

STARS ARE AGELESS

OLDER WOMEN IN FILM NOIR

By Christa Faust

Last year, I had a hysterectomy for my fiftieth birthday. No fun at the time, obviously, but in the long term it was the best gift I've ever received. Like many women, I had been silently suffering from fibroids and severe adenomyosis for years, but figured it was something I had to endure. It was a revelation to discover that not only was I not alone in what I was going through, but it was possible to kick my obstreperous uterus to the curb. I'd never had nor wanted kids, so there was no reason to hang on to a useless thing that was causing so much pain and woe.

Once it was gone, it got me thinking a lot about aging-while-female, and what it means to live beyond what comedian Amy Schumer called the "last fuckable day." About the strange cloak of invisibility that descends around us when we are no longer being evaluated as potential mates on a daily basis. About the fact that the love interests of male movie stars in their fifties are invariably played by women in their twenties, while actresses in their fifties are pressured to torture themselves with painful plastic surgery and other endless cosmetic indignities—only to find themselves frequently relegated to minor character roles.

I also spent the past year working on the comic series *Bad Mother*, which features a middle-aged soccer mom who goes up against a criminal queenpin to save her kidnapped daughter. While I was trying to get into that character's head, I found myself wrestling with my own existential dread of aging and death. I couldn't stop thinking about the way that the voices of women disappear from the collective narrative during the toughest and most trying time of our lives. Coming of age stories are hot—especially if the waifish protagonist is also hot—but hot flashes and the grueling, unlovely hormonal slog of menopause? Not so much.

I guess my point is that getting old is noir as fuck. And because I'm a film noir obsessive, I tend to view everything through that lens.

Don't get me wrong. Like many of my fellow fans, I love a classic femme fatale. Those sexy, duplicitous vixens always come up first whenever you search for women in film noir. Fuckable, every single one of them. But what about the other women? The aging stars and quirky character actors? The bit players and best supporting women? Specifically, women over forty.

I don't believe in top ten lists, because that kind of thing is so subjective. You're bound to piss somebody off, by not including their favorites or by including someone they deem unworthy. And what does "top" even mean anyway? All I can tell you with any kind of authority is what I like.

So, with that in mind, here are ten of my own personal favorite noir ladies of a certain age. As usual, your mileage may vary.



10 Mary Boland (age 68) as Smitty in *GUILTY BYSTANDER* (1950)

“You don’t know what it’s like to be old, with nothing to look back on and nothing to look forward to except more of the same.”

Zachary Scott plays a washed-up alcoholic PI trying (and usually failing) to stay sober. Part of the reason why staying sober is so tough is his boss and steadfast drinking buddy Smitty, the blowsy hotel proprietor played by character actress Mary Boland. Boland was better known for her comedic roles, often playing flustered matrons and society ladies with more money than sense. In this cheapo gem, she’s hard as nails and up to no good. It’s a juicy role, and she chews the hell out of it.



9 Esther Howard (55) as Mrs. Kraft in *BORN TO KILL* (1947)

“I’m at the barren tail end of my life, and Laurie was all I had. Laurie and the bottle.”

Mrs. Kraft is a beer-swilling old floozy who owns a Reno boarding house where women kill time while waiting out their divorces. She genuinely loves Laurie, whose murder kicks off the story, and she knows that the police don’t give a damn about good-time girls, so she takes it upon herself to find the killer. To that end, she hires a sleazy private dick and, needless to say, things don’t work out like she’d planned.

Side note: I’m convinced she was getting more than beer from the card-playing bellboy.

It was a toss-up between choosing Howard’s character in *Born to Kill* or *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) for this list. She’s basically playing the same role in each film. In the end, I went with the former because Mrs. Kraft had more scenes and was much more involved, actively working to solve the crime as opposed to just trying to keep secrets. And—no spoilers—I also love that she puts up a damn good fight during Elisha Cook Jr.’s ill-fated attempt to rub her out.



8 Edith King (51) as Mrs. Smith in *CALCUTTA* (1947)

“I coulda gone for him if I’d been twenty years younger.”

The real star of this otherwise forgettable flick is a dynamite minor character who steals the show in her single short scene. A former circus performer turned shady jewelry dealer, Mrs. Smith smokes cigars, has a pet monkey that wears a turban, and could have eaten Alan Ladd for breakfast any day of the week. I love an older woman who is unabashedly sexual, proving that you don’t need to be considered fuckable to get some.



7 Eve Arden (40) as Chris in *WHIPLASH* (1948)

“I’m not exactly beautiful, but I’m available.”

Arden plays the wisecracking best friend in this flick and many others including *Mildred Pierce* (1945), though she was a little too

young in that one to make this list. She was the MVP of supporting actresses, always a bachelor girl and never a bride. Personally, I think she's way more beautiful than *Whiplash*'s star, Alexis Smith, and I want her to be *my* best friend. Preferably with benefits.

