

Older Men Short Guide

Older Men by Norma Klein

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Overview

Older Men is a novel about Elise Dintenfass, a sixteen-year-old high school senior who at the time of the story's beginning has been accepted into Yale. An only child, she has an extremely close relationship with her father, especially enjoying the excursions the two of them take to New York City without her mother. Her father, Dr. Nate Dintenfass, is a fiftyfive-year-old, highly respected cardiologist. Elise's mother, June, who is thirty-seven, is Dr. Dintenfass's second wife. He left his first wife and married June after June became pregnant with Elise. He has several stepchildren from his first marriage, but at the beginning of Older Men, Elise has not met any of them.

In the course of the novel, June is hospitalized, supposedly for emotional problems, but Elise's maternal grandmother, who is also fifty-five, implies that Nate wanted her hospitalized so that he could be free of her and have affairs without interference. June also feels that Nate wants her kept in the hospital so that he can have his freedom. She also believes that the hospital, located in White Plains, New York, is doing her more harm than good.

She discovers that even though she voluntarily entered the hospital, she cannot get out. Eventually, she escapes and runs off to Maine, where Elise and Nate are vacationing. Elise finds June in the barn, and decides to help her mother stand up to her father and to help keep her out of the hospital. Nate pretends that he too is not going to try to get June to go back to the hospital, Older Men 3771 but on the trip back to their home in Connecticut, June realizes that he has made a turn that will take them not home but to White Plains. June and Elise demand that Nate not go to White Plains, and Elise finds the courage to tell her father to stop the car or he will never see her again. Nate stops the car and asks June to drive the rest of the way home.

By the end of the novel, June and Nate are divorced, and Elise is at Yale.

She has become the friend of Nate's stepdaughter, Kara, and the lover of Nate's stepson, Tim, who is ten years older than Elise. For some unexplained reason, Nate's stepchildren have the last name of Dintenfass.

Older Men treats in a very straightforward manner a very dysfunctional family. Elise's parents no longer love each other. Elise wishes they would get a divorce. Her father's relationship to her is overly close, so much so that her mother says to him in front of Elise, "All you don't do is go to bed with her.

Do that! What difference would it make? It's just the final step. Do that too!" As the story progresses, Elise realizes that her mother is right in insisting that there is something unhealthy about her relationship with Nate. She discovers that Nate had a similar relationship with Kara; in fact, Kara says to Elise, "You're leading my life." At the end of the novel, Nate brings Suzanne Hausman, a psychiatrist in her thirties whom he is dating, to visit Elise at Yale. He also brings Suzanne's two children, Philip, twelve, and Melanie, four. Elise feels slightly jealous as she watches her father play with Melanie,

but she realizes that she still loves her father. The novel ends with Nate pushing Melanie in a swing.

Suzanne says to Elise about Nate, "He likes little girls. . . . He has a way with them." Elise responds, "Yes. . . . He does."

In the course of the novel, Elise matures considerably. She learns that her father is not always right and that he is not always as concerned with others as he pretends to be. She then learns to take stands against her father, and she discovers that she can exert considerable influence over him. She further learns that she is attractive to members of the opposite sex.

About the Author

Norma Klein was born on May 13, 1938, in New York City. She grew up on Manhattan Island and died after a brief illness on April 25, 1989, also in New York City. She was the daughter of Emanuel Klein, a Freudian psychoanalyst, and Sadie Klein. She was extremely close to her father, and he was devoted to her. According to her biographers, their closeness caused severe conflicts in the family, since Norma's mother and her only sibling, Victor, felt excluded by the father-daughter relationship. When her father died in 1977, Klein experienced what she called a "breakdown." Although as an adult she became disenchanted with Freudian psychoanalysis, her interest in using her fiction to help adolescents with their problems surely stems in large part from her interaction with her father.

