



Optics: A Novel about Women and Work and Midlife Muddles

Gail Reitenbach

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Optics is a charming novel about the challenges and possibilities of women's middle years.

In Gail Reitenbach's warm and funny novel *Optics*, a close-knit group of middle-aged gal pals navigate ageism and turn setbacks into comebacks.

Kris could be having a midlife crisis; her baby girl is grown, her husband is talking about early retirement, her wrinkles are more prominent, and she's suddenly found herself unemployed after a long-term career. Instead, Kris is having a midlife glow-up—reframing the glasses game in her own vision. With a support team of friends and family who are there for venting and advice, Kris decides to fight society's expectations and make sure that her second act is even better than her first.

Kris is a smart and confident lead who's able to turn bad situations into opportunities for personal growth. Her methodical question-and-answer-style thought process is highlighted in italicized internal conversations that portray her hopes and anxieties. Kris and her husband, Mike, have a sensible and stable relationship that thrives because of their open and honest communication. Their conversations reveal concerns relevant to their age range, as of caretaking for their elderly parents, becoming "empty nesters," and contemplating retirement plans.

Kris's empowered group of women friends, who call themselves the G7, act as sounding boards for each other. Their lengthy conversations over food and wine take center stage and include mouthwatering descriptions of their snacks. Though rumors and secrets are shared, their discussions rise above mere gossip to tackle topics like women's socioeconomic difficulties after a certain age, microaggressions, the pressure of looking youthful, and declining statistics for meaningful and well-paying work. When a surprise windfall comes their way, the women have a chance to invest in themselves, leading to reflective questions about fulfillment and risk. One of the G7, Diana, is a close friend with Kris; she sometimes shares narrative duties, adding her own frustrations as an overweight woman who deals with fatphobic behavior from her boss and potential suitors.

Kris balances her ambition with caution, seeking out mentors and researching the gaps in her experience in the glasses industry. Business details about the glasses manufacturing world are realistic and informative, but their lengthy and dry paragraphs slow the book's pace. Kris's innovation and vision bring excitement back as her company captures the cultural and natural beauty of New Mexico in its pallets and patterns. The colorful sunsets, bold wildlife, and bright flowers that inspire Kris's unique designs blossom from lush locations, like the trail that Kris and Mike enjoy on a psychologically layered hike in Taos. Kris's artistic collaborator, Paolo, adds a personal connection to their frames, referencing his diverse genealogy and creative upbringing.

A few conflicts arise in the form of uncooperative employees and business delays, but there is a general lack of conflict in the text; some of its developments are predictable. Kris's determination and self-direction drives the novel toward its comforting, open ending.

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DELIA STANLEY (June 12, 2020)

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