

SMART THINKING

Why have women over 50 become invisible By Hilary Mantel

On Sunday last I had a shock, waking up to find that my novel *Wolf Hall* was 2-1 favourite to win the Man Booker prize. It was almost as much of a shock to be described in the press (repeatedly) as "the 57-year-old novelist from Glossop". I've never been coy about my age, so I don't know why the truth should take me aback when set down in print. It made me laugh; I just couldn't think how I got to be 57. Do men ask themselves this question – how did I get to be 30, to be 50, to be ready for my bus pass? Or is it, as I suspect, just women who can't fit the puzzle together, who feel that a reference to their age is not neutral but a sort of accusation?

We've heard so much recently about the disappearance of older women from our TV screens, and about the difficulties, for older woman, of negotiating public life. Every media picture of the rare and glowing Joanna Lumley feels like a challenge; why can't you all be like that, why does she look like a princess and you look like a potato? Many women of a certain age, when a peer of ours is flashed up on screen, run an instant comparison: is it worse to have her jowls than my wrinkles?

Celebrities trade on their image; perhaps it's mean to snigger at their Botox, but their faces are their fortune and they set out their stalls to attract envy. Not so women politicians. We know we're being unforgivably shallow when we judge them on their looks, but we do it all the same. I have been known to say, regarding Ann Widdecombe, that you get the face you deserve. And my mother, who is the same age as Margaret Thatcher, could never see her in her heyday without remarking, "I wish that woman would go home and look after her neck."

When I was a child – in Glossop and district – no one supposed that women over 50 were invisible. On the contrary, they blacked out the sky. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder like penalty walls, solid inside corsets that encased them from neck to thigh, so there was no getting past them: if you'd rushed them and butted them with your head, you'd have careened off, sobbing. They stood in bus queues muttering dark threats against the driver. They stood in line in the butcher's shop, bloodied sawdust clogging their bootees, and amid the loops of sausages and the tripes they talked about My Operation – they boasted of their surgical crises, as Coriolanus boasted about the wounds he got for his mother country. Almost every one of these women was called Nellie, and the others were called Cissie. Why these names are synonymous with effeminate weakness I cannot imagine. They wore vast tweed coats or impermeable raincoats in glass-green, and their legs were wrapped round and round with elastic bandages, so they took up plenty of space in the world; to increase their area they stuck their elbows out. They had baskets and brown paper parcels. They said, "That child wants feeding/ slapping/its bonnet on," and younger women jumped to it. They'd been nowhere but they'd seen everything. They never laughed with you, they laughed at you. They did not use face powder but scouring powder. They could add up grocery prices at calculator speed, and they never took their eyes off the needle of the grocer's scale. Show them the aging heroines of today, and they'd have snorted – they were frequent snorters. Helen Mirren, Joanna Lumley they'd have called picked wishbones. They'd have sneered "bleached blond" at Madonna, while grimly rating those sinewy arms; she looks as if she could scrub a step or mangle a bucket of wet sheets.

At 50 plus, these women ran the world and they knew it. When I was a child I assumed that I would grow into one of them, and have a stubby umbrella which I'd use to point at the follies of the world. I never imagined I'd still be parting with money at makeup counters, or that I'd be racing off for a blow-dry when threatened with a photographer. I assumed I'd wear my hair in round perm, the colour of steel and as tough. Think of the time I'd save; vanity is such a

consumer of the hours. With the spirit of my foremothers inside me, I would write even bigger novels, fortified by pies, and any impertinent reviewers would get a clip around the ear. They were tough as the soles of their shoes, these grannies, and they often lived to great ages; but when one of them died, her funeral stretched right down the main road, and a week later her daughter had stepped in to replace her, packed like an iron bolster inside her ancestral coat.

They were not, these women, peculiar to my birthplace; their geographical spread was the whole British isles. Except for their accents, they were interchangeable in their pride. They were unyielding, undaunted and savagely unimpressed by anything the world could do to them. We could revive their dauntless spirit, instead of dwindling, apologizing and shrinking from the camera lens; though one problem, I fear, is that you can't get the corsets these days.

PS by Les Aupiais

I remember my mother at 50. She wore a helmet of thinning brown hair, tinted at home. She went out in a cream wool coat that squared her off in a doorway. She fancied scarves with a scarf ring, earrings that clipped on and brown court shoes. Her 40s and 50s and early 60s merged, a continuum of middle age uninterrupted.

I am 50 something now. And my answer is hell no. I am going down defiant and I hope, desirable. Viva.