Klein attended Dalton School from age three to thirteen, and Elizabeth Irwin School during her high school years. Both were, she said, progressive schools, run on the model of Summerhill in England. She attended Cornell University from 1956 to 1957 and received her B.A. degree, cum laude, in 1960, from Barnard College, where she majored in Russian and became a member of Phi Beta Kappa. At Barnard, she took creative writing courses from Robert Pack and George P. Elliott. When she was nineteen, she sent out her first story. It was accepted by Greecourt Review. After this initial good fortune, she found it much more difficult to get published, saying that some of her stories were rejected as many as forty-five times.

She received an M.A. in Slavic languages from Columbia University in 1963. She said that other than when she was at Columbia, she spent most of her time from age nineteen until her first daughter was born in 1967 writing short stories. She married Erwin Fleissner, a biochemist involved in cancer research, in 1963. They had two daughters, Jennifer, born in 1967, and Katherine, born in 1970. She started writing picture books for younger children as a result of reading to her older daughter. None of these books were accepted for publication until after the success of her first book for young adults, *Mom, the Wolf Man and Me*.

She is the author of novels and short stories for adults, adolescents, and children. She earned a number of awards for her writing: *Girls Can Be Anything*, a book for younger children, was chosen one of the Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year for 1973; she received the Media & Methods Maxi Award for Paperbacks in 1975; *Sunshine: A Novel*, a novelization of a television special written by Carol Sobiesky, was chosen one of the New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age in 1980; *Love Is One of the Choices* was chosen one of School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year in 1978; and she received the O. Henry Award in 1983 for her short story, "The Wrong Man."



Characters

Older Men is a novel about Elise Dintenfass, a sixteen-year-old high school senior who at the time of the story's beginning has been accepted into Yale. An only child, she has an extremely close relationship with her father, especially enjoying the excursions the two of them take to New York City without her mother. Her father, Dr. Nate Dintenfass, is a fiftyfive-year-old, highly respected cardiologist. Elise's mother, June, is thirtyseven. She is Dr. Dintenfass's second wife. He left his first wife and married June after June became pregnant with Elise. He has several stepchildren from his first marriage, but at the beginning of Older Men, Elise has not met any of them.

In the course of the novel, June is hospitalized, supposedly for emotional problems, but Elise's maternal grandmother, who is also fifty-five, implies that Nate wanted her hospitalized so that he could be free of her and have affairs without interference. June also feels that Nate wants her kept in the hospital so that he can have his freedom. She also believes that the hospital, located in White Plains, New York, is doing her more harm than good. Yet she discovers that even though she voluntarily entered the hospital, she cannot get out. Eventually, she escapes and runs off to Maine, where Elise and Nate are vacationing. Elise finds June in the barn and decides to help her mother stand up to her father and to help keep her out of the hospital. Nate pretends that he too is not going to try to get June to go back to the hospital, but on the trip back to their home in Connecticut, June realizes that he has made a turn that will take them not home but to White Plains. June and Elise demand that Nate not go to White Plains, and Elise finds the courage to tell her father to stop the car or he will never see her again. Nate stops the car and asks June to drive the rest of the way home.

By the end of the novel, June and Nate are divorced, and Elise is at Yale.

She has become the friend of Nate's stepdaughter, Kara, and the lover of Nate's stepson, Tim, who is ten years older than Elise. For some unexplained reason, Nate's stepchildren have the last name of Dintenfass.

In the course of the novel, Elise grows considerably. She learns that her father is not always right and that he is not always as concerned with others as he pretends to be. She then learns to take stands against her father, and she discovers that she can exert considerable influence over him. She further learns that she is attractive to members of the opposite sex.

Setting

Older Men is set for the most part in and around New York City. Elise lives and goes to school in the Connecticut suburbs of New York. Her father works at a hospital in New York City. The story begins with Elise and her father shopping in New York. She spends part of the summer with her maternal grandmother in New York City and several weekends with her grandmother's boyfriend, Vernon, who has a house on Long Island right near the Long Island Sound. While she stays with her grandmother, she gets a job at a feminist bookstore in Greenwich Village. During the course of the novel, Elise makes several trips to White Plains, New York, a suburb of New York City, to visit her mother, who is hospitalized there.

During August, Elise and her father travel to Maine to stay where they have been going, along with Elise's mother, for vacations for several years. They rent a house in Goose Rocks Beach and shop in Goose Rocks and York Village.

