

OUR STREETS NOW PRESENTS

OUR

WORDS



LITERARY MAGAZINE
ISSUE 18



Our Streets Now

Our Streets Now is a campaign demanding the right of women, girls and marginalised genders to be safe in public spaces. How it has started? Two sisters, 15 and 21, spoke about how they experience the world as young women. About feeling afraid walking home at night. About being harassed in their school uniform. About how their lives were restricted by the fear of harassment. Channelling this anger into change, they decided to start a petition. Hundreds of women, girls and marginalised genders went online to share their stories of being insulted, followed and assaulted on the streets of Britain. Soon enough, thousands of voices were joining the Our Streets Now movement, tired of harassment being a 'normal' part of growing up a girl. Our Streets Now became a community determined to challenge the myths and taboos stopping this topic from being discussed and challenged, out in the open.

**#CRIMENOT
COMPLIMENT**

*Join the
movement
now!*



HELLO FROM THE EDITOR

Dear reader,

Happy new year! We hope that 2023 comes with many realisations, happiness, health, and tranquillity for you and your loved ones.

In this issue, we discuss the themes of **motherhood**, **women not wanting to have children and ageing**.

In our first piece, our writer analyses the vilification and dehumanisation of mothers in literature, looking at representations in Greek mythology and fairytales. Our second piece is a poem in which our writer explores the social and family pressures put on women to have children and the disappointment of family members when these women choose not to. In our third piece, our writer reviews the book *Women Rowing North*, focusing on ageing as a woman in a Western society.

Enjoy your reading!

Renata Guimarães Naso
Lead Editor



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trigger warnings

This issue covers some sensitive topics and may be triggering for some readers.

Each article will be marked with a specific TW and we advise readers to seek support if needed. Go to:

<https://www.ourstreetsnow.org/support>

MOTHERS AND MONSTERS: WOMEN IN LITERATURE, FOLKLORE, AND MYTH

Often, women are vilified or dehumanised through their relationship with children. Some of the most well-known female monsters in fiction are judged first and foremost by their maternal instincts.

Written by JESSICA BARNES

Illustration by LEXA TOLEDO VILLANUEVA
(@lexalunastudio)

TW misogyny, murder.

Women have a complex relationship with their fictional counterparts, even though their portrayals in literature, folklore, and mythology are frequently anything but complex. For centuries, men dominated the western fictional sphere as writers, creators, and subjects. Inevitably, this led to women and other minoritised genders taking up space on the sidelines or not being featured at all. >>



>> When women appeared in tales or texts, they were often presented as two-dimensional figures that were subjected to a binary morality as either virginal, subservient angels or sexualised manipulative vixens. Some female characters and figures existed in the grey areas between these two extremes, like Madame Bovary or Mami Wata, but they were usually the exception and not the rule.

The mother is “represented as an (unquestioned) patriarchally constructed social function,” and anyone that wants to challenge, undermine, or seek an identity outside that parameter is maligned and dehumanised.(1) Fictional representations of women who are inadequate or unwilling mothers are often wielded like weapons against people with wombs to cover them into submission and advocate for obedience and childbearing. Women who reject children, don’t procreate or do any kind of harm to a child are presented as the worst of the worst and as abnormalities and monsters to be avoided at all costs.

This theory of polarised femininity is embodied in Sigmund Freud’s identification of the so-called Madonna-mistress complex, which describes men who can only view women as one of these two opposites.(2) While the ‘Madonna’ is worthy of respect and love, she is not sexually desirable, and for the ‘mistress’, the opposite is true. This reductionist viewpoint is entangled with women’s roles in literature, folklore, and myth. For millennia, they were assigned narrative purposes like the helpful but often bland wives (the ‘Madonna’ archetype) or the beguiling and usually dangerous temptress (similar to the ‘mistress’).

