



Age  
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To dye, or not to dye – that is the very vexed question for women (and some men) of a certain age. A proudly salt and pepper **Caroline Baum** looks at the pros and cons.

# SILVER LININGS

**I** first became a schnauzer around 40, when I noticed telltale streaks of grey appearing at my temples. But since schnauzers have long been my favourite breed of dog, I didn't worry too much – after all, I liked the mix of salt and pepper that makes them so distinctive (why I thought what suited a dog would automatically suit me is another question entirely). Having worked at *Vogue*, I knew what to do to adapt to the change: substitute silver jewellery for gold and wear charcoal grey to enhance the look. With minimal adjustment, I was set.

When things were going well, I was proud of my steely helmet – people complimented me on the colour, some even asked where I got it done. By sheer luck, I only had streaks at the front, and couldn't see the spreading white skullcap on my crown. As a then TV presenter, I regarded it as an act of defiance not to colour my hair, believing I was taking a stand in an ageist profession. But by a trick of the light – literally – in the studio, my grey looked shiny and dark on screen, so no one noticed the point I was trying to make. When things were going badly, or I caught sight of myself drained of colour by unflattering fluoro lighting, I weakened and could be persuaded to spend several hours and nearly \$200 a pop on trying to turn back the clock, convinced by my well-meaning hairdresser that I looked younger in shades with names like Indian Bronze, Rich Velvet or Irish Sunset.



Grey liberation: (left) writer Caroline Baum and her schnauzer look.



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Women have been dyeing their hair since antiquity, but it's the baby boomers who have really embraced the concept of defying age through disguise. The generation whose mantra was "don't trust anyone over 30" is now well past that age, but in denial when it looks in the mirror. Having glamorised youth and turned a handsome profit from commodifying and accessorising it, boomers have no desire to surrender the status that it

confers. Who else could dream up a time-cheating slogan such as "50 is the new 40"?

Our mothers put their faith in vanishing cream, little realising that it was not just the cream that melted away but their very identities. You only have to think back to the way they looked uniformly and prematurely old and unsexy in a 1950s wardrobe of housecoats, flesh-coloured tights and Teflon-coated perms to appreciate why boomers will not give in without a fight.

Feminists are divided on this issue. There's the glamour camp, to which Gloria Steinem, Naomi Wolf and Anne Summers belong, and the Germaine Greer let-it-all-hang-out camp. Hair colour is a frontline topic, perhaps because it is the most obvious signal that a woman's fertility is on the wane and that her primary role is about to end.

When men go grey, it's called distinguished. When women go grey, they are extinguished. It's a double standard enshrined by every savvy marketer and only recently challenged by a handful of role models who defiantly strut wrinkles and grey hair as badges of honour: Helen Mirren, Judi Dench and Jamie Lee Curtis are the poster girls for the cause in Hollywood, where the most powerful women in the business – whether studio execs or box-office stars – are dyed, lifted, tucked and Botoxed expressionless dolls. Maybe they don't realise that if anything is ageing, it's a rictus masking internal panic.

When Jane Fonda, then aged 68, was chosen in 2006 to promote L'Oréal's latest anti-ageing cream in Europe and Australia (Diane Keaton, eight years her junior, was picked for the US), she said, "Someone's got to give a face to getting old", but her hair was still artificially golden. While you can't sell wrinkle creams with images of pubescent girls, only the most daring risk doing so with silver-haired matrons. When Revlon tried to sell Vital Radiance, a range of



#### Actress

As one of Australia's most admired character actresses, Julia Blake, 70, has been lucky enough to have worked with directors who regarded her silvery mane as an asset.

"People like Paul Cox hate make-up, and always wanted me to be natural. Margaret Fink was the same when she cast me in *Edens Lost*. I made the decision 20 years ago, when I was doing *Travelling North*, that I'd had enough of all the regrowth and fuss that went with tinting, so I just refused to do it any more and told people that if they wanted to use me with different hair colour, I'd have to wear a wig.

