

I Feel Bad About My Neck Study Guide

I Feel Bad About My Neck by Nora Ephron

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Plot Summary

Nora Ephron is known as a writer of novels, screenplays, and plays. She is also a critically acclaimed director. In this somewhat autobiographical book, Nora provides humorous insight into being a woman; specifically, about being a woman who is aging. But throughout the book there are anecdotes and stories that women of any age can relate to and laugh about. It starts with a discourse on Nora's feelings about her neck, like is mentioned in the title. The remainder of the book dives into thoughts on health, beauty, fashion, relationships, wisdom, marriage, and finally death. No subject matter seems untouchable. If it is something a woman can experience, it can be found in this book.

Nora candidly shares her own experiences. Good and bad it is all here. One learns about her failures in cooking and marriages, her shortcomings in her appearance and fashion, her struggles to begin and maintain a career in writing, and her fear of inevitable death. But even when the subject matter is heavy, her delightful delivery keeps an upbeat pace throughout the book. Nora takes one on a journey that shares life in New York as a single, married, divorced, and remarried woman. The reader experiences life as daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend.

While some of the stories may not be something at first glance someone would think of experiencing, such as the quest to find cabbage strudel or the perfect purse, while reading the story one feels as if one is right there with Nora. The stories often bring up memories or thoughts of a personal cabbage strudel quest. It may not be a purse a reader is searching for, but reading with a sense of humor about someone else's struggle can make a personal search that much more bearable. In each chapter this is what Nora delivers—hope, support, and humor through the trials and tribulation of being not just a woman, but a woman who is aging.

The reader can feel that Nora has written the book to not just share humor and wit with women, but to provide an opportunity for dialog and thoughts on what matters most to women and what should be foremost in our lives. Nora mentions in the end that death is unavoidable. So too is aging. This book shows the battles that are fought with aging. Although one can try and lessen the effects, or try and deny that aging exists, the truth is that one cannot stop life. This book shows that through firsthand experiences. This book takes a woman from hating her neck to just being glad she is still alive. Being a woman can have its challenges. But in between illustrating the challenges, this book also exposes the joy and lightheartedness that life can offer.



I Feel Bad About My Neck

I Feel Bad About My Neck Summary and Analysis

Nora Ephron is known as a writer of novels, screenplays, and plays, and is a critically acclaimed director. In this book, Nora provides humorous insight into being an aging woman. The book includes anecdotes and stories appealing to a woman of any age. The book dives into thoughts on health, beauty, fashion, relationships, wisdom, marriage, and finally death. No subject matter seems untouchable.

Nora shares how she feels about her neck in the very first sentence of the book. She discusses how women do not answer honestly when another woman asks for an opinion on physical characteristics. It seems pointless to answer honestly because if a friend says you look great, you will probably not believe it even if they think it. So the topic of physical appearance is one each woman struggles with in silence all on her own. Of all the physical issues, the neck is what Nora believes shows age the most. She gives examples of how she and her friends dress to conceal their necks, and lists various types of necks, none of which sound very pleasing. The aged neck is something that women do not like to see in a mirror and they seldom look in the mirror at their necks or other body parts. It would be nice to be able to surgically correct a neck that looks old or bad. In the case of Nora's neck, it is scarred, but in order to correct it, she would need a face lift. Nora wishes she would have enjoyed and appreciated her younger and more attractive neck. She misses something she never took too much time to enjoy or care about when she had it. That can be said for young life in general.

Everyone has a neck and everyone grows older. Each person does have things about themselves at any age that they wish looked better. Of course, as one ages, many things change, and not often for the better. Since its skin has to be so loose in order for a neck to function properly, gravity is not a friend. Most women feel like Nora, so her opinion is something that bonds women of all ages and makes the reader feel a part of the book from the onset.



I Hate My Purse

I Hate My Purse Summary and Analysis

Nora dislikes her unorganized purse as much or even more than her neck. Some women love purses, and Nora shares about when she traveled with a friend to Paris for the friend to buy a twenty-six hundred dollar purse. Nora can never find anything in her purse and gets frustrated carrying it around. If she gets a purse big enough to carry all her things, then she feels like a pack horse. For a period of time, Nora works from home and does not need a purse. But then when she works outside the home again, she needs not only a personal purse but also a work purse to carry everything she needs. Upon her return from Paris with her friend, she gets a new purse that sounds more like a large plastic shopping bag. It holds everything she needs, never goes out of style because it was never in style, and is waterproof. It seems to meet all her needs and takes her from hating her purse to being very happy with it.

The description of the contents of Nora's purse sounds more like it should be coming out of Mary Poppins's famous bottomless carpet bag. Trying to make a purse work is something every woman has tried, some more successfully than others. Nora's positive conclusion gives hope to women everywhere who cannot seem to make traditional purses work.



