



Growing, Older: A Chronicle of Death, Life, and Vegetables

Joan Dye Gussow

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Michael Pollan calls her one of his food heroes. Barbara Kingsolver credits her with shaping the history and politics of food in the United States. And countless others who have vied for a food revolution, pushed organics, and reawakened Americans to growing their own food and eating locally consider her both teacher and muse.

Joan Gussow has influenced thousands through her books, *This Organic Life* and *The Feeding Web*, her lectures, and the simple fact that she lives what she preaches. Now in her eighties, she stops once more to pass along some wisdom—surprising, inspiring, and controversial—via the pen.

Gussow's memoir *Growing, Older* begins when she loses her husband of 40 years to cancer and, two weeks later, finds herself skipping down the street—much to her alarm. Why wasn't she grieving in all the normal ways? With humor and wit, she explains how she stopped worrying about why she was smiling and went on worrying, instead, and as she always has, about the possibility that the world around her was headed off a cliff. But hers is not a tale, or message, of gloom. Rather it is an affirmation of a life's work—and work in general.

Lacking a partner's assistance, Gussow continued the hard labor of growing her own year-round diet. She dealt single-handedly with a rising tidal river that regularly drowned her garden, with muskrat interlopers, broken appliances, bodily decay, and river trash—all the while bucking popular notions of how "an elderly widowed woman" ought to behave.

Scattered throughout are urgent suggestions about what growing older on a changing planet will call on all of us to do: learn self-reliance and self-restraint, yield graciously if not always happily to necessity, and—since there is no other choice—come to terms with the insistence of the natural world. Gussow delivers another literary gem—one that women curious about aging, gardeners curious about contending with increasingly intense weather, and environmentalists curious about the future will embrace.

Growing, Older: A Chronicle of Death, Life, and Vegetables Details

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From Reader Review Growing, Older: A Chronicle of Death, Life, and Vegetables for online ebook

Nancy says

I find myself thinking about the same things.

LisaKaren says

I love this book in so many ways. The title is deceiving. It is about so much more. She writes so beautifully you feel like you cups just be sitting at her kitchen table over a cup of coffee. Maybe it came to me at just the right time, as there were so many parallels. I am nowhere near the age of the author, however my dad recently died in a similarly unexpected way to her husband. She lives and gardens and does not stop caring or working for the good of the planet. It is gratifying to know that someone can be living and fighting to protect the environment for over 50 years and not burn out or give up.

Jennifer says

I would give this one 10 stars if I could! A very inspiring, funny and thought-provoking book. It makes the point, thru gardening, that even though you have to face some unpleasant truths life is still worth living, that hard work and happiness really do pay off. She also shares my opinion on the state of medicine in the USA today, which is just an added plus. Ms. Gussow is my new hero :)

Very highly recommended.

As I came ultimately to understand, my conviction that I'd had a long and happy marriage was not a delusion; for most of those forty years, I lived a truly happy life. The surprise was that so little of my happiness had depended on Alan.

Which brings me back, of course - as almost everything does - to gardening. The great advantage of gardening as a challenge to facial and bodily decay is that even if the body goes, you have something left to love. For working in the garden produces more than exercise; it produces strength, joy, hope, a tan, natural beauty, vegetables, and, in Frances Hodgson Burnett's words, a future. Somehow I can't imagine that having thin knees or perky eyelids can ever provide such rewards.

Oldroses says

I was a little put off when this book landed, unsolicited, in my mailbox. I don't like being reminded that I am growing older. Reading the blurbs on the back cover, I was intrigued by the fact that the author was a widow who had lost her husband of forty years quite suddenly and didn't miss him. That alone was enough to encourage me to read the book.

It turns out that after his death, she realized that her marriage hadn't been as happy and fulfilling as she thought. Now her life was her own, unencumbered by a husband who had been an emotional burden, and she could finally live her life on her own terms.

Joan Gussow is a nutrition educator, activist and passionate organic gardener. Her garden feeds her body and her spirit. She uses it in this book as a springboard to discuss nutrition, the environment, life in general and her life in particular. She is a talented writer who can start off writing about potatoes, veer off on a discussion of travel leading to the plight of Magellanic Penguins and end up back in her potato patch without losing the reader's interest or attention.

She had written a previous book about her garden, "This Organic Life: Confessions of a Suburban Homesteader", which I have never read because I don't grow food, only flowers, and didn't think that it would interest me. I know better now and will pick a copy knowing that it will be a wonderful read and not just about veggies.

Trunatrschild says

A good book! Not really my style is this lady is even older than even my parent's generation, but still a worthy read. I was firstly disappointed to the point where I almost set the book down to not finish it. She's of the generation that did not divorce and I thought this book was going to be a big whine about the fact that she slept through an inappropriate marriage, but that lasted only the first third of the book. Okay, yes, we know he was a jerk and you didn't miss him when he died. Great. But I guess for some, what she says is shocking, as those same types, who'd never get divorced, would never say such things about their lifelong partner. Us more modern types would know everything she said about our partners, or SHOULD know and either reject the partner's issues as part of who they are or divorce them promptly as intolerable for the happiness of one's life. Her life apparently awoke after the death of her husband, and for her, I'm glad that he died fairly young as she got to LIVE the rest of her years.