On the way to Maine, Elise and her father stop at the Hopkins Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, a town located near where Elise used to go to camp.

When Elise's mother joins them, they 3772 Older Men stop there also on the way back to Connecticut. Nate views stopping in Sudbury as a family tradition that he wants to preserve even when June is not with them.

The final setting in the novel is New Haven, Connecticut, where Elise goes to college.



Social Concerns

Older Men treats in a very straightforward manner a very dysfunctional family. Elise's parents no longer love each other. Elise wishes they would get a divorce. Her father's relationship to her is overly close, so much so that her mother says to him in front of Elise, "All you don't do is go to bed with her. Do that! What difference would it make? It's just the final step.

Do that too!" As the story progresses, Elise realizes that her mother is right in insisting that there is something unhealthy about her relationship with Nate. She discovers that Nate had a similar relationship with his stepdaughter Kara; in fact, Kara says to Elise, "You're leading my life." At the end of the novel, Nate brings Suzanne Hausman, a psychiatrist in her thirties whom he is dating, to visit Elise at Yale. He also brings Suzanne's two children, Philip, twelve, and Melanie, four. Elise feels slightly jealous as she watches her father play with Melanie, but she realizes that she still loves her father. The novel ends with Nate pushing Melanie in a swing. Suzanne says to Elise about Nate, "He likes little girls. . . . He has a way with them."

Elise responds, "Yes. . . . He does."

Social Sensitivity

Like most of Norma Klein's books for young adults, *Older Men* is controversial. Klein declared that she was interested in breaking taboos in her works, and she certainly does in *Older Men*. Its treatment of psychiatrists, psychiatric hospitals, and shock treatment is harsh.

It also presents views of extremely dysfunctional families and at least one very unpleasant person, Dr. Nate Dintenfass. Tim says about Nate, "Putting faith in him is like trusting in Adolf Hitler." Nate's tyranny is further emphasized when June, after escaping from the mental hospital, says that she feels like someone released from a concentration camp. His unpleasantness is further underscored by his strange relationships with girls. Although Elise assures the reader that her relationship with her father is not incestuous and although June does admit that Nate does not go to bed with Elise, June does say that that is all they do not do.

In addition, Nate tells lies for his own convenience and apparently cheats on his wife.

As is usual with Klein's older young adults, Elise has a series of sexual encounters that are described in some detail. She begins her sexual experimentation with Hans, Lydia's cousin from Holland, with whom she goes to an amusement park during the one evening they are together. While they are in the tunnel of love, Elise and Hans both want to make love and start to do so, but they do not have time to complete the act. Later, Elise and Tim become lovers.

Another controversial aspect of *Older Men* involves the ages of the couples in it. As the title implies, the story deals with several men who are significantly older than the women who love them.

Nate's marriage to the much younger June is disastrous. Kara's marriage to a much older man is also disastrous. And Elise wonders what will be the outcome of her affair with Tim, who is ten years older than she is.

Techniques

Like most of Klein's works, *Older Men* treats in a serious, realistic fashion problems of growing up. However, this novel seems to have more loose ends than most of Klein's novels, perhaps in part as a result of Klein's probably attempting in it to work her way through her close relationship to her own deceased father, who was a psychoanalyst. For example, why Dr. Dintenfass's stepchildren from his first marriage are also named Dintenfass is never explained. Early in the novel, Elise says that her mother and father both grew up in poverty, yet later Elise comments that her maternal grandfather is very wealthy. No explanation of the contradiction or the change in his fortunes is given.

Literary Qualities

Like most of Klein's works, *Older Men* treats in a serious, realistic fashion problems of growing up. However, this novel seems to have more loose ends than most of Klein's books, perhaps in part as a result of Klein's attempt to work her way through her extremely close relationship to her own deceased father, who was a psychoanalyst. For example, why Dr. Dintenfass's stepchildren from his first marriage are also named Dintenfass is never explained.

Early in the novel, Elise says that her mother and father both grew up in poverty, yet later Elise comments that her maternal grandfather is very wealthy. No explanation of the contradiction or the change in his fortunes is given.

