

for the possibility to undertake quantitative genetic gerontological research. The book showcases a number of important research initiatives such as the Norwegian Life Course, Ageing and Generation Study, and ENABLE-AGE, which examines person and home environment data in five European countries. If I have a general criticism of the presented research, it is that there is still overmuch emphasis on generalised changes with age, in areas such as cognition and emotion, and insufficient attention to differential ageing. There needs to be more focus on the factors that promote optimal ageing. One major criticism of the book is that it inexcusably lacks an index both of subjects and authors.

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William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth McKim, *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, 352 pp., hbk £21.99, ISBN 13: 978 0 19 530687 3.

Starting with affirmative postmodernism and the necessity of an ironic stance, this book is not recommended for the faint-hearted. It repays reading nonetheless, for a number of reasons. The main one is that it explores the commonplace activity of reading which, after all, is what we still spend much time over. Metaphors associated with reading abound in gerontology and social science, with stories, characters and chapters used to convey ways of 'reading' the world. Literary allusions may be playful as much as ironic, I think, and a certain lightness of touch by the authors helps break down some rather indigestible tracks. Novels and their novelty are mentioned, so too the pervasiveness of soap operas and their eventual endings.

Despite the ubiquity of reading in many cultures, the authors argue that there are differences between a literary and a lived text, you can only go so far with a sheaf of metaphors. Chapter 2 of the book discusses the 'autobiographical self', concluding that life may have the qualities of a novel. It is easy to get a little lost down 'metaphor lane', with discussions of a character or the reader ... but a strong feature of this book is its self-editing. Just as discussion begins to drift, we are back with a summary, setting us back on the authors' path. There are areas where the conversational style of this book prompts rights of reply. Can it really still be so that gerontology remains so imbalanced, with a narrow focus on the problems of later life? Recent issues of this journal do not seem to confirm this, although policy and political discourses in the developed world seem to be re-discovering the 'demographic time bomb'.

This is all part of certain narratives, of course. The theme of narrative is central to the discussion of several chapters. First, personal experience by way of autobiography is explored (Part One). This is followed by discussion of narrative development in Part Two. Similarly, the exploration of poetics is central to Part One; and their application to Part Two. This focus on application in later life is because the authors hold that during this time the self is both 'under attack' and that a calm period of 'sorting out' the meaning of life is not generally attainable,

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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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, ‘Health 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.