"Men are always saying, 'I love your hair!' I realised after working on *Salem's Lot* with Donald Sutherland, who raved about it, that it's unusual for American actors to see women who look like me."



cosmetics specially formulated for over-50s, with an ad campaign featuring a real woman with grey streaks carrying a surfboard, it bombed and the products were discontinued.

US skin-care company Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, launched three years ago, is still regarded as a watershed in advertising. Few have emulated its approach. Research commissioned by Dove confirms that women feel unhappy about the way they are perceived in middle age. In 2006, prior to launching its Pro.age skin-care range with a controversial ad campaign featuring naked middle-aged women that was pulled by US TV networks, the company conducted a survey of nine countries (sadly Australia was not one of them), interviewing 1450 women aged between 50 and 64. Among its findings: 91 per cent of women feel that the media and advertising need to do a better job of representing women over 50. (There is only one model with grey hair on the books at Chadwick, Australia's largest modelling agency. In her 50s, she is mostly cast as the grandmother in ads for medical products or insurance. In France, Christian Lacroix's mother appears on the catwalk.) More than 70 per cent believe the biggest misconceptions about women over 50 are that they do not enjoy sex, are not productive in society and do not care about their appearance. And no matter whether they were American, Brazilian, German or French, when asked at what age they felt most attractive, women were virtually unanimous in answering "34".

At that age, I never gave my hair colour a moment's thought. But later, I became a serial dyer the way others become serial dieters, yo-yoing between leaving my hair *au naturel* and colouring it. Because I was always ambivalent about the



I subjected myself to long, unattractive periods of regrowth, when I looked less like a pedigree schnauzer than a cross between a brindle terrier, a badger and a hyena.

process, I would subject myself to long, unattractive periods of regrowth when half my hair would be a lightish-chestnut colour, as the dye faded with each wash, while my roots became more and more evident. At that point, I looked less like a pedigree schnauzer than a cross between a brindle terrier, a badger and a hyena.

Grey hair suits short cuts, which helped. Other women I've talked to say they can only bear their grey hair if they have it straightened. A wild, curly mane suggests pan-scouring material and, harking back to some deep-seated myth or superstition, seems to resonate with suggestions of madwomen or witches – women who in “letting themselves go” and becoming the crones Germaine Greer favours, have somehow put themselves on the edge of society, beyond the margins of convention when it comes to appearance, hinting at appetites and desires beyond control.

**I**N THE BEFORE PICTURE ON THE BACK OF HER book *Going Gray* (published on February 1 by Little, Brown), Anne Kreamer has straight dark hair, worn in the same style since her college days – shoulder-length, with a soft fringe. It's a preppy, neat and conservative look which she maintained with near-obsessive regularity during her professional life as a TV executive, having her roots retouched every three weeks.

She thought that was enough to keep ageing at bay until one day she saw a photograph of herself sandwiched between her daughter and a friend. She reacted with dismay: “*I saw myself for what I truly was; a 49-year-old mother with a much too darkly shellacked helmet of hair ... My uniform of deep dark mahogany hair and dark clothing sucked all light out of my presence. Seeing that person –*

*Theatre critic*

“I started turning grey in my 30s, like my mother, and the shock was more that I was turning into her than anything else. It spread from the front, so that I was white at the front and still dark at the back – a bit like Janus, I had two different sides. I decided it was a good excuse to play with colour and I streaked my hair with green, pink and purple, like a parrot. It's amazing what happens when you do that: people treat you like a bank robber, it sends out an anarchic message.

“Now, at 57, I can't be bothered with trying to hide the grey, especially since I think that regrowth looks really tacky. Years and years ago, when I was a child, I remember seeing Lana Turner in a film called *The Rains of Ranchipur*, in which her character's roots were starting to show. I understood that meant she was not a very classy dame.”





