

The Stranger in the Mirror – A Memoir of Middle Age by Jane Shilling.  
Chatto and Windus 2011.

Many clues to the content of the book are given by the cover photos, taken of a naked author standing before a mirror on the front, and seated on a small sofa holding a small mirror up to her face, of which half her mouth, part of her nose and one eye are visible. The front cover shows a woman with a fine looking body, posed quite coquettishly for the camera, her hair piled high above her head by her raised hands, the back photo shows less flesh and a cascade of hair, but it is the face that, partially hidden, dominates the image for it looks sad, slightly drawn, and the eye is drawn downward to the body with an expression that suggests it doesn't like what it sees.

Across the 12 chapters that make up the book, Jane Shilling traces her life through its key events, its professional highs and lows (more of the latter than the former) and the personal relationships that she has had, most importantly with her son Alexander, whom she clearly adores. But this is also a reflection on the ways in which both mind and body change with age and here, with the writer at her most personal, it is an account suffused with sadness, and a mixture of frustration and regret.

Shilling finds time also to reflect on the malevolent role that the fashion world plays in women's lives and of the pressures that society places on the ageing to stay 'young'.

Jane Shilling is an excellent writer and this is an admirable and brave book, but at the end I was left with a sense of profound sadness for her, and a feeling that, though invited in, I had stumbled upon some deep personal grief which ought to have been kept private rather than shared with the world.

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