The way women’s depictions were intrinsically linked to their sexuality or sexual value was also complicated by ideas of motherhood, particularly in Western culture over the last few hundred years. One of the quickest shorthands to identify female characters that the reader was supposed to sympathise with was to show their relationship with children. If a woman had proven her sexual worth by having a child and was a competent caregiver, this was usually an absolute indication of her ‘goodness.’ If, on the other hand, a woman was a careless or neglectful parental figure, she was seen as instantly villainous. You don’t need to look any further than the pervasive trope of the ‘Evil Stepmother’ in fairy tales and their antagonistic roles in narratives like the classic *Ashenputtel*, otherwise known as *Cinderella*.(3) This Stepmother character committed the cardinal sin of not even birthing the child herself, and her villainy is almost always exclusively centred around her treatment of a child or a young person in her care.(4)

So often in these tales, the Stepmother replaces a sweet, beautiful birth mother who has probably died before the story begins. The birth mother’s only identifying feature is her role as a parent, with almost no other personality beyond that. In E. Ann Kaplan’s book *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, the tension between the peripheral, silent maternal figure and the criticism of the present one is explored, with Kaplan stating that “the Mother was in a sense everywhere [...] but always in the margins”.(5) The mother’s figure is “generally spoken, not speaking,” emphasising her lack of voice even when she does feature.(6) “She was a figure in the design, out-of-focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint.”(7) Fairy tale mothers perfectly encapsulate Kaplan’s argument, as they are at once either mute fringe characters or subjects of critique and censure like the Stepmother.>>

>> Fairy tales are cultural touchstones that transcend generations. They contain universal archetypes foundational for how we understand ourselves and our societies, and “different cultures throughout the world [employ] many of the same sequences of events or patterns in the communication of stories,” which includes the same character types.(8) Greek myths hold a similar space in many cultures and, like fairy tales, are important building blocks used repeatedly. They’re recounted through films and other media or retold and reimagined, like in Margaret Atwood’s retelling of the legendary Greek Odysseus’ adventures through Queen Penelope’s perspective in *The Penelopiad* to highlight the forgotten female perspectives.(9) However they appear, they also contain some interesting explorations of motherhood and the vilification of women through its lens, which in many instances has had a detrimental impact on modern perceptions of motherhood.

One of the most infamous examples of motherhood in Greek myth is Medea. Despite her many feats, Medea is defined by her acts of filicide – the killing of one’s child – and all other aspects of her identity are stripped down to this one deed. Even with the context of the wrongs she has suffered, her actions are atrocious, but so often, she is remembered without the accompanying details, like her victimisation and desperation. Harming a child, particularly her own, is seen as the most unnatural thing a woman can do. Medea’s villainy is assured by this simple detail alone, even though the truth is much more complicated.

In Apollonius’ epic poem, the *Argonautica*, Medea defeats the giant Talos while Medea’s future husband Jason and his Argonauts are too scared to face him.(10)

“So often in Apollonius, Medea is the reason that Jason survives,” and yet because of the inherent sexism at the heart of storytelling, her importance diminished over time as she turned from powerful witch to damsel in distress.(11) Euripides’ play *Medea* presents a more nuanced version of this ancient character. Medea’s husband, Jason, has “betrayed her and their children by starting a new relationship with the daughter of Creon.”(12) Not only did Medea help Jason with his quest, but she also betrayed her own father to do so because of her love for the hero. At the start of the play, at least, “our sympathy for Medea could not be greater.”(13)

As the play progresses, the audience learns that Creon intends to banish Medea and her sons. This further injustice is compounded by Jason’s apparent indifference to this fate; he’s happy to leave his wife, but he is also content never to see his children again. Medea is eloquent when she describes her torment, stating that “of all living creatures [...] we women are the most wretched.”(14) She doesn’t have any family to help her, she’s a stranger in a foreign land, and as a woman, she doesn’t have any rights or ways to advocate for herself. >>

"Jason may not wield the blade that slays his sons, but he's hardly a good father either, and yet history remembers him more for his heroic deeds than his poor parenting skills. Medea is the opposite, with her own heroic exploits or impactful actions wiped out by her grief-fuelled killings."

>> Medea kills her two children to punish her wayward husband, seeing it as her only possible way to get revenge and assert a modicum of power over him. Jason may not wield the blade that slays his sons, but he's hardly a good father either, and yet history remembers him more for his heroic deeds than his poor parenting skills. Medea is the opposite, with her own heroic exploits or impactful actions wiped out by her grief-fuelled killings.