Elise is an extremely intelligent young woman, and she reads widely.

She also has seen many excellent movies. The novel refers to works of literature that Elise has read or that she reads during the course of the summer, especially when she works at the bookstore. Some of the books, such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Member of the Wedding*, and *The Bell Jar*, involve central characters who, like Elise, are troubled young adults having a very difficult time growing up. The reference to the movie version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is particularly apt. Nate tells Elise that mental hospitals now are not at all like the one in the movie, but June's experiences indicate that they may be.

Several other allusions to things outside the novel seem particularly important. June refers to Kafka and Orwell when describing her experiences in the mental hospital. In their fiction, Franz Kafka and George Orwell describe worlds in which madness seems to be the norm and in which people who are sane quickly begin to doubt their own sanity. Their worlds are not that different from the world Nate Dintenfass controls in *Older Men*.

Finally, in *Older Men* there are several references to fairy tales; however, the references are not to the tales' happy endings. Kara says that women who take men from their husbands are not wicked witches; Elise thinks of Kara as a bewitching princess; and Elise thinks of her mother in the hospital as an imprisoned princess. Yet in the last analysis Elise is aware that her life is not part of a fairy tale; for her there will be no happily ever after.

Themes

Older Men treats some very serious themes, several of which are highly unusual for young adult literature. A central theme, however, is fairly common: growing up. It is especially difficult for Elise, the central character and narrator of the story, to grow up because of her overbearing father and her ineffectual mother. Instead, her tendency is to remain entirely dependent on her father, doing exactly what he wants when he wants. She soon realizes, however, that she is allowing her father to stifle her growth and to rule tyrannically over her and her mother, who voluntarily admits herself to a mental hospital in large part because of Nate's pressure and then discovers that she cannot get out unless Nate agrees to take care of her. Nate refuses to agree. In spite of these problems, by the time the novel ends, Elise has rebelled against her father's control. Both she and her mother stop fearing Nate even though Elise realizes that she still loves him. She learns that she also loves and can help her mother. In addition, she learns that she herself is lovable.

Another important theme in Older Men has to do with mental illness, especially depression, and with mental hospitals. This material is developed in ways decidedly uncomplimentary to psychiatrists and mental hospitals. The mother of Elise's best friend Lydia is a psychiatrist, and Suzanne Hausman is also a psychiatrist. Yet neither of these two characters is treated in any detail.

Instead, the majority of the information in the book about psychiatrists comes from Nate and June. Nate keeps emphasizing that the psychiatrists are trying to help June, but he makes it seem as though they are really more intent on doing his bidding. The most negative information about the doctors comes from June, who says that the doctors she saw during her twelve weeks in the mental hospital had absolutely no compassion or concern for their patients. The patients, she says, were abused mentally and physically.

She further says to Nate, "There wasn't one doctor in that hospital who wasn't sicker than any patient he would ever treat, and there wasn't one who in his soul of souls didn't know that." From June's ability not only to survive but also to make a new life for herself outside the hospital, it is easy to conclude that in the case of the psychiatrists in the novel, she may be right.

She does, however, credit the hospital with helping her in one way: It frightened her into coming to grips with her life.

June's negative ideas about psychiatrists and psychiatric hospitals are corroborated by Tim Dintenfass, the son of Nate Dintenfass's first wife. Tim says that Nate also put him in a mental hospital, where he too received no help. He underwent shock treatments and is not sure that his memory ever recovered. Like June, Tim feels that Nate hospitalized him basically to get him out of the way.

At the novel's end, June does not attain great happiness, but she makes progress, moving from being so jealous of the relationship between her daughter and husband

that she overdoses herself with pills and helps create a terrible scene in her daughter's bedroom, to being relatively self-sufficient.

At the beginning of the novel, she stays inside the house in Connecticut, depressed and suffering from insomnia.

By the end of the novel, she has an apartment in Brooklyn, takes classes at Brooklyn College, does volunteer work, and seems to be getting ready to start dating.