Serial Monogamy: A Memoir

Serial Monogamy: A Memoir Summary and Analysis

Nora's interest in cookbooks starts with the cookbook her mother gives her. Nora loves cookbooks by Michael Fields and Julia Child. She is proud to have cooked every recipe in Michael's book and half of the recipes in Julia's. While trying out recipes from her favorite cookbooks, Nora has imaginary conversations with the chefs who author them. She does meet Craig Claiborne and Lee Bailey. Getting to know Craig takes away some of the excitement from the imaginary relationship. But when she meets Lee Bailey, he inspires her and changes her life by helping her find her true personal style both in her cooking and home decor. In the meantime, she divorces her husband and seems to find herself. Nora's whole philosophy on life changes as her cooking style changes. She goes from very complicated and not very enjoyable meals to simple and very fulfilling.

Cooking to some is a chore and for others it is very fulfilling. Oftentimes it takes a great cookbook to help someone be inspired. But inspiration is not always enough to make a wonderful dish no matter how good the cookbook is or who writes it. Learning to cook can be a journey. A cook's style of cooking can be very similar to how they lead their life. Some people prefer very complicated dishes with very unique hard to find ingredients. They cook to impress, like they live to impress. But just because a recipe is difficult or by a successful chef, does not guarantee taste. Some people prefer the simple recipes that may not have a lot to them but can provide taste without stress.

On Maintenance

On Maintenance Summary and Analysis

There are two types of maintenance, the kind you do to stay even with the effects of aging on a daily or weekly basis, and the kind of maintenance you do less often but that requires more effort. Nora describes this as trying to "Turn Back the Clock". The maintenance of the hair is something that overwhelms Nora.

Getting a manicure has become a requirement that Nora questions, as she has managed many years getting along with only filing her nails. In her younger years, she occasionally had a few unwanted hairs that were taken care of by a little hair bleach, but menopause brought sturdier hair and she now has a mustache. She hopes that eventually she will age enough that the hair will just not matter. But then she will be losing her memory or her mind and have other bigger problems to deal with.

Nora wants to be in shape but does not enjoy exercise, as she ends up getting hurt. She keeps trying new methods of working out, most recently by hiring a trainer. But she still does not enjoy it and gets more pain than pleasure.

Her skin requires maintenance, which comes in the form of bottles and jars, many of which cost a fortune and do not do anything they promise to do and take a great deal of time to apply. Nora admits to having Botox and Restylane to help maintain her face.

Every woman wants to look and feel beautiful. For many, it becomes an obsession to try and stop time and its effects on our bodies. Woman can relate to what Nora shares, each having tried at least one maintenance technique she shares.

Blind as a Bat

Blind as a Bat Summary and Analysis

Nora's declining eyesight affects her ability to read maps, telephone books, menus, and pill bottles. With aging, the struggle to read causes the need for reading glasses, then the need to keep track of the glasses, which she often loses. Nora misses being able to read a telephone book, something she enjoyed doing as a young reporter. She blames it on aging eyesight. This chapter reads like an ode to reading. There are so many positives to being able to read, but with age it is simply not so easy.

The effects of eyesight going bad affect so much of what a person does. Bad eyesight due to genetics has nothing to do with age. It is the aging process that affects people, so when vision changes due to aging, it can be difficult to accept.



Parenting in Three Stages

Parenting in Three Stages Summary and Analysis

The Parenting movement started just before Nora had kids. Because of the movement, a parent had to do things to change their child. Your parenting is what made your child who they ended up being. The first stage of parenting is the child being born and the parent's responsibility for understanding the child. The second stage is The Child as an adolescent. Just when you think you have your child figured out, it becomes more confusing than ever. You can seek help, but it seems no advice can help you through the adolescent years. Adolescence changes both the child and the parent. The third stage is The Child is Gone. After surviving adolescence, a parent prepares for the time when the child will leave the house. Now is when you actually get to be the parent and are no longer responsible for parenting. Raising the child is something that both the parent and child do to survive. A parent will accept the child and will let go of them. But the worry is something the parent will still have forever.

Parenting is like a lifelong job. It starts with the birth of the first child and does not end until the parent's death. There are no job instructions or manuals. No training—you just start one day, ready or not. You can look for advice and help in books. There are many out there, but there are just as many different opinions as there are authors. However, each stage brings joy with the challenges and love with the worry.

Moving On

Moving On Summary and Analysis

Nora moves into the Aphorp apartment building with her two children after she gets a divorce. The story of the apartment is a story about love. In the beginning she can see no wrong in her great love, even ignoring signs that the apartment is not what one would think, like how one would ignore smell of another women's perfume on the man one loves. To complicate matters, her sister and several friends move into the building. Nora even meets and marries her new husband in the building. They are like one happy family, continually reminding themselves of the rent deal they have. But then things take a turn. Laws regarding rent stabilization change and the landlords hire managers named Barbara Ross, with whom Nora would have to negotiate rent increases. Nora agrees to a new rent and stays on in the building, but it finally becomes more than Nora can rationalize. She and Nick move out and find a new apartment on the Upper East side.

Perhaps Nora fell in love with the apartment as part of her recovery from her broken marriage. Making her surroundings something she loves helps her cope with the loss of love in her life. As Nora moves on from the apartment she loved to a place to live, one can see how her life has changed. At the time she moves, her children are grown and happy and she is happily remarried. Nora has love and joy in her life that she does not need to get it from her building.

