

MIDLIFE

Humanity's Secret Weapon

'Since qualifying as a psychotherapist, most of my clients are between the age of thirty-five and fifty-five and arrive in a state of anxiety, overwhelmed by some intractable problem. We have come to call this the midlife crisis.'

Andrew Jamieson



Benjamin Hulett //

Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory and his own experience as a psychotherapist, Andrew Jamieson's slim *Midlife: Humanity's Secret Weapon* (2022) testifies to the positive personal transformations that midlife crises can occasion. However, Jamieson's edifying claims falter when the book precipitately casts the West as the ethical vanguard of humanity's history and evolution.

Jamieson illustrates a number of common features of midlife crises through several psychobiographical narratives. Jamieson filters these narratives through key concepts derived from the works of Jung, Freud, Klein, and Winnicott, and supplements his analyses with some recent studies in psychotherapy. While Jamieson's therapeutic methods seem effective, his book vastly raises the stakes of his argument by extrapolating historical and biological universals from a local therapeutic context. As a result, the book equivocates its arguments concerning the supposed centrality of midlife crises in humanity's historical and biological development.

The book's main organizing claim is that a midlife crisis is really a process of what Jung calls "individuation," or the emergence of an authentic self that ruptures one's lifelong defenses against early childhood trauma. According to Jamieson, midlife crises proceed in a few regular stages: first, ego destruction, second, "withdrawal of projections," and finally a "period of liminality." These stages describe the suspension of one's persona, which otherwise seeks a compromise between individual and collective needs. This suspension of the persona in turn exposes the individual to the persona's opposing unconscious "shadow," or the "dark corner of the unconscious" that harbors "all those aspects of our nature that we have been taught to regard as shameful and unacceptable" (56-66). The "crisis" is the encounter with this shadow, and individuation is achieved by confronting and transcending it. In Jamieson's view, the individual forges "a way out" of the "endless wheel of [Freudian] repetition" by returning to what Winnicott calls "primitive agonies," or the infant's fear of abandonment that accompanies the withdrawal of maternal attention (49). Jamieson substantiates these early psychoanalytic theories by likening them to the regulatory balance between the calming "optimism of the hippocampus" and the overactive "pessimism of the amygdala" (48). Reckoning with these repressed early traumas — including the trauma of birth itself — in midlife can allow the transformed, individuated self to enjoy a psychically balanced "new realm of experience" (30).

Jamieson maintains considerable flexibility with the duration of "midlife" as it is an "experience of profound transformation can happen at almost any time in adult life" defined by the "sheer power of its transformatory impact" rather than by age. For his own clinical practice, Jamieson draws upon Stanislav Grof's methodology to help clients imagine and reconstruct their earliest yet not consciously registered childhood memories, thereby allowing them to revisit their primitive agonies in a controlled setting. Jamieson claims that more recent "hard evidence confirms" the classical psychoanalytic theory upon which he bases many of his clinical practices. However, Jamieson only cites a few contemporary works of psychotherapy adjacent to his thesis and the book contains no bibliography or endnotes for readers to reference.

The primary way Jamieson illustrates his theory of individuation is through psychobiographic narratives. In addition to brief vignettes from his and his clients' midlife crises, Jamieson's analyses center on the personal lives of Carl Jung, Abraham Lincoln, FDR, Marie Curie, Leo Tolstoy, and Michelangelo. Jamieson briefly nods to figures like Gandhi and Nelson Mandela as well, but does not discuss them in terms of their personal psychological individuation. Generally speaking, the psychobiographies are compelling, though somewhat digressive. The account Jamieson gives of Jung's own life in tandem with the development of Jung's theories makes for an informative

illustration of key psychoanalytic concepts. Jamieson's psychobiographies of historical figures, however, often veer into secular hagiographies. For instance, when praising Lincoln's wisdom in crisis, Jamieson writes "although we know we cannot emulate such a man, his example can help us through such moments" (103). Each of these narratives serve Jamieson's thesis that midlife crises shaped the "unusually developed individuals" who are supposedly responsible for humanity's progress (11).

The book's Eurocentrism is not only evident in the sampling of historical characters Jamieson analyzes (all Western, all modern), but more dangerously in the slippage between scientifically sound evolutionary neurobiology and metaphorical uses of natural selection as explanations of modern history. Jamieson professes to demonstrate that the midlife crisis plays "a significant part of our evolution as a species." Yet he does not extensively engage the literature of evolutionary biology in the text itself, as Jamieson frequently rests his argument on analogies instead. For example, when discussing the key Jungian concept of individuation, Jamieson writes, "Jung presents it *almost like* some Darwinian process of natural selection" (12, my emphasis). In a similar vein, the book's second chapter draws upon Jung's primitivism to use the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example of "how the wisdom of elders can constrain the belligerence of tribal warriors" (6). In this case, the "elder's wisdom" of UN ambassador Aldai Stevenson II dissuaded US General Curtis LeMay from a preemptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. Jamieson extrapolates from this event that "a kind of natural selection was at work" when Stevenson's wisdom saved humanity from our closest brush with "species extinction" (8). What does it mean for individuation to be "almost like" or "a kind of" natural selection? How are we to understand this metaphorical natural selection alongside Jamieson's discussions of neuroscience and modern Western history?

Bracketing these limitations, Jamieson's accounts of the psychic rupture of individuation are often compelling and above all lucidly explained. He has enough of an aptitude for storytelling that the book could stand alone on its psychobiographies. The book falls short when Jamieson strays from his area of expertise to posit incautious conclusions about the "evolution" of human history. Jamieson does not engage with a host of other existing research that suggests that, far from ubiquitous phenomena, midlife crises manifest under specific social, economic, and historical conditions. How might Jamieson address midlife crises differently if he qualified their occurrence and attended to the social as well as the personal conditions of their manifestation? Jamieson's psychoanalytic account of midlife crises will be useful for some readers, yet paradoxically too narrow in its expansive ambitions for others.