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# **“Thirty Billions of Things Started ... and Done” Grandmothering in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Magazine Fiction**

In 1957 the *Saturday Evening Post* published “Good-by, Grandma,” a short story by Ray Bradbury far different from the science fiction for which he was already famous. In this semi-autobiographical piece, Bradbury described in realistic detail some of the “thirty billions of things started, carried, finished and done” by a much-loved great-grandmother, who decided at 90 that she had done enough (Bradbury, 1957: 28). She consoled her assembled descendants by insisting that she would live on in each of them: “I’m not really dying today. No person ever died that had a family” (91). Then she told each of “those other parts of me,” her children and grandchildren, what domestic tasks they needed to do next week, since they would “have to take over” (91).

Bradbury’s story catalogued the myriad domestic tasks that defined mid-twentieth century middle-class North American mothering in terms that echoed Bette Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963), and continued it on through another generation: “She had washed ceilings, walls, invalids, and children. She had laid linoleum, repaired bicycles, wound clocks, stoked furnaces, swabbed iodine on ten thousand grievous wounds. Her hands had flown all around, gentling this, holding that, throwing baseballs, swinging bright croquet mallets, seeding black earth or fixing covers over dumplings, ragouts, and children wildly strewn by slumber” (Bradbury, 1957: 28). This definition of grandmothering in terms of domestic work resonated with the idealized conceptions held by magazine publishers: it was reprinted twice, in *Reader’s Digest* in 1983 and again in *Saturday Evening Post* in 1988.

Since popular periodicals generally functioned to reinforce as well as reflect the values of their predominantly white middle-class readership throughout the twentieth century, they are a good source of information about prevailing cultural ideals. (See, for example, Meyerowitz, 1993; Stearns, 1993; Ward,

1996.) Short fiction allows authors to create characters less complex and ambiguous than actual human beings, but closely tuned to the “values of the dominant culture” (Hume, 2000:11). Thus the genre of magazine fiction provides an especially rich source for idealized role expectations and how they evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hynes 1981; Martel, 1968).

For this article, I used *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to locate fiction about grandmothers published between 1900 and 1999. I found fifty short stories or plays listed under a grandparent heading or entitled with some variation of “grandma.” The earliest was dated 1900; the latest appeared in 1988, although the genre seems to have peaked in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>1</sup> After that, magazines turned far more often to memoir and other nonfiction modes when discussing lifestyle issues, including grandparenthood (McCracken, 1993:183). About 60 per cent of the stories were written by women, and the same percentage appeared in general-interest magazines, with another 20 per cent in women’s magazines.

Emerging from these pages was a definition of grandmothering as an active family role for older women, involving both an exchange of care-work and individualized affective connections to grandchildren. Of 46 grandmothers in these stories whose marital status was clearly identified, 42 were widows, nearly 60 per cent of whom lived with family members, permanently or temporarily. Their shared living quarters provided the setting for much of the action in most of the fifty stories.

Within the domestic sphere created in these stories, many grandmothers’ daily activities fulfilled traditional expectations, but some of them resisted. More grandmothers were seen knitting in these stories than were making cookies, but they also had many other things to do. These fictional grandmothers interacted with their grandchildren most often as storyteller, caregiver, confidante, tutor, or chaperone. However, Bradbury’s thoroughly family-focused grandma was not the only model of grandmotherhood that magazine fiction presented. Throughout the century, these stories featured women characters who self-consciously rebelled against the stereotypical role prescribed for them.

As life expectancy lengthened and cultural views about aging, and about women, changed, so did the portraits of fictional grandmothers. The earliest story, published in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1900, described a woman even strangers recognized as “a real grandmother”: “Her bared head was white as snow, her wrinkled cheeks were slightly flushed, her brass-bound ‘specks’ were perched high on her forehead. Her dress was a faded calico” (Blethen, 1900: 6). Psychologically, however, this particular grandmother was “too confused to know what was going on” (6). Though she was respected and valued by her family and community, she was far too feeble to take an active role in either.

In contrast, over the course of the century, ten grandmothers were shown as active career women, mostly self-employed in family businesses. In the most recent story I located, published in *Redbook* in 1988, a highly successful real

estate broker learned of her only child's first pregnancy the same day her own doctor informed her that her failing vision necessitated her surrendering her driver's license. Feeling suddenly old, and fearing loss of independence, she was at first "A Reluctant Grandmother," but in less than a day she decided that an active retirement, including both travel and caring for her grandchild, would be keep her engaged and happy. There would be no "blue-hair and-rocking-chair" for her (Clayton, 1988: 55). Stories appearing in the first decade of this century usually described grandmothers in older stereotypical terms, often delivered in patronizing language: "a very nice old lady indeed, as an old lady should be, with a pretty cap upon her erect little old head, and a pretty soft dress upon her little, trim old figure" (Hibbard, 1903: 310). Advanced age seemed synonymous with frailty: "the dim, frail face of age, with its silvered hair and slow, tired step" (Bussenius, 1910: 616).

