BOOK REVIEW

The Seasons of a Woman's Life. BY DANIEL J. LEVINSON IN COLLABORATION WITH JUDY D. LEVINSON. New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. 438 pages; \$27.50.

As a 40-ish woman general internist feeling the competing tugs of family and profession, I was delighted at the prospect of reading *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*. Written by Daniel J. Levinson in collaboration with his wife, Judy D. Levinson, this book studies women in midlife in order to address the question of whether there is a single adult developmental life cycle analogous to the earlier process of child development. The Levinsons present stories of women from three walks of life—homemakers, business executives, and academics—stories that remain with me long after reading the book. This book has particular appeal to readers interested in qualitative methods, gender issues, or studies of narrative and biography.

The Seasons of a Woman's Life is a sequel to Daniel Levinson's 1978 *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, in which the popular term "midlife crisis" originated. Professor Emeritus of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine, Levinson had come to identify himself over the course of his career as a hybrid at the margins of psychology, sociology, and psychiatry. He developed multimethod approaches to study individual lives over time, such as his technique of "intensive biographical interviewing." In *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, Levinson addressed the questions: Is there an underlying order in the adult life course? Do men's lives evolve in accord with basic universal principles? Levinson concluded that, in his adult development, every man goes through a predictable order of age-related "seasons" or eras.

In his preface to *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, Levinson explains that, had he studied men and women together from the outset, he would have done a disservice to each group and run the risk of generalizing from the findings of the male cohort. He undertook the study of men first, he states, largely out of interest in his own personal adult development, yet with the intention of doing a second study of women's lives. In 1979, ready to embark on the women's project, he was approached by the Financial Women's Association of New York with an offer to sponsor his work on studying women's lives. In 1981, Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association became a cosponsor. Thus, two populations he studies in the book are women from corporate-financial businesses in the New York City area and faculty in colleges and universities located along the New York-Boston corridor. His third cohort comprises homemakers drawn randomly from the greater New Haven telephone directory. All of the women studied are drawn from a pool of several hundred respondents to a questionnaire, details of which are not included in the book.

Several months after he completed the book's manuscript, Daniel Levinson died. The final editorial process was completed by his wife, which she describes movingly in the preface as a labor of love, respect, and devotion.

The study design begins with interviews of 45 women—15 from each of the three cohorts—performed by a staff of 12, including both Daniel and Judy Levinson. The interviews total 15 to 20 hours per woman studied, conducted and audiotaped over a period of up to 3 months. Budget constraints allowed only 4 to 8 hours of taped interviews for six of the faculty cohort. The 200 to 300 pages of typed interview transcripts per woman were subjected to a process developed by Judy Levinson called "biographical reconstruction." Used as a method to condense, order, and manage voluminous typewritten material, the book states that biographical reconstruction "preserv[es] the life story in the woman's own voice. . . . and maintain[s] [the interview material's] qualitative meanings and themes." Excerpts of these reconstructed stories are interspersed throughout the book.

Using the 45 reconstructed biographies, Daniel Levinson concludes that women do go through the same sequence of eras in their lives as men, and at the same ages, arguing for a single adult human life cycle. However, in spite of this single life cycle, he points out that different places exist in our society for males and females. He calls this concept "*gender splitting*—a sharp division between feminine and masculine that permeates every aspect of human life" (*italics his*). Gender splitting, according to Daniel Levinson, initiates and sustains inequalities that limit adult development within social, family, career, and psychic domains.

What I find most striking about the book is that almost all of the women interviewed in each of the cohorts seem deeply troubled by their own performance as compared with some idealized wife/mother figure. Regardless of her walk of life, each woman's biography portrays her as conflicted and uncertain about how her time is balanced between personal life and career. Not one of them seems satisfied with her situation or feels that it is even possible for a woman in our culture to live without these conflicts and uncertainties. This prevailing theme disturbs me, and I wonder how Daniel Levinson might have followed up on it were he alive today.

Some features of *The Seasons of a Woman's Life* could be improved to make it more accessible. For example, the data are organized by cohort, and then chronologically within each cohort. Biographical excerpts of any of the interviewed woman are presented to illustrate points. At times I would lose track of which woman is which and find myself wishing for some sort of chart to orient me. Occasionally Daniel Levinson does introduce a biographical excerpt with a reminder about who that woman is. Moreover, if the book is not read all at once (which was the case with my reading), it is possible to forget what is said about the preceding cohort(s). A completely chronological organization of the data, comparing and contrasting the three cohorts over time, might have been easier to follow.

Although the book contains a selected bibliography, it unfortunately lacks annotated references. The preface implies that Daniel Levinson may have intended to assemble references at the time of his death. I would have found such notes most helpful to turn to, particularly in the sections on methods.

JGIM solicits reviews of new books from its readers. If you wish to review a book, please submit a letter of interest that identifies the book in question (title, author, and publisher) to Robert Aronowitz, MD, Book Review Editor, JGIM, Veterans Affairs Medical Center (JGIM-111), University and Woodland Avenues, Philadelphia, PA 19104; telephone (215) 823-4470; fax (215) 823-4450.

Daniel Levinson correctly extols the unique ability of qualitative methods to generate hypotheses and questions, and he needs no apology for using them in his study. Curious, though, is his tendency to generalize his findings to all women, even though he readily admits that his sample comprises predominantly white, heterosexual women in the late twentieth century northeastern United States. The generalizing detracts from the intriguing hypotheses and provocative questions his data suggest. It evokes an essentialism found in other studies of women's lives that treats them collectively ("women are like this") instead of acknowledging their variety ("women of this sort do that").

Another reservation comes from the use of biography—rather than narrative—as a data source. I wish Daniel Levinson had provided details about how Judy Levinson reconstructed the transcripts into the passages reproduced in the book. In the text they are formatted as indented paragraphs without quotation marks, headed by the pseudonym of the woman whose life they represent. As a reader, I am curious about how much of the language is in the interviewed woman's own voice, and how much is

in Judy Levinson's. I fear I missed the depth of meaning that each woman's individual voice can add to her story. I wonder why the method of biographical reconstruction was developed and used rather than, for example, the quotation marks and ellipses employed in so many other studies using narrative data. I also wonder what the Levinsons felt about the possible confounding effect of Judy Levinson's dual role as interviewer and biographical reconstructor.

Despite my reservations about *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, its subject matter holds tremendous power. I still find myself thinking about the individual women's biographies as I observe a supermarket cashier, a bank teller, or a secretary to a powerful man. In the book, stories of women like these are marked by deep-seated personal struggle, as are the stories of women in business and academia. For presenting this finding alone, I am grateful to the women who told their stories and to the Levinson team for writing them up.—**CATHERINE V. CALDICOTT, MD**, *Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program, Division of General Medicine, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*