

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

Oglesby, T. 2010. Elderly people are not a burden to be dumped. *The Telegraph*, 3 February.

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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

(e.g. Edward Said; Studs Terkel; Frank Kermode and Helen Small). In amongst these we also find, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the late Peter Townsend's *The Family Life of Old People*. Miller writes about this study – and, although she doesn't name or reference it, *The Last Refuge* too – in a chapter entitled 'Reading into Old Age' (Chapter 4). Here she reflects on who has been writing about old age and in what manner, and her comments about Townsend's studies follow hard on the heels of reflections about John Updike, Saul Bellow and Simone de Beauvoir; about 'late style'; and on whether old age and its preoccupations lie outside the scope of novels. An eclectic and disparate mix then; and a mix which characterises the whole book.

In fact, the book is really a collection of 11 essays – part meditation; part self-talk; part conversation – and reads more like a series of short stories. So, after orienting yourself by reading Chapter 1 ('Crazy Age') I would suggest reading the rest in any order that takes your fancy. In Chapter 1, you will find Miller – a woman in her late seventies who swims 20 lengths each morning despite having two knee replacements and who has been married to the same man for over 50 years – justifying why she is writing the book and saying 'writing about my own old age is a way of convincing myself that I really am old and that I really will die' (p. 16). Yet, despite a seeming denial of ageing she goes on to write both about the frailties of old age and about the rewards and possibilities it has brought her. She is good on friendship between women (Chapter 3: 'Dear Mary'); interesting on intergenerational relationships (Chapter 7: 'The Young and the Old') and, for me, at her most eloquent when reflecting, in the last chapter (Chapter 11) on 'Dying'. The chapter on 'Time' (Chapter 6) is fascinating too. It begins with her writing about how she fills her days: an hour of reading Tolstoy – 'slowly in Russian' (p. 90); followed by a swim; lunch; the news and *Neighbours*. She writes about that odd disjuncture between days, weeks and years rushing by in comparison with how time seemed to drag when we were young. This chapter is packed full of glimpses into her earlier life and musings on the importance of memory in old age: 'I am especially puzzled by the fact that memory is so much better at unhappiness than happiness' (p. 99).

Autobiographically then, the book is also of interest. Miller is from a family of intellectuals and has lived in Chelsea for over 40 years with her husband, the founder and former editor of the *London Review of Books*. She, and they, clearly moved in educated, influential and left-wing circles – her great grandfather was Karl Marx's editor and friend and she writes about 'the irony of making a profit from Marx's letters' (p. 173) to her grandfather by selling them off 'at a swanky London auction house' (p. 172). I also have to own up to the joy of looking up and learning new words and new things from reading this book – bedizening (p. 2); a 'Horrocks dress' (p. 21); rebarbative (p. 64); saccadic (p. 137); condign punishment (p. 195), to name but a few. However, amongst all the positives, I struggled to make sense of some of her musings, especially the chapters 'On Not Wanting Things' (Chapter 2) and 'Clutter' (Chapter 10). I found them confusing and disjointed, but that probably says more about me than Miller.

This is part of that growing trend of ‘age-ographies’: books written by women and men about their own ageing and old age and which we are now seeing more and more of. Don’t approach this as a gerontology text or a teaching aid *per se* – but, if you want another glimpse into one person’s first-hand experiences, then you will find enough here to reflect upon.

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