However, this same story, published in 1910, clearly made the point that such appearances could be deceiving. Gran'ma's entire demeanor changed dramatically when her daughter-in-law left the house, and the old woman had a chance to work by herself: "Her pale, withered cheeks blossomed red again as she bent ecstatically over the steaming [laundry] tub; occasionally, from sheer jubilation, she burst into song, her cracked voice breaking with the tremolo of age over her cadence"(616). Some frailty was thus exposed as psychosomatic: the result of boredom and depression associated with the old-fashioned, dependent role many grandmothers had been assigned to fill against their will.

After the first decade of the century, only a few grandmothers, identified as either in their 90s or near death, were described in terms emphasizing feebleness—and even these had their vigorous moments, in the present or past, featured in the story, evident in Bradbury's list of Grandma's activities. Even in most of the stories in which grandmother's death was a prominent theme (20 per cent of the total), she seemed in control, either choosing a dramatic time to exit, faking her demise, or controlling her family's fate from beyond the grave. (See for example, Machar, 1921; Thomas, 1931; Frost, 1936; Perry, 1942.)

Rather than her frailty, Grandmother's strength of character dominated her fictional portrait in magazines throughout most of the 20th century. In nearly all of these stories the grandmother character was at the crux of the plot, central to the action.

Two different images of grandmother dominated her depiction in magazine fiction: the active and attractive matriarch (eleven stories), and the tough and canny crone (twenty stories). One quintessential matriarch, who presided over a mansion, was described as "inclined to be tall, round, almost plump.... Behind a gentle, even exquisite, appearance, Granny's brain, unrivalled in the family connection, is working busily" (Willison, 1934: 308). Similarly, "Grandmother of Pearl," a middle-class woman from Illinois, had "an austere calm, an unruffled dignity, ... undoubtedly the air of a duchess" (Goodloe, 1916: 102). Matriarchs were thus described in terms that emphasized their power within

their families; their class position, elegant demeanor, good looks, and obvious intelligence served to underline their domestic authority. As was said of one such character at her death, “Blessed Grandmamma—doing all things well” (Machar, 1921: 31).

The tough and canny crone, more prevalent in these stories, had a different body type, generally “small and wiry,” and often a lower class status than the matriarch, but she was similarly described in terms that emphasized keen faculties as well as physical vigor (Frost, 1936: 154). For example, Grandma Gingersnap’s “eyes were a sparkling black, as her hair was said to have once been, and they had the bright, interested look of a sage old bird” (Sampson, 1931: 210). Similarly, Grandma Sharpless, “a straight, solid uncompromising figure,” was noted for “a memory ... as reliable for retaining salient facts as her vision was for discerning them” (Adams, 1913: 220, 173). Crones possessed an essential unity of inner and outer character: “if one is still tough and strong,—as grandmother undoubtedly was—one looked like a gnarled tree that has weathered years of tempest” (Wylie, 1926: 8). “Feisty” is the condescending term often used to describe these women, but that word seems to emphasize their vigor but minimize their power.

In 20 per cent of the stories I found, grandmothers were powerful, effective leaders, exercising authority outside the home with an impressive list of accomplishments: chasing a patent medicine salesman out of town (Adams, 1913); finding the culprit in a robbery (Kelland, 1921); killing a pouncing puma with a single shot (Hess, 1932); rousing the troops on the way to World War II (Hager, 1943); and wrestling a buck deer who had invaded her toolshed (Vance, 1969).

In 1950, *Saturday Evening Post* featured two stories about Granny Hite, an elderly Appalachian woman who seemed to have been given her honorific title by her community, with no biological grandchildren mentioned in the story. Her neighbors had good reasons to honor her as fictive ancestor. In one story, she rescued her village from “progress” by blocking construction of a highway, and in the other, she rescued it from narrow-minded traditionalism by turning back a mob of her neighbors threatening to uproot a family of Jewish refugees who somehow found their way to that remote place (Wilson 1950b; Wilson 1950a). “Granny” had clearly earned the respect of her community for her leadership both as protector and critic of traditional values.

In all of these stories grandmothers were both intuitive and active, extending their maternal authority to chastise adults or wild animals as they would naughty children. Problems were resolved in a few pages with a healthy dose of Grandma’s folk medicine. The implausibility of some of these stories exaggerated grandma’s power in ways that undercut her validity as a person of authority. Interestingly, all of these stories were written by male authors, more comfortable perhaps with action plots rather than family dramas, who might have had a subconscious patriarchal stake in keeping “feisty” grandmas in their place, even while they were stepping out of it.