Me and JFK: Now It Can Be Told

Me and JFK: Now It Can Be Told Summary and Analysis

Nora prints a copy of a news article where Marion (Mimi) Fahnstock admits to having an affair with JFK while she was an intern at the White House. This leads into Nora's personal story of also being an intern at the White House while JFK was president. Meeting JFK is the highlight of the experience. Nora tells how she never has a desk to sit at or a typewriter to type at while she works as an intern. Her time is spent standing by a file cabinet and reading its contents. She does get a chance to save the Speaker of the House when he gets locked in the nearby Men's Room. One day JFK walks by her to his helicopter and asks her a question. The noise from the helicopter is so loud Nora cannot completely make out what he is saying. She replies "What?", and JFK walks away.

Nora believes she is the only one who worked there that JFK never propositioned. She contributes it to her hair and clothes. But she also admits that even if something had happened, she would not have been able to keep it to herself as long as Mimi did. Perhaps that is why nothing happened. The story of Nora and JFK brings reality to working in the White House during a time of glamour and public intrigue. Many would still want to have the chance to work where she worked, with or without a desk.



Me and Bill: The End of Love

Me and Bill: The End of Love Summary and Analysis

Nora never gives more than a first name for Bill, but it is clear she is referring to Bill Clinton. Nora admits she loved Bill in the beginning, but then questions if it really ever was love and what love even is. She rationalized away his lies regarding Gennifer. She admits the love is one way. Even with what Nora did know of him, she is willing to support him until it comes to gays in the military, saying that it is then "her heart turns to stone". She believes she is beyond being hurt by him when the story of Bill and Monica comes out. Nora is now hurt all over again. She believes Bill had it all and threw it away. But what he threw away was not his, it was that of the people who had elected him.

Time goes by and Nora sees Bill on TV again. She listens to him and gives him another chance. Nora is impressed by how he looks and sounds. But she stops short of loving him again. She sees him as a hypocrite, wishing instead of just saying he doesn't "want anyone to die before their time" he would speak out against the war.

Where I Live

Where I Live Summary and Analysis

Nora describes where she lives using five examples, the first being New York. She describes the positives, but the biggest example is that she still wants and prefers to live in New York even after 9/11. The next example is her apartment. The biggest pro to living in the apartment is that its size and horizontal structure help with the fact that Nora loses things. Another added plus is the doorman. The third example is her neighborhood, which has every type of store or service within a two-block radius. The fourth example is her desk. Nora shares that she is a "mouse potato", a person who spends time at the computer with a mouse in their hand like a how couch potato spends time in front of the TV. The final example is her kitchen, sharing that she enters her kitchen hundreds of times a day.

Nora's use of examples to define where she lives gives a visual description of her life. Her descriptions give one an opportunity to think about the definition of where they live.



The Story of My Life in 3,500 Words or Less

The Story of My Life in 3,500 Words or Less Summary and Analysis

Nora starts the story of her life with how much she wants to live in New York. She moves Los Angeles when she is five and misses home and does not fit in. Her mother and her teacher both influenced Nora. She gives two quotes from her mother, "Everything is copy", and "Never ever buy a red coat". From Nora's high school journalism teacher's lesson on learning to write story leads, she decides she wants to be a journalist.

Nora's weight becomes an issue in college, having gained twenty pounds in the first three months. She has to borrow clothes from her friend Janice Glabman, who is known for being overweight, but even Janice's clothes are too small. Janice laughs at her, which motivates Nora to diet and lose the weight, vowing Janice will never laugh at her again.

Stanley J. Fleck is a lawyer Nora is engaged to when she is working at the White House, who she takes on a tour of the White House. When he says, "No wife of mine is ever going to work at a place like this", she realizes she is not going to marry Stanley.

Nora is given a chance to write for the New York Post following a newspaper strike. She is hired and thus realizes her dream at the age of twenty-two, and thinks this is what she will want to do forever. One day after work and after happy hour, she goes to her managing editors house where he thinks it is funny to drench her with water by dropping an awning. Nora says her life changes when she considers herself a writer after she writes a magazine article about having small breasts.

Nora discusses her mother's death and how even on her deathbed her mother spoke words of wisdom. When Nora's mother is dying, she says to Nora, "You're a reporter, Nora. Take Notes". Her mother died of cirrhosis, but it becomes clear the actual cause was from an overdose of sleeping pills that her father gave her mother. According to Nora, her gravely ill mother comes home from the hospital and has care from a nurse in the home. One night her father has given the nurse the night off and later calls Nora to say her mother has died. After Nora goes to the house, her father hands her a bottle of pills and asks her to flush them down the toilet, saying they are sleeping pills from his doctor. The next day when she tells her sister, her sister asks if she had counted them. The two women share an "aha" moment.

Nora tells the story of her six year marriage to her first husband, who she says is nice but has a strange obsession with cats. When they are thinking about separating, he wants to take her on a trip to Africa. She says no because they are probably going to



separate and she will feel guilty. He convinces her to go, but afterward, when she asks for a divorce, he says, "But I took you to Africa".

While seven months pregnant with her second child, Nora learns her second husband is in love with another woman. She learns this from the other woman's husband, who is the British Ambassador to the United States. Nora realizes he is more upset about the state of the country than the state of his marriage. Nora hopes one day this will be funny. These real life events lead Nora to learn that one can make this stuff up; in other words, these real life events can make good fiction, with a little bit of editing.