A more modern example of making women monsters or dehumanising them through their association with children can be seen in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*. Following Freud's theory, *Dracula* contains two reductive versions of women; the loyal, virtuous Mina and the sexualised, rebellious Lucy. Lucy is punished and falls victim to the titular vampire, but unlike the 'purer' Mina, she is not rescued in time before she is turned into an "Un-Dead."⁽¹⁵⁾ Despite her vampiric nature, her friends are still hesitant to drive a stake into her until it is revealed that she has harmed a child, and then they claim they would kill her "with savage delight."⁽¹⁶⁾

meet our writer

Jessica works part-time for a charity and lives in Leeds. The rest of her time is spent writing, be it for a video game website, literary magazines, or her own fiction.

Lucy's actions are seen as entirely irredeemable, and this perversion of the maternal instinct seals her fate and labels her as a true monster, even to contemporary readers.

The absence of children and a woman's unmaternal nature are also ways to vilify her. This is best seen in the crone archetype – a "withered old woman" who is far beyond her childbearing years, whose supposed usefulness has diminished, and who often lives on the fringes of society as a result.⁽¹⁷⁾ Because she cannot be moulded into the patriarchal ideal of a subservient mother, she's dangerous, untrustworthy, and unpredictable. Baba Yaga, a cultural figure prominent in Slavic folklore, is the perfect example of this. She's a witch who lives in the wilderness and is unbound by the patriarchy, and this transforms her into a terrifying character used to frighten children. However, if she is approached with good preparation, sincerity, and due respect, she can be a guide or mentor as often as she is a menace.⁽¹⁸⁾ Yet, as so often is the case with female characters, she is primarily memorable for her mistreatment of children.

Women are continually defined by motherhood, and their representations in fiction have only perpetuated this. Their roles in society and how they are perceived are dictated by whether or not they have children and how they treat them, which is repeatedly reflected in storytelling. In recent decades, more nuanced explorations of motherhood have come to the fore, and these have led to more sympathetic representations of the monstrous mother, like in Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*.⁽¹⁹⁾ This details how the way motherhood is seen in Western culture is simplified and dangerous and argues that it should be a complicated amalgam of positives and negatives instead. >>

>> Fictional representations can be used as powerful reflections of societal attitudes or as a teaching tool to show how society wants certain people to behave. Baba Yaga scares children into minding their manners and shows women what they might become if they reject the patriarchal rule. Medea is a cautionary tale for women wanting to get back at their husbands. Lucy is a reminder that female sexuality is dangerous and will not go unpunished. Having more diverse voices and more women writers exploring issues like motherhood makes them less restrictively instructive and provides an alternative to these censorious depictions. ●

book information

TITLE Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths

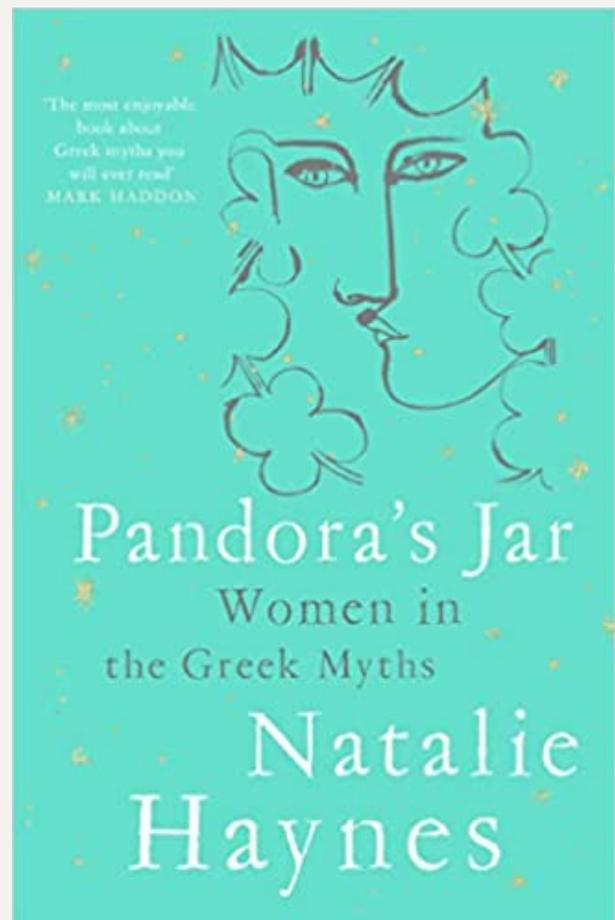
AUTHOR Natalie Haynes

PUBLISHER Picador

YEAR 2020

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Non-Fiction



THE FAMILY CURLS

Written by TILLY BROGAN

Illustration by GWEN VAN KNIPPENBERG
(@gwens_illustrations)



