Chapter Four

“Living Life Seriatim”: Friendship and Interdependence in Late-Life Fiction and Semifiction

The notion of autonomy is prevalent in contemporary North America. As Margaret Urban Walker puts it in “Getting Out of Line: Alternatives to Life as a Career,” “The image of the fit, energetic, and productive individual who sets himself a course of progressive achievement within the boundaries of society’s rules and institutions, and whose orderly life testifies to his self-discipline and individual effort, remains an icon of our culture” (1999, 102). She explains that such a concept is distinctly gendered so that “Autonomy . . . has long been defined concretely in ways at odds with social demands for appropriate feminine behavior in women” (100). Not only is autonomy gendered, it is also aged, so its definition better fits descriptions of young, able men (Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s “normates”) than it does older women, with or without disabilities. Further, as Robin N. Fiore explains in “Caring for Ourselves: Peer Care in Autonomous Aging,” “Autonomy is commonly contrasted with dependence” (1999, 148). Women, and especially elderly women, are thereby cast as dependent.

In the preceding chapters I have discussed many reasons why it might be harmful to consider late life primarily a time of dependence. Counterproductive and debilitating in itself, the misconception that an elderly person can no longer function without constant aid risks devastating physical, mental, and emotional pain. However, Fiore points out that “Twice as many elderly women as elderly men need supportive care to live independently; 14 percent of elderly women are severely disabled—they cannot climb stairs, walk down the road, bathe completely—
compared to 7 percent of elderly men” (245). Also, women frequently outlive men, so the heterosexual living arrangements that were typical to many North Americans (of a certain generation) when under seventy often cease to be viable to those people now in their seventies and eighties. So far I have written about two possible situations for women living old: moving in with family and moving into nursing homes. Each circumstance involves the potential for a key personal relationship, in the first case with grandchildren and in the second with caregivers. Such cross-generational connections could affect cultural notions of aging for a range of people, with the result that not just the elderly but also those who anticipate aging think through the process. However, each risks dependence whereby, as Fiore explains, a person is “subject to the control of others in matters that affect values and purposes constitutive of one’s personality” (248). Though it is possible for younger generations to benefit from hosting or caring for an elderly relative or resident, the potential for reciprocity could remain merely potential.

In this final chapter I want to consider the possible role of interdependence among the elderly, and particularly among older women. Fiore explains that “Sociologists suggest that it is not physical dependency per se that is detrimental to the autonomy of care recipients, but the inability or lack of opportunity to reciprocate, leading to perceived power imbalances and excessive feelings of obligation” (254). She advocates peer care as a possible strategy to redistribute power and to avoid the representation of burdensome old age. Even outside of care situations, the possibilities inherent within late-life friendship allow for a mutuality that might be lacking in inter- and cross-generational relationships. Fiore claims, “friendship provides the condition for the possibility of freedom in an age of comprehensive social regulation” (250). Friendship among the elderly, and especially among elderly women who tend to outlive their male peers, calls into question the automatic association of the elderly with dependence and encourages an identity formation that exceeds the standard “old age as burden” formula. Such friendships could include both longstanding connections that have stood the test of time and new bonds that form in part because of shared experiences of aging. Regardless of whether such friendships result in cohabitation—an alternative to the sometimes restrictive possibilities of living with family or living in an institution—they usually at least trouble the pervasive binary opposition between burdensome old age and useful youth and, in doing so, question the cultural and especially literary emphasis on what Margaret Urban Walker and James Lindeman Nelson refer to as “career selves.”

Nelson offers an alternate model for living (and, in his essay, dying) old: “[S]eriatim selves” see “life less as an overall unified project and
more as a set of fits and starts” (1999, 122). This model, gleaned from Hilde Lindeman Nelson’s phrase “living life seriatim,” shifts from privileging any one stage of life since there can be great diversity and change presumably at any point. Whereas Walker’s “fit, energetic and productive individual” might view his (the concept as Walker explains it is gendered) life as a single arc with an identifiable climax, leaving old age simply as a denouement with room for reflection, a seriatim self might turn to another less wholistic narrative in order to assess personal value. That is, the seriatim self may value a series of connections to other people rather than prizing the progress of life leading to a unified and successful career. This alternate model allows for a revaluation of the elderly without a falsely positive or reductive invocation of serenity, wisdom, and grace.