6 Hermione Baddeley (41) as Ida in BRIGHTON ROCK (1948)

"I've loved a boy or two in my time. It's natural, like breathing. Not one of them's worth it."

Traditional mystery has a long history of older women who solve crimes. Miss Marple. Jessica Fletcher. But in film noir, the main focus is on male detectives, private or otherwise. Which is why I love Ida so much. Not only because she takes on the amateur sleuth role, but also because she sees it all the way through to the end. She's a tough,



NEO-NOIR LADIES OF A CERTAIN AGE

Nowadays we're seeing more movies about older women than ever, and I'm here for it. In fact, there are enough to do a whole separate article and then some, but here are a few standouts in no particular order.

Kim Hye-soo (44) as Ma Woo-hee in COIN LOCKER GIRL (2015)

I can't say enough good things about this movie and wish more American noir fans would give it a chance. Seriously, it's superb, and ruthless mob boss and surrogate mother Ma Woo-hee is a mesmerizing and terrifying villain.

Nicole Kidman (50) as Erin in DESTROYER (2018)

Kidman has had so much work done to her face that I didn't think it would be physically possible for her to rough herself up around the edges enough to take on a role like this. I was thrilled to be proven wrong.



Margo Martindale (68) as Enid in BLOW THE MAN DOWN (2019)

This is another film full of steely and memorable older women, but my favorite is Enid, the onetime small-town hot chick turned hardboiled brothel owner.



Viola Davis (52) as Veronica in WIDOWS (2018)

This one starts with Davis in bed with Liam Neeson, which puts her squarely on my list of older women who get some. As well they should. (Are you sensing a theme here?) Not only that, but she's also a stone-cold boss. Which is reason enough to include her.

Finally, a couple of maybe-noir-adjacent-or-maybe-not modern favorites worth mentioning: Marisa Tomei as Cassidy in *The Wrestler* (2008) and Frances McDormand as Mildred in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017).

The biggest and most positive change I'm seeing in the modern flicks is the number of older female protagonists. No longer relegated to being the nosy landlady or the mom or the funny-but-unfuckable friend, women over forty are finally telling our own stories, taking center stage and taking up space in the cultural narrative. And it's about damn time.

brassy, bleached-blond pit bull who won't give up the chase until the killer is brought to justice. She even tries to speak to the dead through a newspaper Ouija routine in the local pub.

And like Mrs. Kraft in *Born to Kill*, she knows that the police are no real help and that people on the margins of society—like her—have to look out for each other. See also: Elsa Lanchester in *Mystery Street* (1950). This type of role, the nosy older broad, often a lush and never respectable, seems to be the most common option for women over forty in film noir.

Ida is my favorite iteration of this archetype. She's smart, relatable, and out there getting the most out of every night of her wild and unencumbered life. Unlike so many others in this category, you never get the feeling that she's just waiting around to die in some dusty parlor with only the radio and the bottle for company.

5 Barbara Stanwyck (49) as Kathy in CRIME OF PASSION (1957)

"Forget the man, run away with his wife."

A woman after my own heart! I love this proto-feminist B movie, warts and all, and I love Stan in it. She's always been my personal silver fox style icon, and this is one of a very few noir flicks that is totally centered around the female experience at any age.



(Unsurprisingly, one of the others is also on this list.)

Kathy is an ambitious career gal, a newspaper reporter with no interest in the traditional 1950s housewife trap. When she falls for a burly and taciturn homicide detective played by Sterling Hayden, she tries to resist, but ends up putting her career on hold to marry him. Because back then, it was the only respectable way for a woman to deal with her powerful and unseemly sexual desire.

The scenes of the new bride enduring the suburban horror of dinner parties with the other policemen's shallow, bitchy wives are particularly chilling for an independent-minded female writer like me. Of all the characters on this list, Kathy is the one I relate to the most. I just wish she'd taken her own advice at the beginning instead of getting mixed up in murder.



4 Mary Astor (43) as Pat in ACT OF VIOLENCE (1949)
“What is it, love trouble or money trouble? I’ve seen all the troubles in the world and they boil down to just those two. You’re broke or you’re lonely. Or both.”

I never liked Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). She seemed so uptight, dowdy, and sexless that it's hard to imagine why Sam Spade would bother with a gal like her. But she more than makes up for it in this movie, in which she plays a world-weary middle-aged prostitute on the prowl for “kicks.” When the tormented family man shows up like a lost dog in a skid-row bar just before closing time, she takes him under her threadbare wing. I love this flick and I love her in it.

