



# Revising Herself: Women's Identity from College to Midlife

*Ruthellen Josselson*

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In 1972, Ruthellen Josselson was a young psychologist fascinated by the riddle of how a woman creates an identity and chooses one path over another in life--particularly in the face of the nascent feminist movement, which challenged as never before the traditional role models of earlier generations. Selecting at random thirty young women in their last year of college, Josselson undertook a ground-breaking study that would follow these women's personal odysseys over the next twenty-two years, from graduation to midlife. What she learned about the ways women reinvent themselves in an ever-changing world is the subject of *Revising Herself*, a myth-shattering look at both a unique generation of American women on the front lines of wrenching social change, and at the conflicts and compromises facing women today.

With stunning candor and hard-won insight, the "ordinary" (and anonymous) women in Josselson's study reveal how much more complex and interesting real women's lives are than the one-dimensional stereotypes often portrayed in the media. Dismissing a traditional "stage theory" of development as overly simplistic, Josselson identifies four trajectories that women take from adolescence to adulthood. *Guardians* are the "good girls"--high achieving and committed to fulfilling their family's expectations, but rigid in outlook and resistant to change. *Pathmakers* are not afraid of risk or commitment, striving to balance their own needs with others'. The often idealistic *Searchers* are overwhelmed by choice and unable to make commitments, while *Drifters* live only for the moment, avoiding choice and an exploration of identity. Reflecting the degree to which women take risks, make choices, and form commitments, these paths form a foundation for adulthood--but they also lead to surprises: at midlife, Guardians seem strikingly able to "cut loose" from earlier traditional patterns, while many Drifters have "found themselves," sometimes in quite traditional ways. And coming of age just as the feminist movement gathered momentum, the women in Josselson's study were the first to confront many contemporary issues not faced by their mothers, or their mothers' mothers: How does an Irish Catholic contemplate an abortion? How does a woman whose parents believe education is wasted on a daughter find the will to apply to medical school? In examining these questions and others, Josselson shows that the forging of a woman's identity--whatever her "path"--is ongoing, a balancing of the need for self-assertion against the equally compelling need for relationships. Women create their identities along the seams of both competence and connection and continually revise what they have made. Allowing women to define themselves in their own terms, *Revising Herself* holds up a provocative mirror in which readers can reflect upon their own life choices. Whether a Guardian, Pathmaker, Searcher, or Drifter, readers will recognize themselves in these women's experiences and gain new insight into how we construct our identities over a lifetime.

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