

Just after teen angst comes the quarter-life crisis, writes Arja Salafranca

As the century rolls on, older people are looking younger, while the youth are worrying about issues that weren't expected to hit them till they were middle-aged. One such issue is the quarterlife crisis.

At a time in their lives when students should be looking forward to the challenges of the working world, many are anxiously wondering whether they'll even be able to enter the professions they have chosen.

Add to that the mounting debt many students have in the form of study loans to pay off, and you have the start of the quarterlife crisis.

The crisis can hit any time starting from 19 onwards, but hits those in their early twenties hardest. And you're not immune even if you're about to hit 30, or are heading for 35.

This crisis was the topic and title of a play recently performed at the Wits Downstairs Theatre. Written by Wits students Romy Koffler and Christo Oberholzer, *The 1/4 Life Crisis* explores the life and feelings of a teenager worrying, not only about what to study, but also about who will pay for her studies.

Koffler and Oberholzer tapped into a crisis that is being increasingly felt by quarterlifers – those between 19 and 35 – who are grappling with the choices offered today.

Koffler was inspired to write the play after reading a book called *The Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* by American writer Alexandra Robbins and website administrator Abby Wilner.

Recognising there was such a crisis going on among youth, Robbins and Wilner interviewed more than 100 twentysomethings to get to the heart of the problems facing this group. What is the crisis about? Koffler laughs. "It's a midlife crisis in reverse," he says. "Your teens have ended, you're trying to decide what to study, or you have finished studying and are wondering where your qualification will take you. Will there even be a job out there?"

These are some of the practical realities twentysomethings are facing, but there appears to be an emotional undertow to the whole issue, too. Some describe a feeling of ennui: "Is this it? I've studied for four years, I have a job, I pay bills – is this it?"

Joanne Jowell, a local author, also noticed those around her suffering from this crisis. This, coupled with her own, prompted her to write the book *Managing the Quarterlife Crisis: Facing Life's Choices in Your 20s and 30s*. It addresses many of the causes, concerns and solutions to the crisis.

Jowell found herself in the midst of a crisis when, at the age of 27, she returned to South Africa after working in London, to get married.

Once on honeymoon, Jowell questioned where she was going in her life. Forced to evaluate her choices and decisions, her crisis propelled her into a new career as a writer.

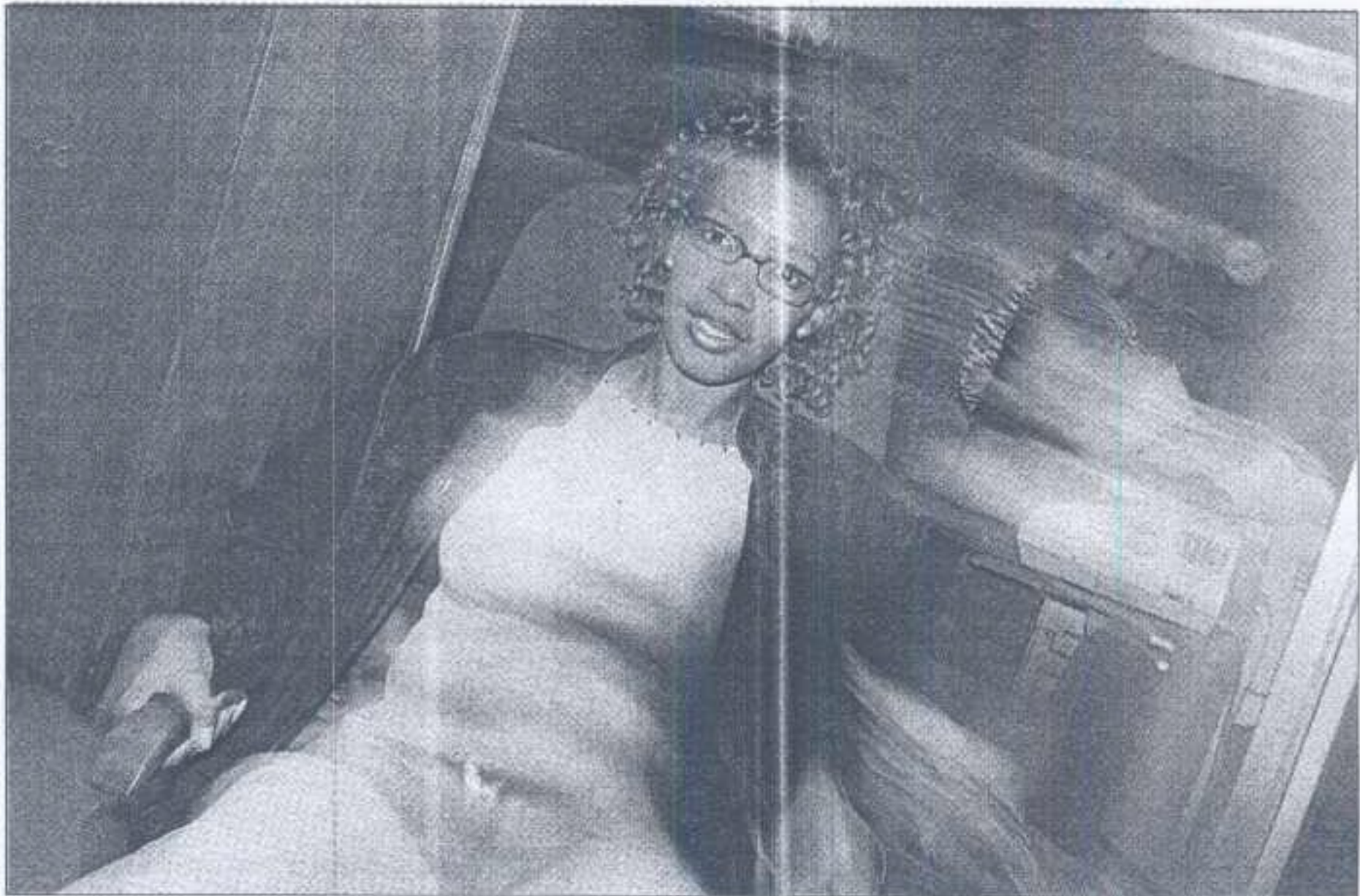
Jowell describes the quarterlife crisis as "that anxious, indecisive time of a young adult's life when you are faced with overwhelming choices and options for the future."