3 Hope Emerson (53) as Evelyn in CAGED (1950)
“Every time he kisses me goodnight, I just want to keep on leaving him.”

This film often gets unfairly dismissed as camp because it's about women, but for my money it's one of the best prison films ever made. It's not glamorous, sexy, or exploitative at all. It's legit, gritty, and bleak, and it doesn't pull any punches.

Caged is jam-packed with older women who have great faces, any one of whom could have made this list, but Hope Emerson is absolutely astounding as Evelyn Harper. At six foot two and more than two hundred pounds, Emerson is one of the most physically imposing actresses of all time. She was also memorable as the brawny masseuse who manhandles Richard Conte in *Cry of the City*



(1948), which would have been on this list too if there were room for more than one role played by the same person. In *Caged*, she uses that legendary size and girth to casually intimidate her charges, and is frequently shot from a low angle to increase the sense of her towering over her victims, as well as the viewer. She's sly, manipulative, and cruel, and I particularly love the scene where she describes her hot date to the sex-starved inmates. Like I said, it's great to see unapologetically sexual older women on screen, especially when they seem totally comfortable in their mature and imperfect (by Hollywood standards) bodies.

I have to add a subsidiary shout-out to seventy-nine-year-old Gertrude Hoffman as Millie, the oldest con. She only has a bit part, but gets off this amazing and defiant line: “I'm in for life. One more like you is just so much velvet.”



2 Gloria Swanson (51) as Norma in SUNSET BOULEVARD (1950)
“I am big. It's the pictures that got small.”

Norma is probably everybody else's number one for a list like this. She's the undisputed empress of middle-aged femme fatales. The first one who comes to mind when you think of older women in film noir. And not for nothing; she's an extraordinary, unforgettable, and infinitely quotable character who is widely known even by people with no interest in the genre. In fact, the title of this article comes from a line of her dialogue. So why isn't she my number one?

Maybe it's because her character is so tragic and needy and doomed. Strictly an antagonist and always viewed from the outside, like a poisonous force of nature. The dark, twisted opposite of guileless ingenue Betty Schaefer, who smells like "freshly laundered linen handkerchiefs" rather than overbearing, indolic tuberose. You feel sorry for Norma, but you don't admire her or relate to her. That being said, I have tremendous respect for Gloria Swanson for agreeing to do this way-too-close-for-comfort role and not shying away from showing her age in those famous close-ups.



Noir ladies of a certain age who almost made the grade include Elsa Lanchester in *The Big Clock* and Marlene Dietrich's Tanya in *Touch of Evil*



1 Thelma Ritter (51) as Moe in PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET (1953)

"I'm tired. I'm through. Happens to everybody sometime. It'll happen to you too someday."

Everyone is aces in this flick but Thelma Ritter is my all-time favorite as Moe, a fast-talking black-market necktie merchant with plenty of moxie. She's a whip-smart lifelong street hustler who knows everyone in the criminal underworld and is always on the make, saving her pennies for a nice plot in an upscale suburban boneyard.

If you can watch Moe's final scene without feeling like you've got something in your eye, you ought to check your pulse to make sure you still have one. It's one of those scenes that makes me choke up every single time, and not just because of my wonky hormones. I'm a huge fan of Ritter and will watch her in anything, but this is her finest moment on screen and that's why she takes the number one spot on my list.

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Elsa Lanchester as quirky artist Louise in *The Big Clock* (1948), Marlene Dietrich as Tanya the fortune teller in *Touch of Evil* (1958), and Helene Thimig as the psycho

mom in that weird, wild fever dream *Strangers in the Night* (1944).

Now I know what some of you are asking: What about Joan Crawford? After all, she was a strong-willed and ferociously independent woman who pretty much reinvented herself from scratch in midlife during the noir era. She even won an Academy Award for *Mildred Pierce*, which is probably the second most well-known noir flick about an older woman after *Sunset Boulevard*. If the list were longer, I'd definitely include her for *Mildred Pierce*, *Possessed* (1947), or even *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950). But hey, this is not a list of objective bests, just my own personal favorites. And while I do love Joanie's bitch eyebrows, I don't particularly love her acting style. Don't like it? Make your own damn list.

Anyway, even if you don't agree with all my choices, I do hope this list has made you think. It meant a lot to me to be given the opportunity to write an article highlighting women over forty. Women like me. Because despite all the juicy roles and undisputable talent on this list, Hollywood has never been kind to aging actresses. We don't often talk about it, but everybody knows this uncomfortable truth. Even people who haven't seen *Sunset Boulevard*.

On the extremely unlikely chance that you're reading this article but somehow haven't seen that film yet, let me first say welcome to NOIR CITY! Now go watch it, along with all the other films on this list. What do you want me to do, count three like they do in the movies? ■