

Reviews

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Bruce Grierson, *What Makes Olga Run? The Mystery of the 90-Something Track Star and What She Can Teach Us About Living Longer, Happier Lives*, Henry Hold and Company, New York, 2014, 242 pp., hbk \$25.00, ISBN: 978-0805097207.

The objective of this book is to find out why a nonagenarian called Olga has the physical abilities to compete across 11 track and field events worldwide and does not suffer from age-related conditions like many people in this age group. A nonagenarian is defined here as a person aged between 90 and 99 years.

This publication is suitable for students of sports science and gerontology programmes in addition to researchers in those fields, but also genomics and neuroscience. What was noticeable in the book is how Grierson narrates Olga's journey to the reader, describing her childhood, her adulthood and her current living status. Grierson states: 'People who roar into their 90s and 100s very often had long-lived parents ... But Olga doesn't necessarily have that pedigree. Her mother, Anna did live to a ripe old age: she died at 85 after a bout of pneumonia. But her father, Wasyl, died at 74' (p. 17). Her maternal and paternal grandparents died aged between 62 and 82 years and Olga has outlived all of her siblings, 'even though she was tucked in the middle, with four older siblings. None of the siblings was remotely as active in adulthood as she' (p. 17). Therefore, Grierson aims to understand why Olga is such a phenomenon in regards to physical activity, and her living status: 'Olga's genome could reveal secrets that will benefit others down the road, in ways that are hard to predict' (p. 17).

Throughout the book, Grierson accompanies Olga to several academic institutes across North America where she undergoes a variety of tests (cognition, physical and biological) conducted by leading scientists to identify how a woman in her nineties is able to undergo physically athletic events and hold many world titles. Several key strengths can be taken from this book: one is the brief overview of the tests which Olga undertakes. Although these are not presented in a traditional academic format, names of the scientists are identified, enabling prospective readers to follow up their work. The narration which Grierson has undertaken allows readers unfamiliar with the fields of sport science, gerontology, genomics and neuroscience to comprehend how several aspects are important to one's health and ageing. Grierson and Olga develop a friendship which is movingly described throughout the book. Grierson admires the strength and stamina of Olga and her fellow competitors in athletic events and he too attempts to undertake a long-distance race, and realises he is not as fit as those several decades older than him.

Towards the end of the book, Grierson reports that Olga suffered a fall after being with some former students. Olga had become distracted, and ended up falling down a steep flight of stairs. Olga was taken to hospital, and as a reader, you expect to read how this healthy fit nonagenarian was seriously injured. However, Grierson reports that whilst at the hospital Olga overheard two doctors looking puzzled at her X-ray film and commenting, 'How is this possible?' A 93-year-old woman takes a flyers header down a dozen stairs and she does not break a single bone?' (p. 209). This in itself is extraordinary, and adds further questioning to the longevity question.

What becomes evident towards the end of this book is that many studies and research in the past and at present do not include nonagenarians and this leaves scientists in difficulty when it comes to cut-off points or understanding the effects of a certain test. At the beginning of this journey, Grierson aimed to identify how a nonagenarian was able to compete across a variety of athletic events and several areas are considered (diet, genetic make-up or lifestyle choices), and all of these facets are covered in the book. Yet, despite ageing and longevity becoming a popular field of study, there is no direct answer to what has enabled Olga to be so physically active.

Grierson concludes the book with the nine rules for living, providing readers with several areas to consider. This book shows that it is never too late to change one's lifestyle habits; and that research in the above areas is still young and the future is very exciting for academics in this field.

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Beth Baker, *With a Little Help from Our Friends: Creating Community as We Grow Older*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2014, 256 pp., pbk \$22.95, ISBN 13: 978 08265 1988 7.

This book looks at the issues of housing for seniors, and the range of possible solutions that are being developed by those who have been prepared to ask 'how do I want to live as I get older?' The narrative is balanced between highlighting research on housing, health and wellbeing of older people, with the practical schemes that the author has investigated. The strongest messages that emerge are:

- The importance of community and social networks in achieving a 'good' old age.
- The success of ground-up rather than top-down solutions.
- People are more willing to accept help in an environment where they are also encouraged to provide help.
- People want to be in control of the balance between possible risk and accepting an element of intrusion into their lives in order to live how and where they want.