

BOOK REVIEWS

At Seventy, A Journal

reviewed by Fe Maria Arriola

by May Sarton.

WW Norton and Company, NY, London. 1984

At seventy, is a woman on a post-menopausal decline? Is a writer's literary work on a denouement? Are the adventures that spice up "the seasons of women" over?

Not so, says May Sarton who "feels younger at 70 than at 50 or 60." In her journal, AT SEVENTY, she writes:

"Those previews of old age were not entirely accurate, I am discovering. And that, as far as I can see, is because I live more completely in the moment these days, am not as anxious about the future, and am far more detached from the areas of pain, the loss of love, the struggle to get the work completed, the fear of death."

The journal, started on her seventieth birthday is a day-to-day account of an entire year. It was not an exceptional year in

what, on the surface, is an ordinary life in a quiet village in England. The journal has no dramatic highlights, no moments of great passion (except, perhaps, that one poignant entry on the day she was told of the death of her "one true love").

But it is written by an extraordinary woman with enough *jure de vice* to last another seventy years. One comes across the words "happy" and "good" so often and she is so appreciative of people, of nature and of her blessings, big and small.

"Now I wear the inside person outside, and am more comfortable with myself," she writes. In some ways I am younger because I can admit vulnerability and more innocent because I do not have to pretend."

The journal almost makes me look forward to being old. Which is wonderful news to women who have been duped into considering youth and beauty essential to their happiness.

She writes mostly about her "priorities" -- "first, friends, then work, then the garden."

The friends are many; the friendships deep and warm and strong. Some were nurtured over the years, some are newly made. Regrettably it was not her "year for passion" or the reader might have gathered valuable insights into a mature lesbian relationship. May Sarton handled this aspect of her reality with subtle delicacy, mentioning it ever so casually, even while sorrow over the news of the death of her lover gives us a glimpse of the depth of her capacity to love.

Work during this period consisted of poetry readings, lecture, a novel and this journal which went into publication shortly after the year's end. She would go on to write more books, validating the claim that age is no hindrance to creative productivity.

The journal is strewn with little poems and quotations. These spice up the text as well as illustrates her points.

And the entries on her garden, the "secret extravagance" where her "madness lies", will delight the reader who would share her concern for the nurture of nature's beauty and bounty.

As journals go, AT SEVENTY tells us not only what sort of a person but also how good a writer she is.

"Writers must write journals the way painters are driven to do self-portraits," to check their development as artists and persons and to chart the direction they are taking.

May Sarton's journal is not, we find, an exercise in self-indulgence. She has, after all, at this point gained stature and some fame as a writer. Thus at seventy, she is well within her right to publish a journal and to share her spontaneous intimate thoughts and feelings with those of us prepared to enjoy the company of a wise and happy woman.▲