"You grapple with dilemmas about career, identity, dreams, relationships, where to live ..."

Nor do you feel entitled to such confusion because you think that everyone else has their lives sorted out, and you worry that you'll be a failure if you haven't "made it" by 30.

The worry and anxiety over career and the need to make a mark in your chosen field are certainly hallmarks of the crisis.

Dave Schafer, in an internet article in the Kent State archives, says: "Graduating students see a strange new door swing open only at the expense of others slamming shut. And adding to that pressure is a preconceived notion of where that path should lead by the time they reach 30."



The pace of life has hotted up to the point where people are feeling burnt out by the age of 19

PHOTOGRAPH: T.J. LEMON

GREY HAIRS AND ACNE



Joanne Jowell hit her crisis at 27, inspiring her to write *Managing the Quarterlife Crisis*

Schafer argues that life after a degree is mapped out according to a socially constructed timeline of life's milestones: graduate; find a meaningful place in society by 30; marry; have children.

Another idea is put forward by Jennifer Zak Place, a Kent University staff psychologist, who believes that adolescence now typically continues until about 23. If that's the case, then 25 is no longer what 25 used to be. But societal timelines haven't caught up with the news, or a delayed adolescence.

Tumi Morake, a 21-year-old cast member from *The 1/4 Life Crisis*, can relate to the issues of age.

"If you look at the big TV shows, they have younger and younger people on them. At 21 I'm starting to think: 'What now, I'm already 21,'" she says.

Ashleigh Harvey, another cast member, admits the pressures are great. "You get out into the big wide world and it is scary. You worry about the future."

Is there way out of the crisis? Jowell believes so, and that's partly what *Managing the*



The cast of *The 1/4 Life Crisis*: Clockwise from left: Tumi Morake, Bryan van Niekerk, Ashleigh Harvey, Denzel Edgar, Joanne Sharp, the stage director, and Romy Koffler, director and co-writer

Quarterlife Crisis is all about. In addition to explaining her own personal crisis in the book, Jowell gives many examples of others who have gone through, or are going through, this crisis. There are also useful suggestions in the book: put things in writing; define your goals; see a therapist.

But it's not all doom and gloom, and emerging from a crisis can benefit young adults in other spheres of their lives.

"One of the best possible outcomes of the quarterlife crisis is to use this phase as fertile ground for building life-management skills," says Jowell.

"The skills you acquire now can stand you in good stead for future issues that may develop at a later stage."

There are, of course, those who will pooh-pooh the notion of a

quarterlife crisis, suggesting it's a luxury only the indulged or well-off can afford.

But Jowell has some sharp words for critics: "I've seen too much real anxiety, turmoil, tears and even depression among my peers to feel that the quarterlife crisis shouldn't be taken

seriously. Even if one thinks it is a crisis of luxury, that doesn't mean it's a lesser crisis. If people are suffering extreme turmoil because their life isn't working out quite the way they had planned, or because they feel as if they aren't coping, we would be irresponsible to pooh-pooh this as irrelevant or insignificant."

Having negotiated one crisis, does this mean today's quarterlifers won't experience the ubiquitous midlife crisis? Perhaps it's not that simple. As Jowell explains, a midlife crisis is about becoming aware of your mortality. The quarterlife crisis is about becoming aware of your responsibility.

"However, I would say that having successfully managed a quarterlife crisis may well eliminate – or at least minimise – the onset of a midlife crisis, primarily because the acquired crisis and life-management skills will assist you in dealing with the midlife phase."

"Also, if you take the time at quarterlife to analyse your needs, to set priorities, to build effective decision-making skills, and to maintain an open dialogue with yourself, then chances are you will have a better chance of avoiding a midlife crisis because your life will chart a more fulfilling course."

Joanne Jowell is facilitating *Quarterlife Crisis* workshops with psychologist Dr Aneta Shaw. The first workshop is on October 11 at the Ambassador Hotel, Bantry Bay, Cape Town. Contact 021-434-3488 or e-mail: jojowell@iafrica.com

- ☐ Newsflash, it's not normal to have three BMWs by the age of 24.
- ☐ I can pretty much guarantee that even Britney Spears has trashcan moments.
- ☐ 'Quarterlife is about having acne and grey hairs at the same time.'
- ☐ Getting stuck with old goals means getting stuck at the age you were when you set them. Don't let age be your only judge of success or failure; things change far too quickly and unpredictably for that.

From *Managing the Quarterlife Crisis: Facing Life's Choices in Your 20s and 30s* (Struik) by Joanne Jowell