Living life seriatim allows for a focus on elderly friendship because it encourages a different value on relationships so that, as Nelson puts it, “A seriatim self has escaped, more or less, the ideological pressures, as well as the ideological and material rewards that encourage people to identify themselves with their careers, and hence may live a life both more shaped by contingencies than by the expression of personal agency and more involved in relationships prized intrinsically, not because they are instrumental to achieving the agent’s quest” (123–24). Living life seriatim offers a model of friendship that values the interpersonal benefits over any other end goal. That is, rather than an elderly woman leaning on a daughter because she is unable to live alone, by this model the older woman might turn to her next-door neighbor for a ride to the doctor’s office, and in return the neighbor may turn to her for advice about buying a new furnace. This model proposes a type of selfhood not unique to late life but particularly salient to a revaluation of those stages of life.

A shift to valuing personal relationships in and of themselves results not only in reciprocity but also, potentially, in a diminished value for action. In seeking “alternate pictures of well-lived and admirable lives, and ones that may be at odds in the concrete with the kind of individuality and autonomy that a certain kind of society elevates as an ideal” (Walker 1999, 97–98), older people might find value in what had previously been labeled obsolescence. Elderly women are more likely than elderly men to choose seriatim selves (and Nelson notes that this is historically specific so that women of my generation may more likely opt for a career self) and so are more likely to reject the action and experience valued within a career model (127). The increasingly constructive narratives of aging published recently build on the notion of seriatim selves and particularly the ways in which personal relationships, and especially friendships among old women, have intrinsic value. In this
chapter I discuss two narratives of elderly friendship: Joan Barfoot’s novel *Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch* (1994) depicts two women who have been friends throughout their adult lives reuniting as elderly women and together grappling with cultural expectations of action; Cynthia Scott’s semidocumentary film, *The Company of Strangers* (1990), depicts eight women who become friends on a journey taken in late life and defy cultural as well as narrative expectations of action. Despite their different genres, the works collectively comment on the possibilities that late-life friendship, especially its narrative depiction, offers to constructive conceptualizations of old age. In both works the characters’ willingness to embark on new friendships and living situations at a relatively late stage eschews the “old age as denouement” pattern typical of a career self. Instead, both illustrate the possibility of and potential within living life seriatim.

**Female Friendship and Literary Scholarship**

A number of feminist scholars have focused upon female friendship, and particularly female friendship as narrative fiction depicts it. Implicitly this work focuses on friendships among younger women, but it is nonetheless relevant to a study of older women. In conventional fiction female friendships most often remain subservient to heterosexual connections. When female characters interact outside of family connections, they do so usually as part of an overall trajectory toward marriage or male achievement. That is, they are married off or sent to work for male characters. Jane Eyre is a well-known example of such a character as are both Catherines from *Wuthering Heights*. In certain unique, though increasingly more prevalent, cases women writers depict female characters interacting solely for the purpose of their connection and without concern for supposedly masculine (i.e., connected to male characters) goals. Jeannette Winterson has created a number of such characters. The latter cases defy the damaging prescriptive embedded in the former and carefully draw the reader into a new possibility for female communities. Of course, female readers may already understand that female friendship is possible, but a narrative model provides a structure for understanding its potency.

In “(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women” (1981), Elizabeth Abel hints at a particular relationship between readers and characters when she argues that female friendship can play a crucial role in self-understanding mostly through commonality: Female characters recognize themselves in each other and gain greater self-knowledge through interaction. Judith
Kegan Gardiner, in her “The (US)es of (I)dentity: A Response to Abel on ‘(E)merging Identities’” (1981), takes issue with perceived narrowness in Abel’s conceptualization and suggests that complementarity can be as crucial to female friendship as commonality, with the result that women may work together to complete each other or profit from comprehending each others’ differences. The collaboration between these two feminist scholars—consisting of an article by Abel, a response by Gardiner, and a reply from Abel—supports itself in its form. The two thinkers collectively shift feminist thought from mother-daughter paradigms to other female-female dynamics. Together, Abel and Gardiner develop a model for studying female friendship, and that model can help clarify friendships as novels about groups of old women depict them.

Gardiner explicitly raises the question of how literature, and especially the construction of the characters Abel discusses, affects an analysis of female friendship. She proposes that character criticism such as Abel’s psychoanalytic approach can restrict the analysis of social context, and so she stresses the “specifically fictional dimension of the characters” Abel has discussed (437). For Gardiner, fictionality is important because of how fiction comments upon a social world. By examining the fictional elements of the friendships Abel discusses, Gardiner demonstrates that readers can glean crucial insights into a social world, outside fiction. As participants in that social world, readers participate in determining how fiction can fit into an even broader social milieu.

In Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction, Tess Coslett, directly in dialogue with Abel and implicitly supportive of Gardiner’s criticism, discusses fiction’s possible role: “Abel’s approach here seems to me to be mistaken (and representative of much feminist criticism), in assuming that fiction can and does simply represent ‘actuality,’ and in assuming that ‘narrative considerations’ are obstacles to this task. Fiction, I would say, actually consists in narrative devices and conventions, and these reflect, embody or even create not ‘reality’ or ‘experience,’ but ideology” (1988, 2). Coslett claims that in the interstices of literary production lie subtle understandings of a larger social world. Similar to Bakhtin, she implies that fiction offers a type of knowledge but not a reflection of actuality. For Coslett, the structure of fiction—its “narrative devices and conventions”—not only absorbs and repeats prevailing ideology but also prescribes it. Her contribution suggests that literary production and literary study have a potentially vast cultural influence.

For Coslett, narrative fiction is paramount because its conventions could exclude the types of depictions of female friendship crucial to Abel’s formulation: “Here, I think, the important point is what is
considered as suitable material for a narrative as opposed to a letter: what counts as an event in a story. The world of women’s friendships seems to be perceived as something static, outside the action that makes a story” (11). As Nelson suggests, narratives typically require action, so depictions of female-female friendship can be controlled by popular understandings of both what women are meant to do (or, more often, not to do) and what fiction is meant to encompass. Old women’s stories and old women’s friendships could also be dynamic narrative happenings, whether or not they match typical expectations of action, that is, whether or not elderly female characters reject “career lives.” Rather than being “outside the action that makes a story” and therefore static, these friendships can be outside the action and still make a story. These constructive narratives of aging are based on what Constance Rooke has called a “new paradigm of hope” and grounded in “living life seriatim.”

Similar to Nelson’s claim about the intrinsic worth of relationships to the seriatim self, Abel explains in a footnote that “while male relationships tend to be more instrumental, oriented toward purposive group activity rather than intimate verbal sharing,” “female friendships are emotionally deeper and involve a higher level of self-disclosure” (1981, 415 n. 4). Along with Coslett, I want to explore how depictions of female friendships in fiction present richer possibilities for this multifaceted interpersonal connection than those offered in other media. If narrative fiction taps into a constructed and imaginary world that can reflect and especially affect circulating social thought, then it might also participate in the larger process of rearranging crucial social configurations such as groups of old women, at least in the cultural imagination.

The Possibility of Late-Life Friendship: Contemporary Narrative Examples

There is a hint of late-life friendship in The Stone Angel. Hagar catches the first glimmer of female interaction as a possible respite at Silverthreads. Sadly, her interaction with Mrs. Steiner, and its hint at the possibilities that groups of old women offer, actually prompts her fatal escape attempt. Hagar’s endeavor to escape to the cannery lands her in a hospital. In the public ward she again encounters women in a situation similar to her own, but, unlike from Silverthreads, she cannot flee from the hospital and so must reconcile herself somewhat to the strengths other old women collectively offer her. Further, the relative abilities found within the hospital community enable Hagar to offer help when she could have been depicted as most helpless. She finally accepts the strength harbored by community and can accordingly defy her previous
overriding superiority and desperate self-containment. Once in the hospital, she laments how little space she has, telling readers, “Lord how the world has shrunk” and “The world is even smaller now. It’s shrinking so quickly now” (Laurence 1964, 254, 282). Now that her world is so reduced that she truly is physically contained, she surpasses her previous circumspection and opens herself to friendship with fellow patients. As Michel Fabre puts it in “The Angel and the Living Water: Metaphorical Networks and Structural Opposition in The Stone Angel,” “[g]radually, through the slow but inevitable ripening of her flesh and her heart, she is led to accept things as they are, to appreciate and accept those elements that she had before considered as scornful, even intolerable, in her own personality” (1996, 27). The need and even desire for others has long plagued Hagar because she has also craved self-sufficiency. She succumbs to what she considers a distasteful weakness of flesh and so becomes able to make interpersonal connections she has also previously considered the result of weakness. Although she never reconciles herself with bodily change to the extent of describing her own body in literal terms, her relations with fellow patients indicate a physical acceptance different from the bathetic metaphors that continue.

Hagar’s initial reluctance to share the public hospital ward reflects the disdain she presents herself as having held throughout her life. The “barracks” are “bedlam,” and she is forced to sleep “cheek-by-jowl with heaven knows who all” (Laurence 1964, 255). The anonymity of the “mewling nursery of old ladies” gradually dissipates as Hagar listens to them sleep (265): “[S]ome snore raspingly. Some whimper in their sleep. Some neigh a little, with whatever pain or discomfort is their particular portion” (256). She can no longer separate herself from these women when she learns from Elva Jardine and Mrs. Reilly that she too contributed to the nighttime din. Further, when her son Marvin is unable to stay at the hospital, he leaves Hagar in the company of the other patients, whom she witnesses helping each other to attract the nurse’s attention. When she discovers that she and Elva Jardine both come from rural Manitoba and even know some people in common, she can accept a connection between herself and the others: “Our eyes meet. There’s an amiability about this woman” (272). Her prairie farming connection allows her once again to be called by her proper name, Hagar.

