

unemployment or falling stock prices as they approach their expected retirement run the risk of reduced income for the remainder of their lives.

Although very specifically geographically located, this book contains material that will be useful to students, researchers and practitioners with interests in both ageing studies and labour markets. The book's final chapter, which discusses implications of the research findings for policy development, draws together some key issues for those involved in US policy making in this area. The ideas discussed by Coile and Levine, to underpin strategic social policy making, are also of relevance for those engaged in this task more widely beyond the USA.

## References

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The Open University, UK

JACQUELINE H. WATTS

doi:10.1017/S0144686X11000468

Tamsin Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, Oberon Books, London, 2010, 113 pp., pbk £8.99, ISBN 13: 978 1 84002 982 6.

'I was inspired by Jonathan Swift's classic satire *A Modest Proposal*, where he walks through streets full of hunger and quite rationally proposes the idea that an eight pound baby could feed a family of four for three weeks. I'm not proposing we eat babies but I wanted to provoke the kind of shock that is funny at the same time' (Oglesby, quoted in an article by Keith Watson, *Metro.co.uk*, 27 January 2010). Oglesby has succeeded admirably in achieving her aim in this wickedly funny and irreverent play about ageing and society. She confronts the audience with a somewhat heightened version of the current demographic, set in the not-so-distant future, with older people living ever longer, many with dementia, families who cannot or will not care for them, and a government that feels that it cannot afford to do so.

The action moves between the parallel universes of a private London family and a government-backed scientific research unit. Both are physically represented on stage, separated in the first half, but with the boundaries blurring in the second. In Act One, we see the family in various locations, at the UK's National Theatre, in the Natural History Museum, and at home, while above them on a raised platform we meet the scientists in front of their computer screens and predictive graphs, attempting to juggle their findings to fit their scientific and financial targets. In Act Two, much of the action moves to the Ark, the sparkling new government hospital from which

patients never emerge. The Ark provides a testing ground for new drugs, ostensibly dedicated to improve memory functioning, but in fact designed to end long lives swiftly and painlessly, to provide body parts and brains, and to trial a new brand of economically viable robotic nurse, engineered to work empathetically in response to patients' moods.

The main characters are two elderly sisters Lyn and Alice (played beautifully by Judy Parfitt and Marcia Warren at the National Theatre in 2010) and their even older brother, Robbie. We watch the three of them attempting to meet the new government requirement that older people continuously prove themselves useful in society. Lyn has become surrogate grandmother to 16-year-old Milly, whose parents are unavailable and who becomes a teenage mum during the course of the play. Alice takes care of her 13-year-old grandson, Dylan, whose parents also never appear, as both are permanently away or busy. Robbie, the very elderly brother, tries to stay in work as an actor, rushing from one audition to the next in order to convince himself and others that he is still a viable contributor to society. He dresses very young, dyes his hair, chases girls and even wears a total face mask, the sudden accidental removal of which provides one of the key shock-horror moments of the play, revealing him as really really old.

In fact, this eccentrically extended family of several generations seems to function quite well, with plenty of intergenerational exchange and mutual appreciation. The play was inspired (if that is the right word) by Oglesby's depressing experience of visiting her mother-in-law in an uncaring care home, where there was normally no contact with young people. She writes: 'Having seen the way my own children lit up that dreary nursing home, and the benefits they have gained from being close to their grandparents, it seems obvious that we should find ways of reintegrating the old, rather than writing them off. I would hate the more brutal elements of my play to become fact' (Oglesby 2010).

The action in the play develops around Lyn whose dementia takes a fairly benign and harmless form, forgetting what she went upstairs for and muddling periods of her remembered life. Her daughter Cathy and the rest of the family are worried and announce to her that it is time for a move into the hospital. The dramatic irony lies in the audience's privileged knowledge of the possibly painless, but definitely fatal treatments that await her there, and our growing sense that everything she says, however apparently disjointed, does still relate to her own lived experience and can be seen to make emotional and historical sense. We get to hear much of her story in out-of-sequence nuggets, including remembered anger, re-lived moments of pride and tenderness, and, finally, with the help of a terrifying electronic brain stimulator looking a bit like a 1960s hairdryer hood, in astonishing, if random, detail.

The second half of the play, set on the hospital ward, tips into farce, when the scientist, Munroe, whom we have learnt to fear with his hurry to fix the statistics, develops the first signs of dementia himself and joins Lyn as an in-patient, stealing her placebo tablets in order to avoid having to take his own medicine as prescribed by his team. With his announcement that there are

parrots flying everywhere, invisible to all other characters, and to us of course, we understand that the medicine has worked and his painless end is very near.

In the recent production at the National Theatre, the show was stolen by Mimi, the superbly played robotic nurse (Michaela Meazza), whose soft sounds and gentle touches manage to calm Lyn's mood swings, although the slightly delayed verbal responses and jerky movements should give the game away. That Lyn finds the utterly unspontaneous mechanical robot preferable to her family provides one of the most chilling moments of the play, a moment hilariously defused by the angry daughter, Cathy, who pulls the computerised gubbins out of Mimi's back and sends her into a fatal whirring frenzy, to demonstrate that she is not Lyn's true friend.

This cutting-edge comedy must surely be revived in the next few years, since it dares to confront the future in a way that allows us to laugh and flinch at the same time. Tamsin Oglesby's nightmare vision of old age in the future is a timely wake-up call and deserves to be seen, read and discussed widely.

## Reference

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London

PAM SCHWEITZER

doi:10.1017/S0144686X1100047X

Jane Miller, *Crazy Age: Thoughts on Being Old*, Virago Press, London, 2010, 256 pp., hbk £14.99, ISBN 13: 978 1 84408 649 8.

I was determined not to like this book. It first came out in the summer of 2010 to great acclaim in the broadsheets. Although I'd written it into my 'must buy/must read' notebook, it wasn't until early in 2011 that I was offered an opportunity to review it. Various described elsewhere as 'delightful', 'life enhancing', 'a joyous read', 'perceptive', 'amusing', 'lovely', 'warm-hearted' and written in 'elegant prose', I thought it might be yet another (upper) middle-class, retired 'non gerontologist' telling us 'how it is' but with little or no acknowledgement of the accumulating gerontological knowledge base. And yes, in one sense it is this – but it is also an unashamedly literary, rather than social scientific, exploration of ageing and old age.

Jane Miller was a publisher, teacher and academic and her literary credentials shine through as she flits effortlessly between well-known and perhaps less well-known literary figures: a quote here; a reference there – but with no dates or page numbers to follow them up dear reader! She does, however, provide a list at the end (pp. 237–9) of 'some of the books about old age and related topics' that she read or reread while writing *Crazy Age*. Needless to say this includes many novels, plays and poetry collections as well as works by literary critics and cultural commentators