been inspired by the lives of writers who came before me. In high school, when I fell in love with Millay’s sonnets, I longed for her bohemian life in New York. More recently I’ve been drawn to the model of Mavis Gallant, who eschewed marriage and children for a writer’s life in Paris. (She died last year.)

Our desire for role models is not surprising: In Spinster, Bolick refers to a fascinating 1986 study by social psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius that stressed the value of the imagined future in determining identity. Of special importance are “possible selves”—ideas about who we want to be, or are afraid of becoming. Markus observes that women in particular “are very focused on their possible selves.” We all need awakeners.

Bolick’s Victorian awakeners resisted marriage at a time before women ran Fortune 500 companies or held seats on the Supreme Court. And yet the conventions they defied still exist; single women over a certain age continue to be stigmatized. In conversation with those late literary ladies, Bolick finally realizes that “the question I’d long posed to myself—whether to be married or single—is a false binary.” “You’ve never been married?” people ask me, with a look that vacillates between pity and surprise. “But you’re a catch!” others say, as if it’s never occurred to them that I don’t want to be caught.

In 15th century Europe, “spinsters” were girls (usually unmarried) who spun thread for a living. Bolick explains. It was only in colonial America that the term took on the negative connotation of “old maid.” Spinster may not be revelatory, but it is a pleasing, intelligent book. Bolick’s minibiographies of her five awakeners are captivating, and she is great company on the page—perhaps she will prove to be an awakener for a new generation. Will spinster find a new life too? “A wholesale reclamation of the word spinster is a tall order,” Bolick says. “My aim is more modest: to offer it up as shorthand for holding on to that in you which is independent and self-sufficient, whether you’re single or coupled.” It’s a message as appealing as the question, whether you’re single or coupled. It’s a message as appealing as the question, whether you’re single or coupled.