Hagar finally finds strength and acceptance through the other women in the hospital, but both arrive too late for her to contemplate restructuring her world to accommodate communal living. Her story resembles the life review model that is most typical of career selves. Because the only places she encounters women like herself are institutions that forebode ill and limit movement, Hagar only glimpses the
possibilities inherent in female friendship and community. Having isolated herself socially earlier in life through her marriage to Bram Shipley and professional relationship with Mr. Oatley, Hagar does not have a basic understanding of the strength of female community to build on in late life. By layering themes (present and retrospective), Laurence underlines Hagar’s self-imposed isolation, and she, ironically by her own previous pleading, is finally segregated from the group of women she comes to appreciate.

Nighttime obliterates the connections among the women—“talk between bed and bed is extinguished. Each of us lives in our own night” (273)—but Hagar is able to comfort herself by thinking of the women she has begun to know during the day. When Marvin finally finds the semiprivate room his mother has demanded, her dismay renders her unchanged in his eyes because she still simply seems unhappy with everything he does. He does not comprehend that her desires have changed as the result of newly developed personal relationships. Within the semiprivate room, the change within Hagar that allowed her to appreciate female community in the general ward is reinforced. Hagar is now so intent on making connections that she offends her young roommate by implying that they are similar simply because their fathers share an occupation: “But that’s the wrong thing to say. So much distance lies between us, she doesn’t want any such similarity” (288). The two are momentarily united when Hagar shares the language of the young woman’s generation: “I have to smile at myself. I’ve never used that word before in my life. Okay” (301). Hagar’s newfound emotional warmth takes up an extremely small portion of the novel, and it merely suggests a potential, which later works expand, for the portrayal of female-female friendship.

“Brave Again”:
Joan Barfoot’s Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch

What Hagar begins to find at the close of The Stone Angel, the central characters of Joan Barfoot’s Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch fully live out in a novel that exceeds the life review model typical of career selves and embraces the possibilities of a seriatim self. The novel charts the developing friendship between two women, now approaching seventy. Their complementarity exceeds their commonality to the extent that they play completely different roles in their separate stories. Charlotte is the other woman in her central romance, and Claudia is the wronged wife in hers. The different stories are narrated alternately, as in Duet for Three, so readers have a similar task of aligning and realign-
ing themselves, this time in a friendship rather than a battle. These women look beyond the role each other has played and maintain a crucial intimate bond. They demonstrate that a pairing of women can signify more than merely amorphous femininity eager, or at least willing, to further narratives structured around the goals of male characters. Readers have to rethink affinities continually because they first side with the other woman, then with the wronged wife, and then strangely, somehow, with both.

The support the women continue to offer each other illuminates the strength of complementarity that Gardiner stresses; As Claudia muses, “[p]erhaps between the two of them, Claudia and Charlotte, they’ve managed to create one single, whole, full life. Maybe Claudia actually relished, the way she could Bradley’s body, Charlotte’s excursions into what must have looked like wickedness; and maybe Claudia gave Charlotte a relationship, however remote, with solidity and normalcy; at least of the sort promoted by certain kinds of magazines” (Barfoot 1994, 85). The differences between the women allow them to offer something otherwise lacking to each other and to be fulfilled by their interactions. Similarly, readers can imaginatively engage with the completion gained by the constructed experiences of these two elderly characters. Though it is too simple to suggest that they too benefit from the completion, readers might gain a new way of thinking about how female friendships can offer fulfillment.

In describing their friendship, Claudia depicts their separate choices as entailing both loss and gain: “You don’t get to have both, by and large. So you chose interesting, and lost out on ordinary. Me, I chose ordinary, so I couldn’t have thrills and change” (Barfoot 1994, 236). The two overcome what could have easily been, especially from Claudia’s perspective, irrevocable differences in a lasting and supportive friendship. Their mutual support extends into a decision to spend their late lives together. In making an unconventional but logical choice, the female characters agree to benefit from close contact with the other side of their crucial earlier choices and, to a degree, gain the “interesting” and “ordinary” they had previously missed. The novel deliberately oversimplifies the dilemma of banality versus excitement to exaggerate how female interactions can help to overcome difference and compensate for loss. More important, the novel depicts these lives moving into a new phase that exceeds the past dependence on a male figure.