Another theme treated forthrightly involves the way patterns of behavior may repeat themselves. Kara Dintenfass, Nate's stepdaughter, sees in Elise's relationship to Nate a repetition of her own earlier relationship to Nate.

Elise sees in the relationship developing between Nate and Melanie, Suzanne's daughter, a repetition of her own relationship to Nate. She also wonders whether her continuing to have an affair with Tim, who is ten years older than she is, may not be simultaneously an attempt to hurt her father and to recapture the relationship she had with him. Significantly, Tim and Elise make love the first time in the house Nate is renting in Maine while Nate sleeps in a room very close to them. Kara, moreover, feels that she entered into a disastrous marriage with a much older man in an attempt to recapture the relationship she lost with Nate when Nate left Kara's mother so that he could marry June.



Topics for Discussion

1. Dr. Dintenfass and Elise have a very close relationship. Mrs. Dintenfass feels that it is too close. Toward the end of the novel, when Elise and her father are in Maine but before her mother joins them, Elise comments about her father and her, "I felt we were like some elderly couple, married fifty years." How healthy is their relationship?

2. While June is hospitalized, Nate and Elise go to Maine for a vacation.

Nate has the telephone number at the house they rent changed, and the new number is unlisted, so that June cannot reach them by telephone. Is this a wise thing that Nate does? What does it reveal about his attitude toward June? To what unexpected events does it lead?

3. *Older Men* is especially harsh in its dealing with psychiatrists and psychiatric treatment. Why? Certainly, as Klein's biographers suggest, her relationship to her own father, a psychoanalyst, is in part involved with the way the novel treats psychiatrists, but may not Nate's profession—he too is a medical doctor—be involved in Elise's mother's attitude toward psychiatrists?

4. When Elise decides to go to Maine with her father rather than stay in New York with her grandmother, does she make the right choice? Why does she decide to go to Maine?

5. Near the end of the novel, Elise tells her father that he will never see her again if he continues to drive the car toward the hospital. Does she do the right thing? Does June not still need psychiatric treatment?

6. According to Tim, childhood maims everyone for life. Is such a pessimistic outlook justified in the context of this novel? Is everyone in it maimed? Is Tim's outlook justified in terms of the real world?

7. Elise makes several references to fairy tales. In what ways is her life like a fairy tale? In what ways is it different from a fairy tale?

8. What kind of person is Dr. Nate Dintenfass? He has many unpleasant traits, but he is also a very successful cardiologist and teacher. Do his genuine contributions to medicine in any way justify or make up for his failings?

9. One reviewer of *Older Men* finds Elise "uninteresting." Do you agree?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are psychiatric hospitals really like? Are they all as harsh as June and Tim say they are? Are most of them? Are many of them?
 2. Read one of the novels to which Elise refers, such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Member of the Wedding*, or *The Bell Jar*, or see one of the movies, such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *Diabolique*. Then, determine in what ways the novel you read or the movie you saw is similar to and different from *Older Men*. What did you learn about *Older Men* by reading the novel or seeing the movie?
 3. Find some fairy tales, such as "Rapunzel," that deal with wicked witches, enchanted princesses, or imprisoned princesses. How are they related to *Older Men*? How does reading them help you better understand the novel?
 4. How much does Elise grow in the course of the novel? Is she what we would call a dynamic character, that is, one who changes in some significant, permanent way? What passages in the novel give you insight into her growth or lack of growth?
 5. In the course of the novel, Dr. Dintenfass seems to be a static character. That is, he does not change in any significant, permanent way. Is this observation correct? Examine the novel for indications that Nate grows or does not grow. Compare and contrast the way he acts in the first and last chapters.
 6. Most of the places mentioned in the book are real. Locate them on a map. Then, try to find out something about them. What kind of place is White Plains? What kind of place is Greenwich Village in New York City?
- What is coastal Maine like? How are these places particularly appropriate or inappropriate for the actions Klein sets in them?