The reader can tell Nora is deeply affected by the divorces and the impact they have had on her life. Nora explains how, when growing up, you love to hear the story of how your parent met and fell in love. When your parents divorce you never hear the story because no one wants to admit they were once in love because it would be hard to explain. Plus, it is hard to remember why you loved them in the first place.

When writing the script for the movie *Silkwood*, Nora learns of a story about a man and a woman who live on a deserted peninsula. The woman in the story dies, but the question is who is to blame—her husband who left her to go on a business trip, the mother who came to stay with her, her lover who she went to see when her husband is gone, the ferry boat captain who refuses to take her home when she is running late and is forced to walk alone, or the stranger who killed and raped her while she was walking home alone. This type of question is a Rorschach, meaning that when you ask a group of people about a particular event, everyone will have a different answer. For Nora, this means the stories one makes up can be as good as truth, and they all will affect people differently. But Nora feels a quote by E.L. Doctorow explains it better: "there is not fiction or non-fiction, there is narrative".

Nora shares part of the script from *When Harry Met Sally*. Sally says she is going to New York so something can happen to her because nothing has happened to her yet, and says that she is going to become a reporter. Harry surmises that she will be a reporter who writes about things that happen to other people.

Nora learns a valuable, life changing lesson during a movie screening. There are not enough seats and people are very crowded and standing. Nora says to her friend Bob Gottlieb, "Someone should get some folding chairs and set them up in the aisles". Bob responds, "we can't do everything". Nora sees this as the secret of life but thinks she learned it a little late.

Nora covers much of her life in this chapter. There is humor, sadness, and great honesty. She bares it all in less words than almost any biography one could read. One does get a sense of her life, good and bad, and a sense of who she is and her personality, all of which are signs of a great story.



The Lost Strudel or Le Strudel Perdu

The Lost Strudel or Le Strudel Perdu Summary and Analysis

Nora shares that one of her favorite foods years back was cabbage strudel from Mrs. Herbst's Hungarian Bakery in Manhattan. The last time she is able to find it is in 1982. She surmises that the tragedy of lost foods is that usually they are something the average cook cannot create in their own kitchen with success. A food writer friend tells Nora about Andre's Hungarian Bakery in Queens. Nora calls the owner to request cabbage strudel, but the owner rejects her request. Then Andre opens a second location where they sell the strudel. While not exactly like Mrs. Herbst, she finds the strudel delicious and enjoys every taste. But mostly she enjoys the fact that something she lost that was dear to her was found.

Everyone has a lost food or something comparable that helps them relate to her story. The thought of something that brings joy and pleasure being gone forever, and its return being out of our control, can lead someone on the same quest that Nora takes. Everyone who has been on a similar quest joins in and savors the victory along with Nora, while also thinking in the back of their mind about an unfulfilled quest for something they have lost. Again, this seems like part of Nora's quest for something else she lost that is beyond her control, her youth.

On Rapture

On Rapture Summary and Analysis

For Nora, ever since she was a child, a good book could place her in rapture. She shares the titles of her favorite books as a child, relating her vivid memories of exactly where and what furniture she sits on when she read them. The characters were all ones she could relate to and imagine being a part of their world, or in some cases, being them. Nora shares some of the books she reads as an adult that have a profound effect on her life. Some are the classics that she reads over and over but still finds herself in rapture each and every time. One book grabs her attention so much that even while trying to finish editing a movie she could not put it down. The time away from these great books is just an attempt to enjoy her everyday life. She has entered the world of these books and they hold her until the end. She compares the rapture of a great book to the rapture a diver gets from spending too much time at the bottom of the sea and becomes confused as to which way it is to the surface. Once they do surface, they often have the medical condition called the bends. For Nora, coming to the surface from enjoying a great book causes the same thing.

At the end of the chapter, Nora shares the title of the book she had just finished at the start of the chapter. It is the *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon. Reading it sent her into 1940s New York, where she stayed in her imagination for over a week. She is slowly returning to present day, but she is on the lookout for the next great book that will take her away again.

A good story pulls the reader in and takes them off in their imagination. Often a reader picks a book specifically to help them escape. In Nora's case, it seems she escapes her own life by journeying into the books. Just reminiscing about a good book offers a small period of rapture, the sign of a successful author and book.



What I Wish I'd Known

What I Wish I'd Known Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Nora shares some one liners that offer advice, humor, and comfort, and are thought provoking. There is no one theme; they cover a wide range of topics. There is insight on relationships, people, how to spend time and money, home decor, email, fears, self-help, and of course, aging. Most are straightforward and have common sense, things people should know without being told. Many are things a person probably only figures out after they have already made the mistake. They all could fall under the category of wisdom, something most people would agree comes with age and many would agree is a benefit of age. It is easy to want to have the wisdom when one is younger and could use it. Most of the "wise" people would like to see some of the younger people take this kind of advice.

Everyone has those moments where something comes up that they wish they would have known when they were much younger, or at least have known an hour or two before. It is easier to look back and see the wisdom once the experience has played out.