When I was younger I let
my Grandma brush my hair.
She would yank the comb
through caramel curls pulling
the ends so tightly they split into
blunt trees that couldn't grow.
*I used to do this with your mother,
Whispers between lavender laundry.
I wish she could've had another.*

As I got older people told me
I'd inherited the family curls.
My parents would sit me down
proud and gush about how happy
being parents had made them –
I twiddled my fingers awkwardly.
*We just wanted you so badly,
Curls heavy on my shoulders.
Would love your own children madly.*

In my teenage summers I spent
time with my uncle and his wife.
We would drink lavender gin until
the early hours of the morning in
his tiny family of two which to me
always seemed like more than enough.
*See myself with kids? Not really.
Curls weightless on his shoulders.
Much prefer living my life freely.*

Last month I told my grandma I
was dating a woman, not a man.
My heart thrummed as I explained
how my new feelings of home were
coming from someone different to whom
she thought I'd bring through the door.
*We'd always hoped for grandchildren.
Disappointment etched onto her face.
Someone to pass on the family curls.*

Growing Older in a Materialistic World

Our writer looks into Mary Pipher's thoughtful book, *Women Rowing North*, on ageing as a woman in the 21st Century. By delving into each section of the book, our writer investigates Pipher's advice to women as they grow older, as well as what anecdotes she has to tell from others who have already embarked on the journey.

Written by TARA MCCABE

TW mental health, ageism, gender-based discrimination, sexual discrimination.

Published in 2019, Mary Pipher's *Women Rowing North* reads almost like a woman's guide to growing older in a Western society. Although Pipher touches upon the unique cocktail of discrimination older women face, she chooses not to linger on the negatives of ageing. Instead, drawing on her own experiences and the experiences of her female friends to show how older women can be productive, valuable members of society while looking after their own mental health. Pipher herself is a *New York Times* bestseller and trained clinical psychologist specialising in women, Developmental Psychology and trauma. She was 72 when the book was published, and it seems to be aimed at women in this age category (60s to early 70s). She was born in the Ozarks, grew up in Nebraska, in the midwest of the US, and still lives there to this day.

The tone of *Women Rowing North* is, for the most part, positive. Indeed, Pipher writes in the introduction that contrary to stereotypes, 'many older women are deeply happy'. >>

>> While Pipher acknowledges that in a Western society, there are many 'negative stereotypes about older women' and that older women experience 'both ageism and gender-specific challenges', she chooses instead to focus more on the positives of growing older. In one of the few studies referenced throughout the book, Pipher says that census data from the UK shows that 'the happiest people are women aged 65-70'.

The book is split into four main parts, each following the travelling theme: challenges of the journey, travel skills, the people in the boat, and the northern lights. The travelling theme represents the journey of growing older as a woman in the society Pipher lives in. In the book, she relies very little on facts and figures, choosing instead to tell personal anecdotes as a way to explore the realities of life for women in their 60s and 70s. While an approach that relies more heavily on statistics may work just as well, Pipher's use of stories and lived experiences give a more personal touch to the book. Throughout the book, she tells the stories of countless women but constantly returns to four in particular: Willow, Kestrel, Emma and Sylvia. Returning to these four women's stories helps to give the book more of a narrative structure and stops it from veering off course, where it may otherwise have strayed into the realms of a series of unrelated tales.

In the first section, Pipher goes through all the 'challenges' of growing older as a woman. These range from societal stigma and unexpected caregiving obligations to how the body changes with age. Focusing more on the negative aspects of growing older, 'Challenges of the Journey' feels markedly more morose than the rest of the book.