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*that version of myself – was like a kick to my solar plexus. In one second, all my years of careful artifice, attempting to preserve what I thought of as a youthful look, were ripped away. All I saw was a kind of confused, schlubby middle-aged woman with hair dyed much too harshly.”*

Like any self-respecting American who has grown up in a culture of self-help and prime-time confession, she embarks on a personal journey: the subtitle to *Going Gray* is *What I Learned About Beauty, Sex, Work, Motherhood, Authenticity and Everything Else That Really Matters*. It's a clever catch-all ploy to appeal to just about every potential female reader, even without mentioning God. Kreamer gets a snappy new layered haircut, changes her wardrobe and make-up and looks a damn sight better in the after picture on her website and the back of the book, as you'd expect. So it all ends happily for her, especially since her book has become a bestseller.

On the phone, Kreamer sounds measured and considered. Given her rather driven personality in the book, I had expected her to sound more hyper, but she's had time to get used to the interest she's generated, although she's still waiting for that call from Oprah that turns everything – even grey – to gold.

If one thing continues to surprise her, it is the reaction from men. “I've had so many letters from husbands who wrote to me and said, ‘Thank you, I've been telling my wife for years not to dye her hair, that I liked it natural, but she never believed me...’” (Women appear to be ignoring such sentiments, since more than 70 per cent of women in the US colour their hair.)

She also found, in follow-up surveys conducted across the country, that it is redheads who have

**It's redheads who have the hardest time letting go of their natural colour. “It is really as if they feared losing their fire. Blondes have it easier – they just fade.”**

the hardest time letting go of their natural colour. “I learned how much we associate hair colour with identity and in the case of redheads, it is really as if they feared losing their fire,” says Kreamer, who admits that “blondes have it easier – they just fade”.

The first country to buy foreign rights to her book was Italy, a land where mature women are accorded respect and status and many sport stylish salt and pepper hair. “I read a story in *The New York Times* about the doyennes of Italian architecture and there were all these women aged between 60 and 80 with no face work done, no dyed hair, but very stylish, with great scarves, glasses, tights and jewellery,” marvels Kreamer. “In America, you can't list five women in public life that have grey hair – you stop after Toni Morrison, Emmylou Harris and Jamie Lee Curtis. We need Hillary or a high-profile TV presenter like Katie Couric to give permission to other women.”

Kreamer notes that feminists colour their hair as much as conservatives. “When women joined the work force, they sought to control their image. The hair-colour and hairdressing industry exploited that desire. Women's libbers dyed their hair along with the rest and we've never really looked at that.” Isn't the answer that they – we – just wanted a choice?

One solution to ageing grey-cefully, according to Kreamer, seems to be simply to redirect one's spending impulse to other areas – clothes and lipstick. It's as if as long as you can still shop, you don't have to admit to getting older. “You do need to make some adjustments,” says Kreamer, who visited several colour consultants as part of writing her book. “Most older women I talked to say



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*Actress/director*

"I went grey quite suddenly, when I was 28, but I was sort of expecting it, as my mother was grey by the time she was 30, so I knew it was hardwired into my DNA," says Robyn Nevin crisply. At 66, the recently departed director of the Sydney Theatre Company sports a spiky head of white hair that declares she is not going quietly into any kind of semi-retirement. "I was lucky I didn't go through a transition of salt and pepper. Directors were always persuading me to dye it but the boredom and discomfort of doing it really annoyed me and my hair didn't take colour well – it threw off hideous coppery highlights. So when I did *Emerald City* in the '80s, I said, 'That's it, I refuse to do this any more, I am playing a character who is my age, so why can't I look like myself?' Now I am growing it long in preparation for Barrie Kosky's production of *The Trojan Women*, for which I want a wild mane – either that or I might shave it off completely."