Considering the Alternative

Considering the Alternative Summary and Analysis

Nora shares details of her birthday party when she turned sixty. She and her friends have a wonderful time in Las Vegas. The joy lasts days, but afterward, the reality of age sets in. Nora has been in denial about aging, pretending aging does not bother her. As she has dedicated a whole book on the subject, aging obviously is of interest.

Nora discusses how there are many books on the subject of aging, and most of them are in the theme that older is better than younger. Nora boldly states that it is not better. Nora is asked the question by a magazine editor, "Why do women our age say, In my day. . .? This is our day". Nora disagrees. Nora believes it is their day, the younger generation's day.

Nora conveys that the older generation is proactive. They are ready to the latest craze in self help, beauty, and health. They believe they are in control, making lists and seeking facts and options. But really they still cannot control the inevitable—the D word she calls it. She describes death as a sniper who can attack at any moment and take someone out. What choices does one make knowing death is unavoidable? Does one go for it all, assuming one could die any day, or does one hold back for the future, knowing it may not come? Nora shares about her friend Judy, who died less than a year after finding a lump on her tongue. There had been no time for Nora to talk to Judy about death. Nora wanted to know what Judy wanted in her last days. How did she want to die? How did she want to be remembered? Nora compares this to her friend Henry, who died at the age of eighty-two. Henry was prepared and ready to die. He had planned everything. He had a file on his computer named Exit that had all his desires laid out.

Nora finishes her book with the chapter discussing death. At the end, she shares that once the book is complete it will be time to get on with life. This brings her to the topic of needing more bath oil. Nora uses Dr. Hauschka's lemon bath, which is twenty dollars a bottle. If one follows the directions for use it should last two weeks. To make it last, each bath should only have a capful, but a capful is not enough. Nora decides that, after seeing her friends die, she does not want to die with a whole bottle of bath oil left by using only a capful. She is going to use enough to make herself smooth as silk.

Aging is better than the alternative. There is positive to be found in aging. Living life to its fullest is the best way to live. Enjoy everything as much as you can. Do not use just a capful of anything.



Characters

Nora Ephron

Nora Ephron is the author and the subject of the book. Nora is known for her writing of novels, plays, and screenplays. Her best selling novels include *Heartburn*, *Scribble Scramble*, and *Crazy Salad*. She was nominated for an Academy Award for the screenplays for the movies *When Harry Met Sally*, *Silkwood*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*. She is also the director of *Sleepless in Seattle*. Nora has a journalism degree and was a writer for the *New York Post*.

Nora was born in New York City, but moved away when she was five. Nora fulfilled her dream to return to New York after graduation. She still lives in New York with her third husband, Nicholas Pileggi, who is also a writer. Nora was married twice before, with each marriage ending badly. She uses the stories of these broken marriages in several of her writings. Nora has two children from her second marriage. Nora has three sisters, one of whom lived in the same apartment building while they were working on writing together.

Nora is close to sixty-five years old when this book is published. She has worked hard to maintain herself, but as the reader knows from the title of the book, there are many things about her aging body that do not please her. While Nora is willing to pay top dollar for her favorite bath oil, she is satisfied with a low cost yet functional purse. She describes herself as obsessed with cooking and cookbooks, and she chronicles her quest for her favorite cabbage strudel.

Nora's Mother

Nora does not give her mother's name in the book. From research, one finds her name is Phoebe. She was a screenwriter with her husband. She gave Nora her first cookbook in 1962, *The Gourmet Cookbook (Volume 1)*, along with some of white linens. The cookbook had changed her mother's life. Until the book, Nora's mother had stayed away from the kitchen, leaving the duties to the family cook. But the cookbook inspired her to enter the kitchen and create marvelous meals.

Nora's mother offers advice like, "Everything is copy" and "Never ever buy a red coat". Nora never seems quite sure what her mother means by everything is copy, but she does know her mother teaches you should be the hero of a joke and not a victim. While in the hospital, Nora's mother tells Nora another bit of advice: "You're a reporter. . . Take notes."

The end of Nora's mother's life sounds very tragic. She suffered from cirrhosis. But the cause of death was from sleeping pills. Nora explained that the pills were given to her mother by her father. Her mother died in the family home.



Evelyn Hall

Evelyn Hall is a cook from the south that is employed by Nora's family. She cooked mostly classic American food like roast beef. However, she changed her cooking style after the publication of *The Gourmet Cookbook*.

Jane

Jane is the name Nora uses to refer to her older woman friend that Nora met the first summer she lived in New York City. Jane gave Nora the cookbook called *The Flavour of France*. Jane helped Nora learn about French cooking and French ingredients. She introduced Nora to the concept of One Away, which means you are One Away from someone if you both end up sleeping with the same person. This One Away concept is what contributes to the end of their friendship.

Craig Claiborne

Craig Claiborne writes a Sunday Food column in *The New York Times Magazine*. In addition to acting as food editor, he also was a restaurant critic. Nora admits to being somewhat obsessed with him. Craig is one of the subjects in Nora's first freelance magazine article for *New York Magazine*. Although Craig invites Nora to his house after the article is completed, and she returns the invitation to hers, Craig and Nora do not really become friends like she had hoped.