The rest of her book, while speaking of aging, is mostly her outlook on life, both political and on gardening and as I share most of her outlook that part was most pleasant to read, though she does state that she lives in a state of near depression because she sees the doom of the planet and everyone else either sees this truth or are walking zombies. I agree, but I've stopped caring whether the zombies don't see their doom or do. I've decided that the worthy do and the not worthy aren't worth my worrying about. A lot of worthy people spend a lot of time trying to educate the people who don't want to see and they still don't want to see, so, so be it, let them be ostriches. I think that one can prepare and still live a happy life, I do, and I most definitely see the doom that she forecasts.

Another thing is, I wish she'd sell her land and get a better plot. :) But other than that, this was a nice read, not my thing, but I'm not 85, but I respect her and think that she's a very strong lady and very smart.

Leah Manners says

Joan and my mom would have gotten along swimmingly. Loved the book because it brought my mom back to life.

Mary Ginn says

I loved this book. I wish Joan were my salty next door neighbor. I am 61 and each year after I harvest my gardens and put my beds to sleep, I think I can't do this much longer and yet the compulsion to sow, and weed, and harvest begins again every spring. I was not raised by gardeners so I am mystified how I developed this desire. Ms. Gussow's essays put the words to my experience. I am so grateful to have stumbled upon this book as I head into the later phase of my gardening life.

Happyreader says

Loved This Organic Life and so far am loving her new book. Definitely a bracing palate cleanser after the dullness of Mary Catherine Bateson. This is a woman who isn't afraid to be brutally honest. Heck, she starts the book by revisiting the death of her husband and coming clean that not only didn't she miss her husband after he died, that she was happy to have her life back. This reads like something I would actually pass on to my mother, unlike Composing a Further Life which I know would just put my mother to sleep.

Andi says

I have a complicated reader relationship with Joan Gussow. I want to say that I love her writing all the way to the end of the earth, but I do recognize some of her quirks that many might find irritating. In some ways, she seems to be a nit-picking old lady, the type you don't want to be neighbors with, for fear that she'll make your life hell. She is very opinionated, a right we all have but especially at the ripe age of 80-something, and there are many times while reading that I get the distinct impression that whatever she says, GOES in the lives of anyone around her.

BUT. That is all the negative I will say. Because, darnit, I can't help it. I really, really love her stories.

She writes with pure heart, holds nothing back, and openly shares everything she's ever learned about food, gardening, our food system, our environment. She is full of facts and important knowledge, and she's not afraid to stick her neck out with unpopular ideas (she wrote and researched many facets of our current agricultural systems long before the topic became mainstream, often facing tough critics). She also shares very personal stories about her sons and late husband, and shows time and again her humanness.

Growing, Older, is a book I will read often. Gussow ponders many of the issues a human being faces as they grow past 'old' into 'elderly', yet maintains her fierce independence and continues to grow most of her food in her (granted, huge) backyard. The Hudson River lies directly behind her, and throughout her insightful chapters there is the constant background threat of her garden being flooded.

Flood, it does. More than once Gussow's gardens have been utterly destroyed by the river's rising banks. The work she must do to repair the damage is exhausting to read about, and yet she's had to do it more than once, and she willingly does it. The answers to the question "Why don't you just MOVE?" emerges in her reflections. For one, she respects what nature has to dish out, and feels she needs to work with the forces around her. Two, the view of the river is so beautiful to her that she's willing to do what she must to live with

such a gorgeous natural presence that fills her soul, even if at times it wreaks incredible damage on her livelihood. Many people wouldn't even have the option to move, so to see her succeeding in raising lots of food in a not-always-very-ideal environment is encouraging.

This 'old lady' has a lot of good knowledge to offer, and I feel her words on a personal level. There is so much focus on the negative aspects of growing old that it's no wonder everyone's so terrified of it. Joan Gussow is not terrified of age, but ecstatic about what the years have given her. I've adopted her as one of my role models, hoping I have the wonderful opportunity to also grow old, along with my gardens.