That's Nevin the actress; as Nevin the director, her attitude does a sharp about-turn: "Grey is a no-no for actresses. It distracts the audience and causes them to make a judgement that can compromise the character they're playing. Even today, I just don't believe you could play a seductress or a femme fatale with grey hair. I wouldn't do it even casting the role of Mrs Robinson in *The Graduate*. White is different, thank God. I loved Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*, but you have to remember she got away with that platinum do because she was portraying a powerful woman, not a sexual one – she was all strident striding and she was a demonic monster."



that when they look in the mirror, they don't see the self they want to see. And when you ask them how old that self is, the reply is usually 34 internally, so there's a cognitive dissonance happening. Now, having made some changes, I feel for the first time that my interior and my exterior match." Spoken like a true control-freak, which Kreamer cheerfully admits she is. She says that since she went grey, she's been able to relax a little more about her desire to micro-manage every aspect of her family's life. "I'm more forgiving, I have time for lunch with friends, and to read and go to exhibitions or just wander around a neighbourhood," she says.

When Kreamer's book came out, several commentators remarked on how Meryl Streep had struck a rare blow on behalf of mature women with her platinum do as Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*. But there's a difference between a white fox and a grey one. The white in Streep's case was dyed and the colour looks dramatic and throws a lot of light around her face. Grey can have a more deadening effect on the complexion. Because it's not just hair that changes colour, it's skin too. Which is why wearing black at 50 may look severe whereas it looked chic at 30.

Former model-turned-writer Suzy Baldwin, 61, claims that she always looked forward to getting older. So when she saw the first streaks of grey appearing in her dark hair, in her 30s, she was unperturbed. "As a child, I always wanted to be with the grown-ups, because they represent elegance and sophistication, so any sign of ageing was not a problem," she says. "I felt that I had earned the grey, that it was a sign of wisdom.

"I suppose that sounds terribly disingenuous," she adds, "but I was a plain child and once I realised that from the way boys reacted to me, I decided quite consciously that my personality would have to be the main attraction. I only became a model when I was a student to earn money, I didn't invest in my looks for my sense of self or my future. When I went grey, I thought, 'Great, people will take me seriously.' And my hairdresser has never once suggested that I hide it."

Well, that's easy to say when you are blessed with beautiful bones, perfect skin and a statuesque physique. Plain women are just not allowed to feel quite so unconcerned. And maybe that goes for plain (or vain) men, too. These days,



These days, going grey is not an exclusively female worry. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, with the rise of metrosexual grooming, more and more men are dyeing their hair.

going grey is not an exclusively female worry. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, with the rise of metrosexual grooming, more and more men are dyeing their hair. One gay male friend confessed to me that he still has dreams about his formerly dark locks, 20 years after turning silver.

**K**REAMER DOESN'T BOTHER WITH THE DETAIL of why hair goes grey, but as with so much else in life, it's due to the unfair lottery of genetics, according to trichologist David Salinger, who runs clinics in several Australian cities. "The follicles go grey when the production of cells that create the melanin pigment is reduced," explains Salinger (who sports a showy, tousled mass of grey curls), adding that in some parts of the world, diet can also be an influencing factor. "Malnourishment and an absence of some minerals can cause premature greyness." His most extreme case was an eight-year-old girl in India with a head of grey hair, where the colour was a source of shame and social stigma. "In Australia, I've had clients who had gone grey by as young as 17 or 18 – the 20s is not an unusual time to start." Eventually, all grey hair does go white, says Salinger, by which time it has also changed texture and grown coarser.

Even before it's time to ask the "to dye or not to dye" question, the relationship a woman has with her hairdresser is one of trust. It's also one based on vulnerability, honesty, tact and discretion. The hairdressing industry thrives on female vanity and insecurity, so I wondered what the professional take on grey is.

Film producer Margaret Fink suggested I talk to her hairdresser. Now 74, Fink is one of the most stylishly individual women in Sydney. She colours her hair boldly and wears it in a variety of sleek, sometimes asymmetrical bobs that show off her angular bone structure and large eyes. A definite iconoclast, Fink is no pushover, but she defers to Troy Brennan at Ilium Tonsor in Surry Hills when it comes to her hair: "I ask him if I should let the grey come through and he says, 'Not yet.'" Well, he would, wouldn't he, I think to myself: colouring would be the most profitable part of his business. (When asked, Brennan confirms that it constitutes 70 per cent of his income.)

