or even desirable. Later life is a time of 'changing bodies', 'changing worlds', 'changing minds', as the authors note, although the 'thinning' of the life plot may not be experienced by all. This leads to personal introspection about identity in later life; or rather its continuance or re-emergence. My reading of texts around later life suggests that there is much in common with other parts of the lifecourse in searches for identity: the teenage complaint of 'who am I?', the new mother's observations of her 'changed' identity.

Death features in this text, as it must, although not all books about later life step into this area. The authors' concluding comments that the 'story' of a life is ironic need to be set in the context of their meaning that this involves untidiness, uncertainty and 'positive befuddlement'. This text has the potential to inform our reading of our own lives, and adds to the 'toolkit' of gerontologists by asking us to think more critically about reading, while reading.

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doi:10.1017/S0144686X09008782

Virpi Timonen, Ageing Societies: A Comparative Introduction, Open University Press, Maidenhead, UK, 2008, 224 pp., pbk £21.99, ISBN 13: 978 0 335 22269 8.

It is very refreshing to read a book which achieves the delicate balance between celebrating age and ageing without losing the message that there are distinct biological, psychological and social challenges for older people in all societies. Biomedical research and practice has pioneered cutting-edge treatment for older people and, certainly in the western world, there have been substantial improvements in surgical and pharmaceutical therapies which have prolonged and enhanced quality of life in old age. But as Timonen emphasises, old age is also socially constructed and policy-makers have been less responsive in recognising the social and political needs of this burgeoning population. However, she points out that this response varies considerably between countries and offers an intelligent and highly accessible overview of what it is like to grow old within diverse welfare cultures.

The book has four sections, with two or three chapters in each. The first section, 'Social contexts of ageing', introduces us to the importance of understanding ageing, how demographic shifts are evolving and the extent to which these shifts impact on family structures and inter-generational solidarity. The second section, 'Heath income and work', examines these three aspects in separate chapters and offers comparisons by gender, ethnicity and across cultures. In Section 3, Timonen considers formal, informal, community and institutional care, and compares provision and policy development between countries, principally from the more developed regions of the world. The final section opens up the debate on how world societies might meet the new challenges of an ageing population who are likely to be more demanding on welfare resources in terms of quality and quantity and expect a much greater say in how these are met.

The volume is well written in a jargon-free, lively and accessible style, and any necessary acronyms and technical vocabulary are fully explained to the reader. The use of 'boxes' in most of the chapters to summarise the main points works well. The tables are clear and the content well illustrated within the text. What is particularly good is the use of data and more explicit case studies from both OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and non-OECD member countries. There is little discussion of the less-developed countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa (other than South Africa), but I am mindful that there is a paucity of data on older people from these countries. The global comparisons are likely to appeal especially to international students whether they study ageing in the United Kingdom or elsewhere.

So what's really new? Well, not much for the seasoned gerontologist, but for people new to the study of later life, it would be very useful to read in conjunction with more theoretical and conceptual texts on ageing. I have no doubt that the book will be of interest to both undergraduate and postgraduate students in fields such as gerontology, social policy, social work, sociology, nursing, as well as professionals and practitioners who work with older people. Timonen provides a clear, well-organised, wide-ranging and comprehensible introduction to the complex and highly topical subject of ageing and its global and social diversity.

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