Lee Bailey

Lee Bailey is a man whom Nora meets through the common friendship with Liz Smith. Nora and Lee meet when she attends dinner with Liz at his house. Nora become obsessed with Lee and his tastes for food and decor. Lee wrote many cookbooks and was quite well known for his culinary skills. But he also held fabulous dinner parties. In addition, the decor of his house was beautiful and inspiring. Lee became a good friend of Nora's.

Barbara Ross

Barbara Ross is the manager hired by the Apthorp Apartment building. Barbara negotiated rent with the tenants, including Nora, when there were changes in the rent stabilization laws in New York. She is described as a small woman with pale skin who wears red lipstick and keeps her black hair in a beehive style. Barbara is from New Jersey, but spent nights in the building trying to catch workers napping, or tenants breaking the rule. Under Barbara's management, many changes were made to the building that affected the courtyards and fountains, the details that provided the charm.



Mimi Fahnestock

Marion (Mimi) Fahnestock is a former White House intern who kept a secret for forty-one years. Her secret was having an affair with JFK while working at the White House in 1962. According to reports, she could not type.

Bill

Bill is a man referred to in first name only in the chapter written by Nora. Bill is someone Nora questions whether she loved. Whatever it was, it is over. Bill lied about a woman named Gennifer. In 1993, he is inaugurated and takes a stance on gays in the military that turns Nora away from him. Then Bill is involved with a woman named Monica. There is a chance for Bill to redeem himself when he speaks on a Sunday news program. He is still well spoken but deemed a hypocrite when he talks about not wanting anyone to die before their time and yet not speaking out strongly against the war.

Charles O. Simms

Charles O. Simms is Nora's high school journalism teacher. His lesson on writing a lead is what reveals to Nora she wants to be a journalist.

Janice Glabman

Janice Glabman is a friend of Nora's who is known for having always been overweight. Nora tried to borrow clothes from Janice during college when Nora had gained weight and could not fit in any of her own clothes. When Janice's clothes were too small, Janice laughed at Nora. The incident is what motivated Nora to lose the weight.

Ed Levine

Ed Levine is a food editor who helps Nora on her quest to find cabbage strudel once again. Ed tells her about Andre's Hungarian bakery having cabbage strudel you can special order. Although Andre refuses to make the strudel for Nora, sometime later Ed once again helps Nora when he lets her know Andre's had opened a second location and the cabbage strudel is available over the counter.

Judy

Judy is Nora's friend who dies the year before Nora writes the book. Nora calls Judy her best friend and describes her as her confidant. Judy is sixty-six years old. Judy's death is less than a year after she finds a lump on her tongue. Nora is deeply affected by Judy's death.

Henry

Henry is a friend of Nora's who died just a few months before she writes the book. Henry is eighty-two and died of heart failure peacefully in his sleep. Henry had macular degeneration for two years, which resulted in blindness. Henry writes about the experience in a book. Henry asks before his death for an accordion folder he kept papers and letters in. He returned letters back to the women who had sent them years earlier along with lovely notes. Henry also had left instruction about his preferences for his funeral and burial in a file on his computer titled "Exit".



Objects/Places

Kelly Bag

A purse made by Hermes starting back in the 1950s. Grace Kelly made it popular, which is how it got its name. It is considered classic style. They are available in vintage and current models. Nora's friend paid twenty-six hundred dollars for a vintage Kelly Bag in Paris at a flea market. It was not yet waterproofed and they had to wait out a rain storm in a bistro.

The Gourmet Cookbook

The Gourmet Cookbook is given to Nora by her mother in 1962. It is the first cookbook Nora owned. The large cookbook was compiled by the editors of Gourmet magazine starting in the 1950s.

The Flavour of France Cookbook

The Flavour of France Cookbook was given to Nora by her friend Jane. It is the cookbook Nora uses most during her first year in New York. It is small in size, only about six by eight inches. The recipes are by mother and daughter writers Narcissa Chamberlain and Narcisse. The photographs were taken by Samuel Chamberlain, husband and father.

Apthorp

Apthorp is a huge stone apartment building Nora moves into in 1980. It is on the corner of Broadway and Seventy-ninth Street. It was built in 1908 by the Astor family. It has a courtyard, fountains, and a garden. At the time Nora moved in, she paid fifteen hundred dollars a month rent. But she fell in love with the place so it was worth it. The location was perfect—near bagel shops, the subway station, an all night newsstand and restaurants.

The White House

The White House is where Nora works as an intern. It is where Nora meets President Kennedy and realizes she may be the only one who works there that he does not hit on. She blames it on her bad hair. It is also where she is working when she is engaged to Stanley J. Fleck. She takes him on a tour and realizes the end of their relationship is near when he states his wife would never work there.



New York City

New York City is a prominent location throughout the book. It is where Nora is born but moves away from, and dreams of returning. Her goal is to live in New York after graduation. Once she returns she states she could never live anywhere else. Almost every chapter tells a story about the city; Nora's favorite restaurants, stores, and people are all there.

New York Post

The New York Post is the paper where Nora starts work in 1963. She gets hired at the Post after she writes a parody about it. During her trial week, Nora describes the Post as "dusty, dingy, and dark". Its condition and smell are terrible. But Nora loves working there and expects to work there forever.