Readers witness Claudia, having helped her philandering husband to a swifter end via morphine, write to Charlotte after a year of silence. Charlotte, disturbed by her own recent turn to spying on her former lover from hedges, responds with a warm invitation. The resulting meeting allows the two old women to understand the strength of their
collective experience, and they decide to move in together to combat their excruciating memories and perilous financial states. Charlotte expresses the potential of their friendship strengthened into a new living arrangement: “Well. It’s only, I thought it would be cheaper for both of us, for one thing. But also it might keep us from driving ourselves crazy. You wouldn’t have to be off brooding in that house on your own, and I wouldn’t get frightened or tempted by foolishness. I can see getting brave again, instead of ridiculous” (257–58). Instead of continuing to be the wronged wife and the forgotten mistress, the two women can function together socially and combat their fears of late-life fatigue, senility, and decline. Their commonality as older women living changing lives exceeds the complementarity that existed primarily in relation to men.

The friendship these two women have managed to forge becomes more crucial to them than any relationships they have developed with men or even offspring. As Claudia thinks, “Their friendship is a spine that has grown with them, and whatever aches and pains and inflexibilities it has developed here and there, now and then, its absence is not imaginable. What would one be without a spine?” (162). They become mutually dependent to the extent that they share a support system. Neither is entirely dependent, and so neither is vulnerable to outside accusations of insufficiency; instead, they require each other. Claudia has an option other than moving in with her offspring, and Charlotte does not have to move into a nursing home. As a result, when Claudia confesses murder to Charlotte, Charlotte offers comfort, thinking, “Well. Friends perform certain acts, no matter what” (251), and she expresses worry for Claudia rather than for the man Claudia killed.

Charlotte repeatedly says to Claudia in her letters and in person, “I think we tried to look after each other. I think that’s what friends do” (235). The friendship depicted between these two women hints at a world of possibility for female late life: Neither woman will remain alone in an unsustainable home, neither woman will depend on family to an extent that she may lose the freedom she has finally gained, and neither woman will go to an institution unnecessarily. The two will budget together and explore the numerous possibilities they had been unable to pursue because their opposing love choices interfered with their friendship. As Claudia puts it, “‘It’s nice anyway, ending up with a friend!’” (260).

This fictional exploration of two old women regaining contact to further their friendship at a crisis point in both their lives offers rich insight into the potential for female friendship to offer respite to women at any time, and especially in late life. Never having been able to (or chosen to) make their friendship central in their adult lives, the women realize that doing so could provide a solution to their financial
and emotional woes. Readers witness the complex memories and justifications of both women with regard to extremely different experiences and perceive that friendship can offer respite and even escape from the vicissitudes that social hatred of old age can bring. Rather than writing a retreat into lives lived in retrospect, Barfoot depicts the characters as willing to begin anew late in life.

“Ourselves, Up to a Point”:
Cynthia Scott’s The Company of Strangers

In The Company of Strangers, the characters literally embark on a new journey that is quickly interrupted when their bus lands in a ditch, an accident that could be a simple metaphor for the typical sidelining of elderly women. These characters turn to each other and develop friendships that become the means by which they explore their varied pasts. Career selves meet seriatim selves resulting in a new narrative model, neither entirely fictional nor entirely documentary. Originally called The Bus, Cynthia Scott’s NFB production is a semidocumentary in which, as actor Mary Meigs puts it in her book-length narrative about the filming, “our eclectic group of seniors’ is being taken in a rented school bus . . . ‘to a Golden Age exchange program at some remote resort.’ . . . The bus ‘runs gently off the road into a ditch,’ says Gloria, as we make a detour to find Constance Garneau’s childhood house” (1991, 9–10). Cynthia Scott and Gloria Demers chose the group of actors/subjects because of their different backgrounds, but, with the exception of Michelle Sweeney, 27, who drives the bus, the women are all 65 or older: “Alice Diabo, 74; Constance Garneau, 88; Winifred Holden, 76; Cissy Meddings, 76; Mary Meigs, 71; Catherine Roche, 65; Beth Webber, 80” (10). They play themselves, and there is no attempt to hide their particular ages and backgrounds. As a group, they succeed to a larger degree than the characters I have discussed thus far in reshaping devastating understandings of old age, in part by thoroughly investigating the device of the lens as a kaleidoscope for their aging bodies and in part through interdependence.