This ambiguity led to some interesting plot twists and combinations of themes. For example, in "Grandma Was A Lulu," a seventy-year-old, who "had her own money, which was plenty; her own inclinations, which were positive; and her health, which was perfect," thwarted a kidnapping while touring in the Amazon, meanwhile helping her grandson win the heart of the erstwhile victim (Garth, 1935: 47).

In this story, the adventure theme intersected with a theme even more popular, particularly with female authors: romance. Three-quarters of the sixteen stories with romance themes were written by women. In many of these stories grandma was a matchmaker or confidante of younger lovers, particularly a favorite grandchild. When the mother of one of these lucky young adults failed to mention him in two letters, his grandmother drove 200 miles at 25mph to find him unemployed and dispirited. Understanding that he needed love to give him something to work for, she lent him her car, and within a few paragraphs he had acquired both a job and a girlfriend (Weston, 1934). Other grandmothers applied their talents in the romantic realm outside their own families, helping young couples elope or arranging reunions of oldsters who once were youthful sweethearts (Bussenius, 1910; Thomas 1938).

Sometimes Grandma's matchmaking was prompted by memories of her own past romances, but in a few stories, Grandma herself was the love interest. In "Grandmamma's Gigolo," an intellectual grandmother's friendship with a handsome young scholar aroused the worried (but mistaken) suspicions of her granddaughter, whose patronizing assumption that old age meant obsolescence was shattered (Miller, 1931).

In another story, the flow of advice reversed its usual direction, as two granddaughters arranged "Grandmother's Debut," beginning with that women's magazine staple, a makeover. After they had modernized their formerly frumpy feminist grandmother's image—"It's very inconsistent for a woman who thinks ten years ahead of her time to wear clothes twenty years behind"—the transformed, "altogether elegant-looking creature" rekindled the spark of an old flame at a suffrage ball (Hall, 1919: 14, 74).

Most of the four stories in which granddaughters taught grandmothers were published in the era of World War I, when consciousness of rapid modernization and social change was especially prevalent, and thus assumptions that grandmothers would be old-fashioned were made most explicit (Hynes, 1981).

Awareness of changing times and competing values prompted some authors to create characters who pointedly resisted the old fashioned grandmother role. Two stories that appeared in the first two decades of the century both featured younger, widowed grandmothers who had raised their children alone, a particularly challenging experience of mothering. "That Grandmother of Ours" promised to be generous to her newborn first grandchild, but refused to love it: "it hurt to love little babies," so selflessly and completely, only to have them grow up (Collins, 1905: 12). She couched her resistance in terms of fear

of commitment to the child, with overtones of lack of confidence in her now-outdated nurturing techniques. However, she was soon won over by the experience of feeling needed and appreciated by her son and daughter-in-law.

A decade later, another middle-aged widow was declared “rebellious” for refusing to become “a grandmother-creature in black silk and mitts,” and ruin her chances for remarriage (Bailey, 1914: 589). She cared for her grandchild through a crisis, but refused to let the role swallow her completely. Relentlessly modern in dress, she remained fully confident in her old-fashioned maternal skills: “From noon until midnight she was of to-day—smartly gowned, girlish; from midnight until dawn she was of yesterday—waking from her fitful slumbers at the first wailing note, presiding in gray gown and slippers over strange brews of catnip and of elderflower,” home remedies that proved effective (591). Not surprisingly, this story had a conventional happy ending. When her suitor discovered the familial status the widow had tried to keep secret, he insisted that he preferred a “Madonna-creature” to a sophisticate (592).

Other fictional role resisters focused on the dependence and inactivity associated with old age, as well as resentment of the younger generation’s assumption of authority, in their efforts to rebel against their family’s expectations for them as grandmothers. The title of an early story with this theme proclaimed how the conflict was resolved in 1906: “Grandma’s Surrender” (Houk, 1906; see also Bussenius, 1910).

This theme resurfaced, not coincidentally, in the 1940s, when wartime housing shortages made 3-generation households more common. Only magic seemed to solve intergenerational problems in a 1948 story. Grandma’s helpful neighbor, a witch, taught her to transform herself into a bird to escape the constraints her son and daughter-in-law enforced upon her. Her son took her to a psychiatrist, who at first dismissed her, “Nobody can reason with any female ... especially an old one ... What’s remarkable about an old dame who thinks she’s a bird?” (Fessier, 1948: 82). When she finally was able to convince her family to take her needs seriously, Grandma agreed to stay human, provided she retain her freedom to attend sporting events, and “buy a yellow convertible roadster with white-wall tires” (83). Again, the grandmother capitulated, but not before winning some concessions from her family as she accepted her dependence upon them.