That said, it does also feel indispensable for Pipher to address the challenges older women face as they age before moving on to all the reasons why older women might be able to enjoy life more. This seems the only way Pipher can convince readers of all the positives that she will tell later on. As Pipher puts it, 'ageism may be an even more serious challenge than aging' for older women. She says, 'our sexuality is mocked, our bodies derided, and our voices are silenced.' Indeed, Pipher illustrates how distanced older people are from society with an anecdote about a little girl in a park who once asked her: "Where do old ladies come from?"

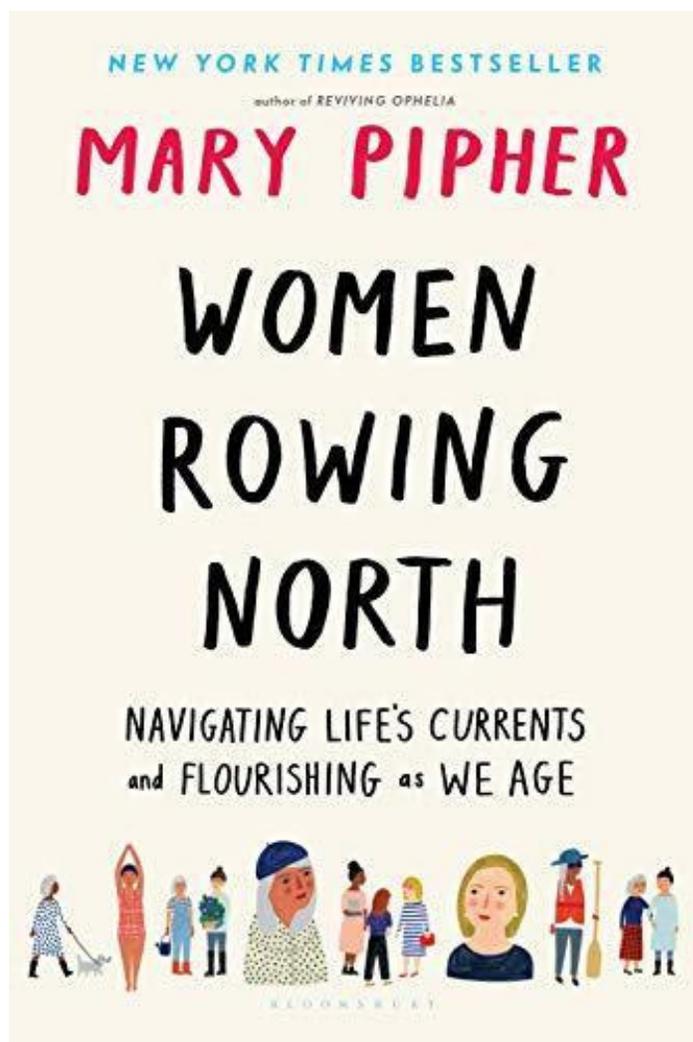
The section 'Travel Skills' is about what women can do as they age to make life more enjoyable. Pipher talks about how important it is to understand themselves and their emotions, how making intentional choices can help and how being involved in a community can create a sense of purpose. In this section, Pipher reflects on the level of self-awareness that older women often have, saying: 'Many women our age feel less anger. We have learned how to work with all our negative emotions and deal with relationships more skilfully'. Pipher also shows how older women can choose to be happy, or as she puts it, 'structure a day that is rich in meaning and joy-producing activities'. Here Pipher refers to the attitude of a lady called Eloise, who lives in an assisted living community. Pipher says, 'Eloise likes to look for evidence of love wherever she goes'. For instance, 'a silver-haired lady carrying an ice-cream cone into a hospital, or a young child earnestly playing a cello at a recital'. All these things give Eloise a 'ping of pleasure'. Pipher says Eloise has 'excellent navigational skills and she knows how to create a good day for herself'.

In the penultimate section, Pipher talks about the importance of 'travel companions'. That is the people who come along on the ageing journey, such as friends, partners, family and grandchildren. >>

>> She reflects mainly on the value of female friendships, saying: 'Women have always worked together. For at least 200,000 years we have raised children, foraged for food, and walked for water with the women of our clan'. Pipher says that the value of female friendships is felt even more as women grow older. Alongside friendships, Pipher also talks about when a long-term marriage or partnership is successful and when it isn't. 'Marriages are the most successful when partners' interactions are mostly positive', but 'after the children leave, many people have thirty years of healthy life ahead and some realize they don't want to spend those years with their current partner'. More than anything, this section of the book gives the reader tips and advice on managing relationships later in life.