On the phone, Brennan oozes the kind of charm that makes you want to put your scalp in his

*Adjunct professor, ANU*

"It was such a relief to be free of the tyranny of regular appointments!" remembers Betty Churcher of her decision to stop dyeing her hair when she became the first female director of the National Gallery in Canberra in 1990.

She considered her hair colour strategically in terms of her career. "I got the job when I was 58. At that time I would not talk about my age and still dyed my hair because I refused to be typecast as old. I wouldn't surrender to some stereotype. I hated the airstrip of grey that appeared down my part every few weeks, forcing me to make time to go to the salon. But my hairdresser disliked the colour and persuaded me to phase it out over months, helping me by adding a bit of lighter colour here and there as it grew out. The result was so liberating, I wished I'd done it sooner!" laughs Churcher, who will appear on ABC-TV later this year, in a series about the hidden treasures in our national collections, sporting her now signature metallic bob.





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hands. "I'm not into hiding or disguising the truth, but I tell my mature ladies that to go straight from colour to grey in one go is too much of a shock, that they should approach it gradually. I encourage them to grow out the colour slowly while continuing to add lowlights [dark streaks] so that they get used to their new look bit by bit.

"The one thing I do advise is that if they are going to go completely grey, they will need a stronger haircut to carry it off, something with more structure to it. It's the same as with your wardrobe – as you get older, you want a look with a better cut, more tailoring, more shape. Generally, short suits grey best. I am not a fan of dead straight blow-dried grey hair which can make some people look a bit fierce."

Nor is Miranda Priestly platinum the solution for everyone, alas. "Yes, it is more dramatic, but it is also more high-maintenance, so I tend not to recommend it – you are applying bleach to the hair, so it's damaging and needs an enormous amount of care, and is not suited to our climate and lifestyle of sun and sea. When it fades it goes yellow, which looks dreadful."

Brennan discourages women from obsessing too much about the whole business. "Hair is not something women should be neurotic about." He sounds so sensible that I find myself thinking I should make an appointment.

**B**UT THEN AGAIN, MAYBE NOT. MAYBE IT'S time for different priorities. Magistrate Pat O'Shane is a handsome woman of 66 who has always been told she looks younger than her years. Speaking of her Aboriginal heritage, she says: "Indigenous culture reveres age and

"Indigenous culture reveres age and equates it with wisdom."

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equates it with wisdom. When a woman goes grey, we call her Auntie or Mum and she acquires a higher degree of respect and status. We see age as a plus."

O'Shane has never coloured her hair or been persuaded to spend money on a miracle face cream. "I prefer to put my faith in muscles. They are what make older women strong in body and mind and prevent you from disappearing."

Businesswoman Wendy McCarthy, also 66, and still colouring her hair, agrees: "Today, we can choose to age differently from our mothers. It's about having a presence, intellectually and physically. We can be fit, strong, active and groomed. I'm not ready to retire or to become invisible. Instead of making me feel older, becoming a grandmother has given me a new energy and bounce, but I don't look like the nanna in my grandkids' storybooks with ample bosoms, hair like steel wool and whose only function is to bake cookies. We have to recognise that the old stereotypes no longer apply and that we are no longer a one-size-fits-all society."

Despite those fighting words, when I look around an auditorium at the theatre where women of a certain age are in the majority, I see very few natural untinted heads. Australia is still sorely lacking in silver icons like Simone Weil, Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir or Doris Lessing. Janet Holmes à Court, the country's most high-profile corporate woman, is still blonde at 64. Come back, Mary Kostakidis! We need Ita to be glad to be grey, and Maggie Tabberer. Maybe Therese Rein could do it, as she approaches 50. To get used to the idea, next time you see a chic and jaunty schnauzer out for a walk, tell yourself, "I could look as good as that." **GW**