Mrs. Herbst's Hungarian Bakery

Mrs. Herbst's Hungarian Bakery is where Nora first tasted Cabbage Strudel in 1968. Its location is on Third Avenue. But years later after taking for granted that the bakery would always be there, she goes to get strudel and finds the bakery closed.

Cabbage Strudel

Nora describes Cabbage Strudel as looking like apple strudel, but it is not a dessert. It is similar to a Russian meat stuffed pastry and can be served as a side to a main course or along with soup. Nora is obsessed with tasting this dish again for years after the bakery where she first tried it closes. She finally does get to try a version again that is very close to the original. Nora does point out that the cabbage strudel is almost the only thing she remembers from her first marriage.

Andre's Hungarian Bakery

Andre's Hungarian Bakery is where Nora finally finds a version of cabbage strudel close to what she loved from Mrs. Herbst's. The first location opened is located in Rego Park, Queens. Nora is introduced to Andre's by food writer Ed Levine. Ed tells her Andre's has the strudel available by special order. But Andre refuses to make it, saying he is too busy. Later, Andre's opens a second location in Manhattan and they have cabbage strudel available over the counter any day. Nora goes to Andre's and gets to enjoy cabbage strudel once again.

Dr. Hauschka's lemon bath

Dr. Hauschka's lemon bath is a bath oil Nora uses and loves. It is expensive, about twenty dollars a bottle. The directions say to only use a capful, making it last a couple weeks. But Nora prefers to indulge and uses more than a capful.

Themes

Aging

Aging and the effects of aging, both physical and mental, are the prominent themes in the book. It begins with how aging affects the body in a negative way. The title even speaks to that theme. A neck, which is quite a necessary body part, is described as something to feel bad about based solely on its appearance, which is made worse by the effects of aging. Nora even mentions how she wishes she would have enjoyed her neck more before it aged. She also mentions later in the book how she wishes she would have worn a bikini when she was younger. It seems as though age has taken away the joy in life and one can only look back with regret.

Aging is out of a person's control, but as Nora shares, the reader spends a great deal of time and money trying to hide the effects. Aging causes everyone to go into denial, some more than others. Although Nora is a woman and she writes from the perspective of a woman, it seems like women more than men struggle with this issue. Perhaps women have more physical attributes that are affected by aging. Even when women are young they spend a great deal of time making hair, skin, nails, and their bodies looking great. Aging makes it a greater challenge.

Aging is something that keeps going. It cannot be stopped. But like aging, living should not be stopped. A person should not stop enjoying life just because of age. There is much to life and growing old is indeed better than the alternative.

Self Esteem

Beginning with the title of the book, there is a clear theme on how being a woman and one's appearance and age affect how she feels about herself. More than once in the book Nora brings up what she does not like about herself. She when she returns from college a little overweight, she quotes her father as saying "maybe someone will marry her for her personality". Ironically, what Nora weighs at that time, 126 pounds, is considered overweight when she comes home. But that is the same weight she weighs today, and she does not describe herself as currently overweight. Many women would love to be that weight. Self-esteem seems to be much like the phrase "the grass is always greener". There is always something people would like to change, and they believe this change would make them feel better. But how they would like to look or what they would like to do is very likely what someone else wants to change about themselves because they are so unhappy.

The challenge with self esteem is that it is all about how a person feels about themselves. A person is their own worst critic and often ignores or does not even believe a kind word or compliment they are given about someone else. Nora shares in her book that when someone does not agree with a criticism you have of yourself, they



are lying. It seems women especially define themselves by those things that affect self esteem the most: their looks, their clothes, their accessories (like their purses), even their cooking skills and parties. Nora touches on all these topics and more. She shares her trials and tribulations of trying to find herself and happiness amidst all that. She does admit on a couple of occasions her tendency to escape reality to find happiness and satisfaction in her imagination. How sad it is that even a highly successful woman like Nora Ephron, someone many women would like to emulate, does not seem to have much self esteem. Maybe that is just the message or theme she wanted to convey. It seems like she did that well. It is something to which most readers, especially women, can relate.

Being a Woman

The title of the book ties together the theme of feeling bad about one's body or body parts and being a woman. It is almost like it is a given that women are not happy with part or all of themselves. Most men would probably not relate to many of the topics in the book. Or if they do, they would not have the same response. Women do indeed care about things like what their neck looks like and how to make it look better. They carefully choose clothes that hide certain body parts and enhance others. But they also are better at finding more things critical about themselves. Most women will spend more time maintaining themselves than a man would. But women should be reminded that aging and death are just as unavoidable for men as for women. It just seems like women try harder to deny them or control them.

Being a woman does seem like being in some sort of club. Just the mention of the word menopause and even women yet to experience it feel for those who have. That is why the theme of this book fits so well with its audience. Women want to hear about what others think and experience. It is like one big group therapy session. As a woman, you somehow feel better about yourself when someone shares what they are struggling with. Maybe it is because you can relate, or maybe it is because you no longer feel alone. But in the end, even when a book has outlined the trials of womanhood, the book becomes cause for celebration and solidarity. That is what being a woman really is. You can feel bad about yourself one minute and ready to celebrate the next. That is what is so great about chocolate. It can be used for both occasions.



