize this breakthrough as “second-tier thinking” (qtd. in Wilber, Integral Psychology 48).

4. Following the first six basic stages, Wilber includes three more transpersonal realms, the “psychic” (“world soul”), the “subtle” (“deity mysticism”), and the “causal” (“pure witnessing self”) (Brief History 183–205).

5. Sandra Singer uses this image in chapter 9. The phrase comes from the title of a collection of short pieces by Canadian women writers.

6. Jung in “The Stages of Life” notes that “we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning.” The second half of life must be governed by the turn inward and the consideration of the meaning of “old age, death, and eternity” (399).

7. Barbara Waxman, in her introduction to From the Hearth to the Open Road, summarizes the findings of a number of critics examining women’s earlier developmental paths, including two landmark studies, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender by psychologist Nancy Chodorow; and In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development by sociologist Carol Gilligan. Waxman also discusses the study of the female Bildungsroman, The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development, edited by literary critics Elizabeth Abel, Mariane Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hearth 12–15). These studies emphasize the unique nature of women’s psychological, social, and moral development and the unique patterns of the fictions that record them.

8. In A Brief History of Everything Wilber describes the immanent, descend-
ing nature of spirit, associated with the image of the goddess and with Agape, as
the embodiment of diversity, the senses, the body, sexuality and earth, the com-
passionate embrace of relationship and the many. In contrast, the transcendent,
ascending nature of spirit, associated with God, is connected to otherworldli-
ness and to the “striv[ing] for the Good of the One in transcendental wisdom” (232).

9. See especially Waxman’s discussion of the desire to live intensely and
the importance of work and love in the autobiographies of May Sarton, Audre
Lorde, and Donald Hall in chapters 2, 3, and 4 of To Live in the Center of the
Moment.

10. This phrase comes from a special issue of Doris Lessing Studies focusing
on older women in Lessing’s works, entitled “Coming to Age,” edited by Ruth
Saxton and Josna Rege.

11. Sizemore discusses Praisesong for the Widow in chapter 5 of Negotiating
Identities in Women’s Lives and Doris Lessing’s novel on the mutually creative
relationship between two women, one in midlife and one very elderly, The Diary
of a Good Neighbor (part of The Diaries of Jane Somers), in chapter 6.

12. Gullette argues for an understanding of age that counteracts the decline
narrative with an understanding of the evolution of identity throughout the life
course (Aged by Culture 194–95).

13. See Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar for a discussion of the need to bring the
self into one’s criticism.

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