



# You, the Older Woman?

Confident and financially secure, more women over 35 are making romantic choices based on desire over convention. Finally.

by Kim Izzo

**I**t will never work." Such a frank statement coming from one of the country's top cosmetic surgeons stunned me. You may be wondering if he was commenting on some wacky procedure I had requested—say, having my fingertips liposuctioned—but no. He was referring to my *relationship*. I had confessed that my boyfriend is nine years younger than me. And that, according to the good doctor,

is a recipe for disaster. "You'll start to feel insecure once you hit your mid-40s and realize you're not aging as well as he is." I look good for my age, I fought back. "You have good skin," he conceded. "But next to him, you look average." Note: not *will* look average, but *do* look average. Given that he'd never seen my boyfriend and me together, I should have taken one of the silicone implants on hand and ▶



Lady Amanda Harlech, involved with a man 10 years her junior

“A marriage of true minds,” says Lady Harlech, “is not a narcissistic pas de deux for the benefit of other people’s perceptions of you.”

smothered him with a DD. Instead, I left and had three martinis. Why was I there in the first place? Because I was interested in microdermabrasion and glycolic peels, both age-defying procedures. And while the doctor was undoubtedly offensive, was he entirely wrong?

When I met my boyfriend, we were at a swanky arts benefit. He spied me across the room and asked a mutual friend to make introductions. By night’s end, he had asked me to dinner. Simple enough. Still, at a party overflowing with numerous shared acquaintances, gossip was quick to spread. One such creature sought me out to kindly offer this vodka-soaked warning: “I think you should know he’s only 28.” Ouch. The girl stumbled off before I could ask her, “Exactly how old do you think I am?” For the record, dear reader, I was 37.

I know what you’re thinking: Nine years isn’t much. His mother is old enough to be my mother. And in this era, what’s the big deal about dating a younger man?

Truth is, while I consider myself a successful, independent, empowered female, I’ve never dated anyone younger than me, and that woman’s caveat did leave

me unnerved. If she found the age difference worth commenting on before our first date, what would the rest of my social circle have to say if we wound up in a serious relationship?

As it happened, we did fall in love. But the age issue haunted me. People often express shock when I reveal my age; I can appear closer to 30 than pushing 40. My boyfriend easily passes for 32. Yet I couldn’t let it go. Neither could many of my friends. “How’s your boy toy?” “I didn’t know you were a cougar!” “Are you inviting your baby boyfriend?” “It’s a summer fling.” These repetitive comments, meant to be funny, were insulting and dismissive. I was disappointed in my friends’ apparent shallowness, and yet they struck a nerve. I was having anxiety about our age difference. And their comments did nothing to stave off my insecurity about being the older woman—or, more accurately, my uneasiness with *looking* like the older woman.

But I’m hardly alone in Mrs. Robinson territory, circa 2005. When my friend Debbie, 35, a journalist, found herself in a relationship with a man seven years her junior, others also duly noted ▶

Ex-Boss  
Extremely  
Shagzable





a double standard—one we frequently impose on ourselves!" note the authors.

"What a woman has to say to herself is: He *can* have a younger woman if he wants, but he wants you—you're hot!" says Brings on the phone from New York. "Your eyes are lying to you; you're not seeing who you really are."

"The main attraction wasn't his age," says Ella, 40, a public relations executive expecting her first child this spring with her 30-year-old partner. "When you're successful and independent, it opens up the market. I was in a position where I could be with someone I really loved—not worry about being taken care of."

the age difference. "People said, 'Oh, 28, fun for a little fling.' I'm not in this because it's cool and hilarious to be dating a younger man. I get offended. I've dated frivolous 37-year-olds."

Anne Kingston, journalist and author of the critically lauded *The Meaning of Wife*, agrees. "Women over 35 often have the confidence and financial stability that permit them to make deci-

"It's an American hang-up. In Paris, I was struck by the number of women with *much* younger men."

"People were shocked, in-laws were shocked. I was shocked, too," admits Maxine, 45, a therapist married to a 34-year-old. "It wasn't as straightforward as some typical relationships. My father said, 'Nice guy. Too bad about the age difference.' He thought he might leave me in a few years."

And his leaving—invariably, and for a younger woman—is the prevailing myth of these relationships, according to Felicia Brings, co-author with Susan Winter of *Older Women, Younger Men: New Options for Love and Romance*. "Whereas an older man might look with adoration at his young wife or girlfriend and consider himself fortunate, a woman will typically experience a drop in self-esteem compounded by self-doubt and recrimination. It's quite

sions about the men they choose based on desire rather than conventional expectations. That's attractive to a lot of younger men who are not hung up on a woman having more social or financial clout."

Perhaps this explains why we are seeing more and more of these matches. Tabloids can't print enough pages to keep up with today's older woman/younger man love affairs. Included in the current crop are Demi and Ashton, Cameron and Justin, Madonna and Guy, Courteney and David, Susan and Tim, and Julianne and Bart, among others. So are we 30-somethings followers of the latest trend or our own hearts?