The final section, 'The Northern Lights', can almost be described as an overall reflection on all of the considerations in the book. It summarises everything good that comes with ageing. Pipher says age can bring self-acceptance, a greater perspective on life after so many years on the planet, and the ability to see the beauty in day-to-day life. As Pipher puts it, 'one of the great gifts of our later years is the possibility of authenticity...We may lose our false selves, acquired in childhood and carried with us through much of our long journey'. We have the potential to discover our true selves deep inside and, at last, be able to tell the truth'. Pipher tells the reader: 'Time is a great teacher of perspective. If we allow ourselves to be present and if we work to understand our experiences, the tincture of time can heal us'. Finally, Pipher talks about the ability to feel moments of bliss. She ponders, 'Bliss, like orgasm, comes easier after our first experience. After that, we know we can make it happen again.

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book information

TITLE Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Currents As We Age

AUTHOR Mary Pipher

PUBLISHER Bloomsbury Publishing

YEAR 2019

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Non-Fiction

>> Moments of bliss can occur all across our life spans, and, as we age such moments may become daily occurrences’.

If I were to give one criticism of Pipher’s book, it would be that I wish there were a broader scope of women from all walks of life. The four women Pipher focuses on are all reasonably well-to-do. Willow is the head of a non-profit, Sylvia is a retired paralegal, Kestrel works in a technology company, and Emma is a former teacher whose husband runs a landscaping business. Despite having struggles in their personal lives, none of these four women seems to have financial struggles. Pipher does reference a few lower-income older women, but only briefly, not enough to get a clear picture of their lifestyle and what ageing means to them. Pipher even describes herself as a ‘typical older woman’ who is ‘middle class’. According to a 2020 report from the *American Centre for Progress*, around 13% of women over 75 years old live in poverty in the US.(1) That doesn’t consider women living just above the poverty line, still working in their 70s and struggling to pay bills. So for Pipher to describe her situation as ‘typical’ does seem a little narrow to me.

Besides a lack of class diversity, there is also not a wide range of diversity in general. Kestrel is homosexual; however, the other three women, Emma, Willow and Sylvia, are all heterosexual and have had long marriages with men. Pipher mentions one woman, Sally, who, despite managing chronic pain on a daily basis and using a wheelchair, has a positive outlook on life. In the book, Pipher says she deliberately doesn’t identify women by race, but she does say that she interviewed Latina, Asian, Caucasian, African American and Native American women.

Despite this, I did enjoy the overall structure of *Women Rowing North*. The use of personal anecdotes and Pipher’s own experiences feel very apt for a book written from the point of view of someone who has lived in the world for several decades. Reading the book as a woman in her late 20s, there were some things I could relate to and others I have yet to experience. One big takeaway for me was Pipher’s advice on managing mental health; there was definitely a lot that people of all ages and backgrounds could find helpful. Indeed, Pipher’s knowledge and career as a psychologist shine through in her reflections and advice on relationships and cultivating self-awareness. Overall, I do think this is a worthwhile read for women of all ages. Pipher gives invaluable advice on, as the book title so perfectly puts it, ‘navigating life’s currents and flourishing as we age’.

meet our writer

An experienced journalist and writer, Tara is a passionate advocate for change and has supported *Our Streets Now’s* work for several years. When not volunteering with social justice groups, Tara is a full-time Master’s student and freelance writer.

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Review: Growing Older in a Materialistic World

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about us



Our Words is part of Our Streets Now (OSN). Within Our Words, we have a Literary Magazine, a Book Club and events. We feature various writing pieces on topics covered by inspiring books in the Literary Magazine. The Book Club is an opportunity for the OSN community to engage with one another, creating spaces of dialogue. At events, we promote interviews, lectures, and poetry gatherings. Our Words' primary aim is collective learning. We appreciate our members' experiences, knowledge, and interest.

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