Literary Precedents

Elise is an intelligent young woman, and she reads widely. She also has seen many excellent movies. The novel refers to works of literature that Elise has read or that she reads during the course of the summer, especially when she works at the bookstore. Some of the books, such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Member of the Wedding*, and *The Bell Jar*, involve central characters who, like Elise, are troubled young adults having a very difficult time growing up. The reference to the movie version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is particularly apt. Nate tells Elise that mental hospitals now are not at all like the one in the movie, but June's experiences indicate that they may be. Several other allusions to things outside the novel, seem particularly important. June refers to Kafka and Orwell when describing her experiences in the mental hospital. In their fiction, Franz Kafka and George Orwell describe worlds in which madness seems to be the norm and in which people who are sane quickly begin to doubt their own sanity. Their worlds are not that different from the world Nate Dintenfass controls in *Older Men*.

Finally, in *Older Men* there are several references to fairy tales; however, the references are not to the tales' happy endings. Kara says that women who take men from their husbands are not wicked witches; Elise thinks of Kara as a bewitching princess; and Elise thinks of her mother in the hospital as an imprisoned princess. Yet in the last analysis Elise is aware that her life is not part of a fairy tale; for her there will be no happily ever after.

For Further Reference

Campbell, Patty. "The Young Adult Perplex." *Wilson Library Bulletin* (May 1987): 51-52. Campbell reviews both *Older Men* by Klein and *After the Rain* by Norma Fox. She recognizes the biographical aspects of Klein's novel and speaks of its "thematic richness" and of its "Dark Freudian implications." She praises the characterization and calls the work "the most moving and substantial" Klein has produced.

Klein, Norma. "Books to Help Kids Deal with Difficult Times, I." *School Library Media Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1987): 161-164. This article reproduces an address Klein gave in 1986 to a conference sponsored by the American Association of School Librarians. In it, she discusses her own works in connection with two meanings of her topic, helping children deal with the difficult times we are all living in and helping them deal with their own individual problems.

She talks about her own reading as a teen-ager, her adult reading, and some of her main goals in her fiction for young adults.

"Norma Klein, 50, a Young-Adult Novelist." *New York Times* (April 27, 1989): B16. This is an obituary notice for Klein. It includes a short summary of her life and treats her fiction for young adults and for adults.

Phy, Allene Stuart. *Presenting Norma Klein*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. Begins with a biographical sketch of Klein, and continues with a general overview of her work through 1987. It treats *Older Men* with great sensitivity, especially placing the work in the context of Klein's relationship with her own father.

Review. *Publishers' Weekly* (May 29, 1987): 80. This anonymous review calls Klein "irresponsible" for describing Elise's sexual activity in some detail but only referring to birth control in passing and not mentioning AIDS. The reviewer also finds fault with Klein's characterization and calls Elise's growth so that she is able to oppose her father "incredible and unmotivated."

White, Libby K. Review. *School Library Journal* 33 (April 1987): 111-112. This largely negative review calls Elise "uninteresting and insipid" and calls the whole book, "An empty story that doesn't hold together."



Related Titles

Klein's works tend to deal with highly controversial subjects, so much so that she has been labeled "outrageous."

In fact, she once said that she intended to deal with one taboo subject a year for the rest of her writing career. One of the main areas of controversy that she treats is sexual activity among young adults. Many of her young adult characters, like Elise, engage in sexual experimentation. The title character in *Bizou*, for example, is also just beginning to experience her sexuality, but she is younger than Elise.

Central to many of Klein's works are families in which the parents are or get divorced, one of them is dead or dies, or they were never married. In fact, such families seem to be fairly typical of her works. They are found in novels like *Mom*, *the Wolf Man and Me*, *Bizou*, *Taking Sides*, and, of course, *Older Men*.

In *Taking Sides*, the narrator, Nell, finds herself in a situation like that of Elise in at least two respects: She feels torn between both parents, and she finds herself living with her father, not her mother. She wonders why, since most of her friends whose parents are divorced live with their mothers. The book implies that she lives with her father because her mother may be a lesbian. However, when her father gets ill, she has to move in with her mother.

Like *Older Men*, Klein's novel, *No More Saturday Nights*, involves some couples in which the man is significantly older than the woman. However, at least one of those couples, Abner Weber and his dead wife, had a very happy marriage.



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