"I'm not sure I see it as a trend, which makes it sound like Ugg boots or pashminas," says Kingston. "Rather, I ▶

Perfect  
Bottom  
Perfect  
Boyfriend

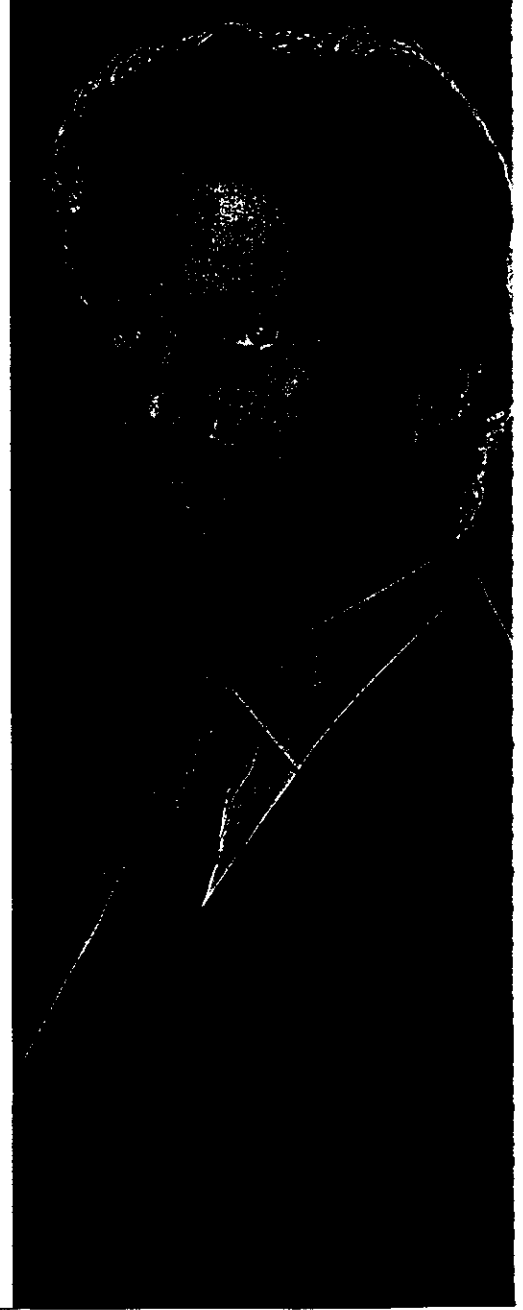


Illustration by Marcos Chin

## culture relationships

think the old pattern of the older, richer, taller man is being detonated—though it still exists.”

But the celeb factor is a standard milestone in women’s empowerment. “When powerful women like Madonna or Demi say, ‘I can have what I want,’” points out Brings, “they’re lighting the way for everyone else.”

Who better to suss out trends with than Lady Amanda Harlech, an international style icon who also happens to be involved in a long-term relationship with a man 10 years younger. “If they have these worries, they’re just going to make themselves and every-

“I secretly revel in the odd grey hair on his head,” says Ella. But according to Nancy, 38, a filmmaker whose husband is 10 years younger, these worries come and go. “It depends on how much sleep I’ve had. When it comes up, I tell that inner voice to stop creating stress for nothing—I’m older, so I’ll look older. Why freak out?”

While we may prefer for now to keep Miss Clairol in the black rather than skip to the cosmetic surgeon, the notion of equating beauty with value hasn’t left us. Brings and Winter calm our inner terror of the 22-year-old rival in a dental floss bikini by reminding us,

### Though it still exists, the pattern of women being attracted to “older, richer, taller” is being detonated.

one around them miserable,” advises Harlech, fashion muse to Karl Lagerfeld. “Be yourself! That’s who he fell in love with.”

Does she feel any outside pressure due to the age difference? “No. A marriage of true minds is not a narcissistic pas de deux for the benefit of other people’s perceptions of you.” Then she added, “If anything, he is more conservative than I am.”

Still, it may take time to adjust to our own perceptions. Cindy, 39, a former musician whose journalist husband, 29, met her while shooting a piece about her band, describes their meeting as “classic love at first sight.” Yet she was not initially won over; it took a year. “I was a little obsessed with [our ages],” she admits. “I thought, What does it say about me? Why am I dating someone [so young]? Am I immature? I have a child; he’s like a kid. You do some soul searching and come to, Who do you fall in love with?”

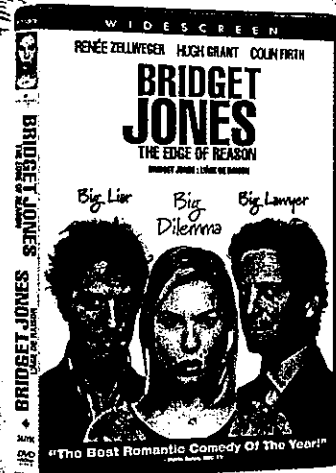
And what both parties should look like. “Grey hair makes me feel prematurely old,” admits Debbie. “I look in the mirror. I ask myself, How old do I look? I get my hair coloured more often.” In fact, most women I interviewed confessed to at least some degree of age-related anxiety—as well as relishing their young men’s maturing process.

“To women everywhere who think that finding and keeping a ‘good catch’ has anything at all to do with youth and beauty, we want to say three little words: Camilla Parker Bowles.”

They point out that even though Prince Charles is merely a year younger, he divorced the young and beautiful Diana and is marrying his older lover. Is Camilla the one exception? Or is she so damn confident because of geography? “This is an American hang-up,” states Kingston. “When I was in Paris this fall, I was struck by the number of women with much, much younger men. Of course, the French have a more enlightened attitude toward female sexual maturity. I really liked seeing these couples out and about and nobody paying attention—except me.”

A few months have passed since my appointment with Dr. Evil. I have managed to get over myself, and no longer actively worry about one day looking like my boyfriend’s sexy aunt. Even the derisive comments of others have dropped off. But when those moments of lingering doubt rear up, I remember that he isn’t measuring my worth according to fine lines, strands of grey or extra pounds, and I summon my inner Lady Harlech and accept that he loves me just for me. ■

# What could possibly go wrong?



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