Meigs talks about the significance of the borders between fiction and nonfiction and between young and old:

We are ourselves, up to a point; beyond this point is the “semi,” a region with boundaries that become more or less imprecise, according to our view of them. In one sense, it is semi from beginning to end, for we wouldn’t be out there in the wilds, wouldn’t have boarded the bus together. Semi has worked to put together
seven old women and a younger woman who would never have known of each other’s existence, with the ironic outcome that both in real life and on film we become friends who now need to keep in touch with one another. A real documentary might not have had this effect; it might have isolated each of us in her own life and surroundings. (59)

The strength of community is obvious in Meigs’s account of the process, but she also discusses how the women individually and collectively grapple with the possibilities that a partially fictional medium affords them. They also wrestle with the disjunction between those possibilities and what they perceive as reality in their own nonfilmic worlds. A documentary “purports to present factual information about the world outside the film” (Bordwell and Thompson 1997, 42), as does The Company of Strangers. Further to that standard definition, as John Izod and Richard Kilborn describe John Grierson’s innovation, “the documentarist must deploy a whole range of creative skills to fashion the ‘fragments of reality’ into an artefact that has a specific social impact: that is educationally instructive or, in some measure, culturally enlightening. This account must be, in Grierson’s phrase, a ‘creative treatment of actuality,’ being aesthetically satisfying while also having a clearly defined social purpose” (1998, 427). The NFB’s most popular film (according to promotional material) creates a fictive scenario through which to access the seemingly accurate information about old age, gleaned from the women’s experiences and conversations. The film works creatively with “fragments of reality” and aims for a social impact that is realized, to some degree, within the film itself.

Writing about women’s autobiographical videos, Julia LeSage makes much of “women’s fragmented consciousness” (310). She explains, “Unlike social-issues documentarists working over the same twenty years in a realist mode, most of these women artists do not presume to represent a continuous stable identity or a cohesive self. Rather, they pursue an epistemological investigation of what kinds of relations might constitute the self” (1999, 311). The Company of Strangers fits to some degree three of the four structures that LeSage articulates as categories of experimental feminist video autobiographies. It collects family photographs, explores daily life, and situates the autobiography within a fiction frame. Writing about the NFB production, Diana George discusses the interactive role of these structures when speaking of the photographs featured onscreen to accompany the oral narratives: “[B]ecause they are so obviously taken from the attics and albums of each actor, the viewer is forced to move back and forth between genres, never settling on the photographs as either evidence or fiction” (1995,
27). The film offers characters, but the characters are at times indistinguishable from the actors. Thus LeSage’s fragmented consciousness makes the mix of fiction and documentary appropriate; Catherine Russell describes The Company of Strangers in this way: “The fictional premise dislocates the women from their ethnographic characters, and then lets documentary seep in from the edges” (1999, 219).

Meigs provides her own definition of semidocumentary: “A semidocumentary is a happening within an artistic structure, which is set up with a delicate instinct for possibilities, for recognizing the moments at which possibilities happen” (1991, 148). The insertion of fiction into documentary adds the potential of Bakthinian dialogism. In return, The Company of Strangers partially thwarts the usual properties of a fiction film because the characters are not mostly imaginary or entirely constructed, but the location and events are. The possibilities available to the fictional aspect of the film uniquely depend upon the participants’ link to a lived reality. Meigs tries to explain the thin line between fiction and nonfiction: “We are all ‘in real life,’ since we are ourselves in a semidocumentary, or ‘alternative drama.’ Our semi or alternative category shapes our story, which has no plot and no conventional drama; it is a happening in which strangers become company” (9). “The Bus” has the possibilities of narrative, the imaginative detours of fiction, and yet a uniquely permeable boundary between characters and actors. The actors were cast based on their diverse backgrounds, and they are called upon to play themselves, if awkwardly scripted at times. The casting and the effects of the casting amplify changes both to the proposed screen version of the story and to the personal experiences of the actors.

The impact of the film on the participants is uniquely relevant to the film itself. The process of filming results not only in a version that differs from what the directors had envisioned, which is typical, but also in a self-image that differs from what the actors had understood. And it is, in part, that self-image that the film seeks to convey. Meigs explains that “Gloria’s scenarios had suggested a ‘story,’ but this film had been taken by the wayward movements of the cast away from and beyond the ‘story’ to an unanticipated place where it wanted to live” (29). Thus, the process of creating a fictional narrative of aging had the effect that I propose that reading narratives can have, in that it created a new narrative of aging. The women’s emerging friendship revolves around collectivity both in the fictive world they share, where they work together to survive, and in the nonfictive world they share, where they work together to create a narrative.