MaryJo says

I ran into a reference to this book in an article on a food blog, and got it from my public library. The back cover has praise from some of my favorite food writers: Alice Waters, Dan Barber, and Michael Pollan. (She influenced food activist Marion Nestle!) This is a collection of essays about gardening, and how to live a good life as an aging woman, retired and newly on her own. She had a career as a professional nutritionist and food activist, concerned about the health of the population and the health of the planet, and these interests infuse the book, as she reports on her daily life, battling the flooding Hudson river, harvesting vegetables, trapping skunks, recommending the best variety of zucchini to grow. At first I was surprised at how cranky she is. The essays begin with Joan writing about the death of her spouse. She finds she doesn't miss him that much, and wonders what is wrong with her. Living her life absorbs her, and gives her ample opportunity to comment on how to live in an uncertain world. I was sorry to come to the end of the book. She says lots of very smart things in a rather matter of fact way. Despite her crankiness, Joan gives me hope for the future. As I look uneasily at the years ahead--wondering how many more years I will be able to live in my house and take care of the gardens-- it is good to think about Joan in her eighties, cleaning up her garden one more time, after the flooding Hudson has moved her raised beds, and brought in assorted flotsam. The essays, taken together have a nice balance of gardening stories, critical commentary and personal reminiscence. Favorites include "Things that Break and Things that Don't" (about shopping for and buying a new stove and the history of repairs it needed); "My Life with Butterflies" (going back to a childhood romance with butterflies); "A Fate worse than Death" (about visits to the doctor and the incurable complaints of an aging body). I am returning the book to the library, but I may have to get a copy for myself.

Lisa says

I loved this book. I adored how Gussow told the truth about the deficits in her marriage. I so admire a truth teller. As one who has been in a 25 year marriage, I understand the urge to "prettify" all the places where struggles reside -- and how deliriously happy is one supposed to be throughout a life, anyway? "And they lived happily EVER AFTER" is true only in the books we love here on Goodreads.

Another thing I love is that Gussow involves All Her Relations in this life story. Like her, the players in my life aren't just humans. They are dogs, trees, flowers, herbs, honeybees, insects, yeast, and many others. Her approach feels true and right to me in this regard.

The book itself was like taking a short walk with Gussow thru her late seventies and projected up until her Obituary. I related to the mortality thoughts that have begun to creep in as I traverse my fifties. It's so good to learn strategies for active engagement with the land as I contemplate aging. THANKS SO MUCH, Joan!

Cyndi says

In this book her voice rings loud and strong on a number of topics. Even if I didn't always agree, I loved hearing her opinions.

Somara says

so much that touched me in this book

Susan Albert says

Joan Gussow's new collection of personal essays, *Growing, Older*, is a free-ranging exploration of a wide number of issues: the loss of her husband of forty years and her reassessment of her marriage; her experiences of growing her own food in the garden of her Hudson River home; her concerns about climate change and resource depletion; and her thoughts about entering into her ninth decade. Gussow knows what she's talking about, for she developed the nationally acclaimed Nutritional Ecology program at Columbia Teachers College and was one of the earliest writers to speak out about the dangers of industrialized agriculture (*Chicken Little, Tomato Sauce, and Agriculture*, 1991)—a subject that has been recently popularized by the likes of Michael Pollan, Paul Ford, and Barbara Kingsolver. *Growing, Older* is a lively book, energized by Gussow's straightforward, often blunt observations that are by turns witty, argumentative, cranky, and funny—but always interesting, enlightening, and provocative.

The collection opens with the death of Gussow's husband, her reaction to his loss (she "simply didn't miss him"), and her difficulty in sharing this truth with people who asked how she felt. What she actually felt was a "strange liberation," she says, "from things I hadn't known I was imprisoned by." (Some readers may find this measure of her marriage startling and perhaps even uncaring, but it is honest, direct, and authentic, qualities we value in a memoir, and which are characteristic of all Gussow's writing.) But if she is not devastated by her husband's death, there are other issues that do bring her nearly to despair: the frenzied consumerism of our culture, the media's "furious silence" about peak oil, the hidden costs and the obvious vulnerabilities of our food system, and climate change.

But Gussow is by temperament an optimistic and hopeful person, as well as a determined gardener, and she never despairs for very long. This trait becomes clear as she describes her skirmishes with the Hudson River, which regularly floods her garden, requiring her to rebuild and replant. But she sees these battles as simply part of her "self-provisioning adventure," for Gussow is resolute in her determination to grow as much of her own food as possible and to continue to live in the home she loves as long as she can. Hence her wonderful chapter called "Potatoes and Escape," in which she meditates on the tendency of the potato to "stay put," and her own conviction that everyone should stay home and work on making the places they live livable. "If the planet is to remain inhabitable," she writes, "we can't give up on the homes and communities we live in, but must turn them into places where our hearts rejoice."

And that, for me, is the great virtue of this book. Now in her eightieth year, Gussow, a natural-born teacher, shows us by her example how we can live in an endangered world without losing hope; how we can learn

and practice skills of self-reliance; and how we can coexist with our often-annoying fellow journeyers (the skunks, woodchucks, and muskrats, for instance, that regularly raid her garden). While we might not agree with all Gussow's practices, we have to admire her spunk, her determination, and her courage. "Did I get what I wanted?" she asks herself, musing on the challenges of a long life and years of hard work. "I'm pretty sure I did," she answers. Which seems to me to be a very good way to sum up a life.

Jennifer says

Joan Gussow, though I only know her through her writing, is one of the people that most admire. This and her book "This Organic Life" remind me to garden, eat, and live my life more thoughtfully, deliberately, and with a sense of humor. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, it's another one to add to my small shelf of true favorites.