Only two authors drew grandmother characters intended to elicit readers’ unambiguous contempt; they both appeared during the early 1940s, and were the only role resisters who refused to compromise. George Sessions Perry published two stories about Granny Tucker, who lived with her dirt-poor grandson Sam and his family on his tenant farm in Texas, and fiercely resented her dependence (Perry, 1941; Perry, 1942). Although Granny was “the scourge of his household, the terror of his existence,” her grandson “loved and understood her, understood her selfishness and heartlessness, her violent hunger to dominate, the blind compulsion that drove her to contrive the

devastating little schemes to which she resorted as a defense against boredom" (Perry, 1941: 44, 42). In spite of this explanation and Sam's sainted compassion, Granny appeared as unrelievedly selfish, manipulative, and mean.

These qualities also dominated the personality of the other negative grandmother, who appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1943. The title of "Grandma What Big Eyes" hinted at the wolfish character of the woman disguised as a Red Cross volunteer, proud to look too young to be a grandmother, but too absorbed in her own image to help her daughter-in-law care for her grandchild while her son was at the front (Finletter, 1943).

Selfishness was clearly the antithesis of what grandmothers were supposed to be, particularly when their contributed services were needed by families disrupted "for the duration." These characters may have won their struggles against for independence, but they lost the warmth and respect more traditional grandmothers elicited. They contradicted a consistent theme emphasized in nearly all the stories: grandmothers were most often seen giving: gifts, money, time, help, or advice. Those who refused to conform to "selfless old age" were scorned, not pitied (Machar, 1921: 531).

Not all of the stories conformed to conventional plots with one-dimensional characters. Particularly in the last decades of the century, magazines anticipated the change of genre preference from fiction to memoir. Several character studies appeared in which grandchildren wrote in first person, but sought to understand grandmother's perspective in a way not seen earlier; these stories did not have happy endings. In the most moving story I read, Janice Davis Warnke explored the relationship of a young adult granddaughter to her dying Gram, as they transcended the sometimes painful memories linking them and reached a new level of mutual compassion that "survived even the rubbings of daily, fettered life" that ensued when, unlike Bradbury's character, this Gram failed to die on cue (Warnke, 1954: 225). When the narrator of a 1964 story arrived for "Grandma's Funeral," he realized that "for the first time I saw Grandma's first name, framed in a black border. I had never known it" (Telpaz, 1964: 35). This recognition of the person's confinement within the role seemed to make most explicit a theme addressed, but resolved too neatly, by earlier authors in this genre.

Although grandmothers in magazine fiction throughout the twentieth century were thus granted a degree of individuality and strength, none of them was allowed by her creator to address readers directly and define her life in her own terms. It seems significant that more than three-quarters of these stories were third-person narratives. When first person was used, the grandchild's view generally prevailed, with an occasional voice from the intervening parental generation. The grandchild's vantage point would seem most likely to emphasize grandmothering in terms of service to the family, especially to the juvenile narrator; parental generation narrators focused more often on intergenerational tensions.

Rules about happy endings and rose-colored lenses of sentimentality

affected the portrait of grandmothers that emerged in these pages. When grandmother characters deviated too far from role expectations—particularly if they committed the cardinal sin of selfishness—the respect their strength had previously warranted was abruptly withdrawn. If she pressed too strongly her claim for independence, a grandmother challenged too blatantly the contingent, family-oriented nature of magazine grandmothering. Extending her activism on behalf of her community was permissible if it were couched as an extension of domestic authority, scolding naughty adult children or protecting them. If a grandmother acted out her own desires without considering others' needs, she was negatively depicted, unless or until redeemed by adjusting her attitude and behavior to standardized expectations. Only rarely, and in the latter part of the century, were the more subtle complexities of defining grandmothers entirely in contingent terms addressed—as magazines moved away from fiction.

Thus the dominant discourse in twentieth century magazine fiction defined grandmothering more strictly in attitudinal terms than in terms of unwavering fulfillment to domestic ideals. The range of personalities, activities, and plot lines involved these fictional grandmas in “thirty millions of things” (Bradbury, 1957:28), but they all added up to one essential characteristic required of grandmothers: unselfish concern for others.

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<sup>1</sup>The distribution of stories by decade showed a rapid decline after World War II. I included the Bradbury story only once in my overall story count.

1900s: 5

1910s: 7

1920s: 7

1930s: 10

1940s: 10

1950s: 5

1960s: 4

1970s: 1

1980s: 1 NEW story + 2 Bradbury reprints

1990s: 0

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