When Constance complains to Meigs that nothing happens in the film, making it a poor example of narrative in her opinion, Meigs responds, “[W]e are what happens. The film is about seven semi-old
women and a young woman happening” (78). The women themselves are an experience, thwarting conventional understandings both of film and of old women. Old women are not typically viable subjects for a film, so Meigs’s response may not go far to alleviate Constance’s misgivings. In the process of filming, the women present various concerns about whether they will come across as themselves or as the characters they portray, as old or as semi-old, as their mirror images or as the movie stars dressed up as the old women they frequently refer to themselves as: “ourselves, who were radiant film stars disguised as old women” (38). They fear that the necessary privileging of the visual required by film will limit how they will be seen and how they will be able to see themselves.

Despite their emerging belief in movie illusion, the old women do not entirely overcome a strong belief that their bodies are typically considered inappropriate for display. The problem crystallizes in Meigs’s repeated reference to a bathing scene that director Cynthia Scott wanted to film while the actors were naked: “We are asked one by one, how do you feel about walking nude into the lake? That’s how I understood the question, though Cynthia tells me that it was hedged with delicate precautions, which, in my panic, I didn’t even wait to hear. My horror of the idea must go back to the irreversible prudery instilled in me seventy years ago” (61). Meigs claims that her fear of nakedness comes from internalized notions of appropriateness and the display of female bodies, but the rest of her discussion makes it clear that a fear of exposing old flesh pervades the women who are asked to disrobe. They feared physical ridicule, exposing that their bodies were in fact old: “We were semi-old. It was a lovely illusion that got us through long days without falling in our traces like decrepit cart-horses. It was the reason for our refusal to be in a nude scene, for wouldn’t this have proved that we weren’t semi but old?” (74) Despite some of the women’s continued reservations, the directors film a compromise scene. Because of the camaraderie developing among the actors, a clothed scene in the water turns into a childish, teasing water fight:

“Grotesque, ridiculous, they’re trying to make a laughingstock of us,” says Constance about our splashing scene; she is looking through the eyes of a hostile audience. But the camera keeps rolling while we (Cissy, Alice and I) become ourselves as little children and, fully clothed, chase each other into the dazzling lake, scooping up warm water as we go. Alice goes in up to her waist, heaves gallons of water at Cissy and me; Cissy and I shriek in mock terror. (61)
Strangely, although the fear of nudity overcame the desire to be made new by the camera and produced a preventative embarrassment, the women did not have the same fear of acting youthful, even childlike. The moment captures to a degree the developing intimacy among a group of old women and helps release the tension in the film’s loose narrative about the struggle to survive while stranded in rural Quebec. Still, the tranquility originally envisioned dissipates partly because old women’s bodies are not credited, in this case, even by themselves and partly because the directors were unable to come up with an alternative.

Meigs’s version of Cynthia Scott’s actual vision of the scene is oddly removed from what occurs in the film. Scott tells Meigs she had no intention of fully exposing the women or having them parade naked in front of cameramen. The scene would have been filmed by a woman, and the actors would have worn bathing suits: “The seven of us in the calm lake with our backs turned—that was Cynthia’s vision” (74). Her sense of loss in connection with the scene is intensified by an understanding that the actors compensated for remaining clothed by splashing about like children. The potential for the kind of disjunction (between imagined youth and actual age) of posing naked is possibly even more present in the scene as filmed than in the envisioned scene. Somehow it is more appropriate that old women mimic the ridiculous, giddy games of children than that they expose their flesh.

Meigs speaks of the film as “the first time in our lives we are separated from our mirror-images, the ones we can control, and have become Others” (75). She recounts an experience Constance told her about: “She tells me about the stranger riding beside her on a department store escalator, a well-dressed, attractive woman who looked like her and to whom she turned at the ground floor. She felt that she knew her and wanted to greet her. The woman had vanished; she was Constance’s mirror-image. Constance realized with surprise that her mirror-image could please her as long as she was a stranger” (76). The women have a similar experience reconciling themselves with their filmic images. Meigs speaks of recognizing herself on the screen after having participated in the illusion of her semi-oldness: “During the entire filming we are invisible to ourselves, but each must have had a private image different from the one we see when we are shown the film. How strange she is, I think of the Mary I see; she has a slow, creaky voice and a face like her mother’s crackleware teapot” (78). Meigs wonders about the new realization, whether it lies with the medium or a subjective reevaluation that occurs differently in mirror gazing: “We are seeing our new selves—the real ones? or the ones that others see? It must be this, for the others don’t seem strange to us, as each of us is strange to herself” (78). The entire process of creating an illusion has changed Meigs’s relation with her
physical manifestation so that she no longer feels stuck within the only perspective available from within that physical frame: “Because we are sealed into our bodies, we are surprised by things in ourselves that we have never noticed and that now seem exaggerated and slightly embarrassing” (74). As a result of movie magic, the same process that allows them to turn chicken legs into frog legs during filming allows them to believe in a new physical freedom: “We can bask in a whole summer of attention, we are acting out the myth of our ideal selves, off- and on-camera, and we come to believe in our new reincarnations, there in the centre where the perspective lines meet. It doesn’t matter that we, flesh and blood old people are being translated into a film-language that expresses old people (us seven, at least) to Cynthia, Sally, Gloria and others” (77). It does not matter, to Meigs, that an illusion is being created for a semifictive exposé of old age. She and the group of seven women had an opportunity to forge a new relationship with an ideal self not subject to the usual social dicta. The semi of the semidocumentary opened the door for the old women to realize the potential of fiction in recreating their self-images.

