Middle age "is the last uncharted territory in human development," Bert Brim, the director of a large-scale study devoted to this age cohort, declared a few years ago. Millions of Americans, he added, make important decisions about midlife based on "a cultural legacy of falsehood and myth."

In "In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age," Patricia Cohen, a reporter for The New York Times, provides an informative and at times surprising "biography" of middle age, from its invention more than a century ago (as a byproduct of the assumption that every aspect of existence could be identified, analyzed, and controlled) to its current status as a "never-never land, a place that you never want to enter and never want to leave."

In our youth-obsessed culture of consumption, Cohen demonstrates, middle-age is often infused with negative connotations -- and forty- and fifty-somethings are barraged with products and services designed to slow down aging. In 1983, for example, the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons re-packaged small breasts as "micromastia," a "disease" which created "a total lack of well-being." And when Allergan, the maker of Botox, discovered a drug that could lengthen eyelashes, it invented "hypotrichosis."

Although "middle-ageism" is a reality, manifesting itself in discrimination against workers over 40, the "midlife crisis" is mostly a myth. Despondent empty-nesters and angst-ridden Porsche purchasers are rare. Menopause is a non-event for most women. Eight of 10 middle-aged men and seven of 10 women rate their marriages as good or excellent. Despite worse health than their white counterparts, African-Americans and Latinos report a greater sense of well being, personal growth and contentment.

The idea of a mid-life crisis, Cohen points out, persists despite evidence that few people actually go through one. She sees signs, however, that more positive messages are penetrating American culture. Although they are not yet cured of "Chronic Youth Syndrome," advertisers are beginning to act on the fact that mid-lifers are big spenders, who are willing to try something new. Forty-seven used to be the age of maximum consumption; it is now 54. The entertainment industry is featuring "off-beat, full-bodied middle age characters" in shows such as "Nurse Jackie" and...
"Curb Your Enthusiasm."

"On the far side of mid-life," Cohen concludes, the years between 55 and 75 are becoming a distinct category. Dubbed "the encore generation" or "the new old age," this group is often healthy, sometimes wealthy, and not necessarily ready to retire.

Cohen is concerned, however, about the next generation of mid-lifers. They may find themselves challenged by "the seismic growth of the elderly population" -- and by a less than robust American economy. Nonetheless, she finds reasons to believe that they will have the skills and wisdom to "ride out the unexpected" and find fulfillment.

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