

I can't take my eyes off Jean Smart

In *Hacks* and *Mare of Easttown*, it's thrilling to watch an aging woman on screen.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue



(HBO MAX)

Can we talk about Jean Smart for a minute? I never watched *Designing Women*—where she played a leading role for over five seasons in the late '80s and early '90s—and until recently I probably couldn't have put her face to her name. This is my loss, and thanks to her resurgence with leading roles in two new shows—*Hacks* and *Mare of Easttown* (both on HBO Max)—I can't stop thinking about her. She has the kind of glamour that makes me look toward my golden years with anticipation. If I can wear a caftan or a bathrobe with the assured elegance of Jean Smart when I am 65, then surely I have nothing to fear.

In *Mare of Easttown*, her style is all bathrobes. She plays Helen, the mother to main character Mare (Kate Winslet). Mare is a local detective trying to solve several possibly interconnected cases involving missing or dead young women.

Underneath the red herrings and unexpected twists, *Mare of Easttown* is a show about the threats and dangers of motherhood for Mare and for all the women of her generation in their small, working-class town. Having children, raising them, and protecting (or failing to protect) them from threats inside the home and out form the limits of these women's lives. Other critics have dissected this and just about every other aspect of the show: whether the ending makes sense, the particular Philadelphia accent the actors try to adopt, White working-class politics, Kate Winslet's realistic middle-aged body, and even her bad hair dye.

But there are not enough essays about Helen, Mare's mother. She lives with Mare in a multigenerational home devoid of any adult male presence—indicative, I guess, of the economic devastation of working-class America and the way women carry the burden of the family, even when the family is breaking down. We don't know what Helen makes of it because we know nothing about her life before she chose—or was forced?—to move in with her daughter and help raise her grandchildren and great-grandchild.

In a small scene setting up a dramatic sequence involving other characters, Helen digs out a pint of ice cream she keeps hidden in a bag of frozen vegetables buried in the freezer. She doesn't get to eat any at this moment—the show's a tragedy, after all—but as I watched her reach for this secret delight, I thought, *Why doesn't Mare talk to Helen more often?* Here is a woman who has already borne the impossible weight of motherhood and has found a meditative calm playing Fruit Ninja on her iPad, drinking martinis with her priest, and prioritizing ice cream. In Easttown, maybe this is as close to happiness as a woman can achieve.

Maybe Mare doesn't talk to Helen enough because the weight of her own grief is paralyzing. Or maybe it's because she knows she has only a few years left before she is old enough to be relegated to secondary-character status, where the best she can hope for is hidden ice cream, and she wants to avoid facing what is waiting for her. But the viewer can't stop watching Helen, because Jean Smart steals every scene she is in and because she is so fully confident in her own skin, regardless of whether any of the other characters notice.

Does Helen have hard-won spiritual wisdom for Mare? Is she secretly drowning her own grief in gin or eating her feelings one pint of Häagen-Dazs at a time? We will never know, because even a show that is about the perilous traps of motherhood and White womanhood can't really imagine a woman over 60 contributing much

beyond comic relief or a backdrop against which younger women's sexuality and maternity can shine.

This is part of what made it so thrilling to watch *Hacks* just a few weeks after I finished *Mare of Easttown*. *Hacks* avoids the mother-daughter relationship by pairing Smart's leading character Deborah Vance with Ava (Hannah Einbinder), a woman at least four decades younger, in a cross-generational buddy comedy. Ava is a young comedy writer. Deborah is a famous comedian who has built an empire with a line of QVC products and a steady standup show in Vegas, the kind of show your aunt from Kansas might see on a weekend getaway.

This appeal to middle America—"the Panera crowd," as Ava pejoratively refers to Deborah's audience—makes Ava shiver in disgust. Having left her own small town for comedy in LA, she writes for a social media crowd that demands several removes of irony. Her style of humor is snarky and caustic and, as Deborah complains, often barely funny. "Where's the punch line?" she asks when reading Ava's material.

As the women are forced to work together by their mutual agent, these debates morph into deeper discussions about the struggle for women to be taken seriously as artists and social critics. Having come of age in a social media activist world, Ava has a cocoon of self-righteous prickliness, yet she appears shocked that the #MeToo hashtag hasn't, in fact, stopped #MeToo behavior. Deborah, on the other hand, has decades' worth of stories of overt sexism, sexual harassment, and structural misogyny that have threatened to destroy her career and life at every turn. Where Ava wants to expose it—as though the clear light of a Twitter post will shame patriarchy out of its power grab—Deborah has opted for her own form of revenge in success and extravagant wealth.

Ava does eventually help Deborah recognize the powder keg of personal stories she can turn into exhilarating new comedy. Having resisted anything honest or confessional for decades, Deborah is invigorated by Ava's reminder that the personal is political and that comedy can be a force for social critique. But the stream of wisdom flows primarily from Deborah's abundant font to Ava's parched and eager ears. And this very idea—that you can build a show around an older woman character who refuses to be relegated to the roles of mother or grandmother and who has something essential to teach her younger counterpart—feels electrifying and new.

When faced with my own aging, though, I am not sure Deborah can really serve as a role model, elegant caftans notwithstanding. Her wealth and fame set her apart from all the Helens of Easttown and even from most professional women. That same wealth and fame have cost her greatly, and she can be brutally unkind and self-defensive. Given her story, her bad behavior might be understandable, but it is not admirable and certainly not all I can hope for in a vision of mature life.

Perhaps what's most appealing in *Hacks* is not Deborah herself so much as the hope that women can find solidarity across generational lines. It is an old feminist dream and one rarely achieved, as Mare's avoidance of Helen illuminates. But if Jean Smart's ubiquitous presence on my TV screen points to a willingness on the part of mainstream entertainment to pay attention to older women's stories, I will be watching and taking notes.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Electrifying wisdom."