

Reviews

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Karla A. Erickson, *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2013, 208 pp., pbk US \$25.95, ISBN 13: 978 1 43990824 2.

The purpose of the book was to address sensitively and compassionately the dramatic statistical demographic changes that are under way in 21st-century America and confront head on the realisation that people are living longer, dying slower. Uniquely, this book gently unearths some of the myths and taboos that surround why people are also dying differently. Erickson explores the concept of the ‘Longevity divide’ and her use of the participant observation technique gives her research a robust framework which carries the reader through the book towards the more probing and challenging sections. The authority Erickson commands by her commitment to her research is admirable and is reflected in the book. This is not simply a quick project but a heartfelt long-term commitment which is reflected through each page and engages the reader at every level. It is the interwoven personal stories that make the book so engaging and underpin the medical practice and academic learning and knowledge. This book feels like a journey. When you reach the end you are ready to learn from the lessons in Chapter 4, and because of the assurance that you have felt throughout the book and emotional engagement from the participants’ personal stories of love and loss, you are ready to learn and make a difference to your own practice. Erickson’s purpose, I believe, in writing this book was to engage with the reader emotionally first, to write a book that would change people’s thoughts, behaviours and practice about how we make the dying experience a better one. She has done that superbly by underpinning that intention with a sound academic literature review and excellent research. This gives the reader confidence at every level.

With regard to limitations of the book, the narrowness of the contextualisation of the research subject may make it less accessible for a non-American market. However, the book is relevant for a wide spectrum of audiences. I think this book would be an excellent accompaniment for all health-care professionals, particularly health-care staff who are considering pursuing work with the dying. The book provides a way of understanding some of the demands that will be made of them, both emotional demands and the social political climate which is currently facing the United States of America but is also transient across Europe. We are an ageing population and in sensitively addressing the ethical considerations of being a ‘death novice’, the book would be of benefit across the health-care spectrum. It does this by using observation techniques that help the reader to make their own conclusions to some very difficult, emotive, individual and unique

situations, recognising them as such. I also think this book would be a beneficial read to those who are considering long-term care for their loved ones as the honesty and robustness in the writing is reflected through the pages. There would be an assurance for people that although this might be for some a difficult read, here is an honest account of what to expect at end of life for those you love.

I found this book to be extremely accessible, emotionally engaging but not overly sentimental. I found that unlike many books I wasn't guided, instructed or told what to think but left to reflect and arrive at my own conclusions. I felt it was a journey. I started in one place and ended up in another one. I felt reassured and confident by the robustness of the research methods and sensitive capturing of data. Although I am a specialist in palliative care, I still found there were things I had learned from reading it. I would fully recommend this book to anyone who either works in this field or who has an interest in knowing more about end-of-life issues.

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Christopher Martin, *Constituting Old Age in Early Modern English Literature from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Boston, 2012, 240 pp., pbk US \$27.95, ISBN 13: 978 1 55849 973 7.

The central premise of Christopher Martin's comprehensively researched book is that the public understanding of old age changed radically over the period of the last quarter-century of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1578–1603) with the emergence of the forerunner of our modern concept of individual subjectivity. One of the key drivers for this shift in attitudes was the example of Elizabeth's own longevity and the strategies she employed to continually re-invent her own image as she aged, which are discussed extensively in Martin's second chapter. What both Elizabeth and the dramatists and poets discussed by Martin drew upon in their constructions of ageing identity, was the mid-16th-century lexical development by which the definition of the word 'constitution' expanded from applying only to external bodies of laws and regulations, to signifying also the human body in regard to vitality and healthiness. *Constituting Old Age* charts how this productive ambiguity enabled a vigorous cultural contestation of any idea that late life should be a time for passive acquiescence in the face of impending mortality.

Given that the book is essentially a study of representations of ageing in Early Modern literature (the chapter on Elizabeth functions in effect to set out the historical context), it stands or falls on the strength of its readings, which are convincing. These are divided into three chapters respectively covering Elizabethan pastoral (such as Edmund Spenser's