The interaction among the women actors is crucial to their capacity to reimagine themselves. As Meigs points out, only by understanding that because she is seeing the others on film as she sees them regularly, she must also see herself as others see her. The filming process brings new ways of seeing from the perspective of each of the women as well as bringing together a diverse group of people who, as Meigs admits, otherwise would not have met. Meigs’s description makes clear that the women became friends both on- and off-screen simultaneously: “In the first rushes, Sally says, we seemed (as we were) almost strangers to each other. Our becoming friends off the set changed the nature of the film and made scenes of discord or violence impossible” (77). The kind of community the women form is so strong that it affects the type of film that is made and precludes a previously planned death scene. Originally, Constance’s pouring of pills into the lake resulted in her death, but the women grew to know and understand each other so well and developed such faith in the movie magic that they could not actually film that death.

Meigs explains the fictive power of the developing friendship: “The story of the film is the story of the eight pieces of us coming together, an invisible and motionless progress, a gravity pulling toward the still centre that is the place of art” (47). Meigs describes the blending of people into an aesthetic that transforms old bodies for film viewers as part of the developing friendship: “Mixing, not only in terms of sound, but also in the mixture of us: connection or binding, each with every other, and all of us with the elements” (153). The strength of the devel-
oping bonds makes even prickly Constance tell Meigs, “I’m very fond of you. . . . I feel you filled a gap in my life” (87), and motivates Gloria to ask, in a child’s line, “will you be my friend forever?” (98). That strength also affects the technical aspects of filming and postproduction. Meigs’s figure of speech, mixing, evokes the splicing of the sound track, not the editing of a visual scene, to describe the friendships that emerge as complexly as the film encourages viewers to perceive the women.

The award-winning *Company of Strangers* is of course a selection of the many hours of shooting into a compact narrative with decidedly documentary moments. The conversations among women take the place of talking-head interviews and could make the overall narrative thrust seem contrived, except that the landscape is so carefully woven into each conversation as well as into the overall story (they are stranded within the landscape after all) that the willing suspension of disbelief includes accepting moments of awkward disclosure. The setting operates metaphorically so that the two houses comment on the old age the women face. The building isolated near the water offers a tranquil but lonely refuge. The other decrepit dwelling turns out to be full of hidden treasures that the women, because of their own lengthy experience, understand. The quilt they unearth represents to them hours of careful handiwork. The bizarre and disturbing Victorian bootjack shaped like a woman’s body provokes different reactions in the women based on their various relationships to pornography and feminism. The discoveries happen early in their stay and offer an opening to the development of understandings among the women. The metaphors do not veil the aging bodies but rather comment upon them and enhance how viewers can see and interpret them.

The interrupted journey that offers these women the time they share by the lake in rural Quebec can be thought of metaphorically. No longer as able to travel forward, physically hampered from activities previously crucial to everyday life, the women are offered the time and space to discover each others’ knowledge, strengths, and stories. Because they do not have food to sustain them, in this extreme case they rely on each others’ expertise to survive. Read literally, the film offers the possibility for a group of women to work together, even in late life, to survive a potentially traumatic, life-threatening time. In addition, *The Company of Strangers* shows that constructive bonds can develop out of such interdependence.

Rather than the figures of speech Hagar hides behind, which indicate scorn and contempt for her own changing physical form and the cultural meanings it encompasses, Scott’s filmic juxtapositions poignantly link old bodies to surroundings without avoiding the bodies themselves.
Those bodies, the real old women chosen to play themselves, establish friendships that sustain their late lives both in fiction and after filming. Forming interpersonal bonds means finding spaces of interdependence that offer new and continued strengths and experiences. Without evading the visible implications of growing old, the film works through the visual to demonstrate a range of viable tactics for understanding late life, all of which rely on a female community.