Style

Perspective

Nora Ephron uses her perspective as an aging woman to convey the trials and tribulations of being a woman with humor and fun. She pulls from her own life in an almost autobiographical format. She does follow the advice from her mother and makes herself the hero and not the victim of the humor. The objective of the book is really to make women laugh at the effects of aging and all things that women struggle to endure. She makes it clear from her title that this is a book about women, and because of that, it is written for women. She is successful in reaching her target audience. She speaks to women about what affects them most. Her own shortcomings help women to see beyond their own, and to help them reach for their goals and remember they are not alone in what they feel or experience.

Nora's experience as a journalist and writer allow her to keenly observe her own life and see where other women can benefit. The topics she chooses are ones any women could relate to, yet remain personal enough one can feel the emotions and truth. She provides just enough facts and experience to keep the reader's interest and make the story believable. She becomes the heroine of the story, overcoming obstacles and offering hope for women everywhere. Nora remains faithful to her style of writing a fan would expect, so she comes off as a friend sharing a story and not someone preaching at the reader to change.

Tone

The message of aging being a painful and unavoidable truth is first and foremost in this book. There are many ways this message can be conveyed. In this case, Nora delivers it with humor and wit and a great deal of wisdom on the side. It makes some of the somber points easier to accept. But also gives women an opportunity to smile and laugh at things they see in themselves that they might never have laughed about before. Sometimes, if a person does not laugh they may cry, and laughter is certainly better for the soul.

Nora is know for her contributions in writing screenplays for some of the best romantic comedies. The stories bring heartbreak then hope then love to her characters. Her same skills shine through as she delivers heartbreaking truths about being an aging woman while still revealing the joy and offering hope that only women get to experience.

The end of the story becomes a great Hollywood ending, with the aging women finding love in the form of herself, whatever age she is.

Structure

The structure of the book is first person autobiography. There are fifteen unnumbered chapters. The titles successfully match the topics of each chapter. Many of the chapters are short in length. Some of the chapters could have been expanded, while a couple of the longer chapters could have used some brevity. Humor and wit are constant throughout the chapters. There are two chapters that have unusual formatting.

The chapter titled *The Story of my Life in 3,500 Words or Less* is made up of what is more like extremely short chapters rather than paragraphs. The one constant through the chapter is that it relates to the life story Nora is trying to convey. The chapter titled *What I Wish I'd Known* is really more of a list of anecdotes, much like proverbs, than it is a chapter. In both cases, the chapters are enjoyable and still remain faithful to the topic of the book, they are just very different and rather unusual in style.

Since it is not written in chronological order, there are some overlaps in time and events across chapters. On a couple of occasions the reader may feel they already read about the topic, but in truth they had not yet gotten the whole story. The re-emergence of the topic is to add more details and understanding of the story. In general, the format is easy to read and flows well.



Quotes

"Our Faces are lies and our necks are the truth." p. 5

"your purse has accumulated the debris of a lifetime." p. 11

"Maintenance is what you do just so you can walk out the door. . ." p. 31

"Once I picked up a copy of Vogue while having my hair done, and it cost me twenty thousand dollars. But you should see my teeth." p. 35

"I could die from not being able to read the print on the pill bottle." p. 53

"Parenting was a participle, like going and doing and crusading and worrying; it was active, it was energetic, it was unrelenting." p. 57

"But it's not love. It's just where I live." p. 84

"I am probably the only young woman who ever worked in the Kennedy White House that the president did not make a pass at." p. 89

"a mouse potato. It means someone who's as connected to her computer as couch potatoes are to their television sets." p. 95

"Everything is copy." p. 98

"I have achieved my life's ambition, and I am twenty-two years old." p. 102

"I can't understand why anyone would write fiction when what actually happens is so amazing." p. 105

"we can't do everything." p. 111

"In a few minutes I will be through with writing this piece, and I will go back to life itself." p. 136



Topics for Discussion

Why do most of the concerns about aging have to do with physical appearance? Are there any non-physical signs of aging that bother people?

Can aging be avoided or is it unavoidable, like death? Is it worth it to try no matter how much it costs?

Should a person define where they live or should where they live define them?

How would you define where you live?

What in your life has vanished that you wish you could get back again, like how Nora got cabbage strudel? If you did get it back would it be all that you remembered or would it just be cabbage strudel?

What benefits are there to escaping life by finding rapture in reading a book? Can you find the same pleasure in another way?

What would you put on a list of what you wish you had known? Who would you like to share that list with?

How should knowing you are going to die someday affect how you live? Would you make different choices if you knew exactly when and how you would die?

If you could decide how you age, what would you plan? What effects of aging do you care about? What effects of aging could you care less about? What would you be willing to do to stay young, or looking young?

If you could determine how you die, what would you plan? What would you want to do before you die? Who would you talk to? What would you say and what would you give them?

Do women have a harder time accepting aging or do men? How do men and women handle aging differently? If this book had been written by a man, what body part do you think he would feel bad about and why?

The focus of aging seems to be on what is lost as a result of it. What can be gained from growing old?