

# Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Ulla Kriebner and Roberta Maierhofer, Eds. *The Ages of Life: Living and Aging in Conflict? Aging Studies Volume III*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript-Verlag, 2013

Reviewed by Enrique Fernandez, University of Manitoba

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This edited volume includes 14 multidisciplinary contributions that were discussed at the annual gathering “Encounters in Bad Aussee” (Austria), which in 2010 was dedicated to discuss the topic of the ages of life. The contributions examine the influence of representation on the construction of aging. All the essays are firmly rooted in the contributors’ home disciplines, but they share what the editors identify as a cultural studies approach. The contributions also coincide in emphasizing how aging is mediated by the semantics of form, which the editors correctly connect to the famous “linguistic turn” that purportedly affected many disciplines starting in the mid-20th century. The biographical sketches of the contributors included at the end of the book show that they come from fields and subfields within literature, anthropology, media studies, sociology, and cultural studies, to cite just a few. In spite of writing within the styles and methods characteristic of their fields, all the contributors stay on target, avoiding, for the most part, the jargon associated with their fields. This makes the book accessible to scholars interested in aging studies independent of their disciplines, as well as to a wider readership.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first section, “Methods and Approaches,” is in part a repository that holds the contributions that do not fit well within the theme of the two other sections. An example is Pirker and Melzer-Azodanloo’s study of the construction of age in Austria through the historical examination of the laws affecting – and therefore implicitly defining – age markers such as childhood, age of consent, or voting age. Another article in this first section is Formosa’s critical examination of how neoliberalism tacitly informs policies and ideals of positive or active aging. Unlike these two articles, the other two contributions in the first section directly deal with methodological issues. This is the case with Lövgren’s essay on the limitations and possibilities of cultural studies for the study of aging. She exemplifies her points by studying the representation of young and old individuals in Swedish magazines targeted at a readership of women over age 40. Studying popular magazines, which can be traced back to Adorno’s famous studies on the culture industry in the 1940s, also informs the

essay in this section by Stone, who examines media images of aging rock stars and other pop icons.

A critical studies approach in dealing with commercial images is followed by several contributions in the book’s second section, “Representations of Ages of Life in Media and Art.” The essay by Klein is a diachronic study of the representation of age in advertisements of Austrian magazines; Wangler’s contribution is an analysis also of the image of aging people in printed popular media from the 1980s to the present decade in Germany. Wangler’s diachronic study reveals how the demographics and social policies in Germany influence the stereotypes about old people: in the 1980s, the predominant image was that of the fragile senior; in the 1990s, the perception of the parasitic, wealthy senior exhausting the resources of the state became dominant; in the new millennium, the image of the healthy, active senior displaces previous images in the many advertising campaigns targeting the growing market of aging baby boomers. Similar methods are used in the article by Grebe, Otto, and Zimmermann, who studied the use of metaphors of aging and dementia in German journals and magazines. In the article they use Lakoff’s and Johnson’s theories on metaphor as a form of creating new meanings by analogy to develop their arguments.

The third and final section of the book is “Representation of Ages of Life in Literature.” This section is the longest – six essays – and it studies literary productions from mostly 20th- and 21st-century novels, some by well-known authors such as Salman Rushdie or Umberto Eco, analysed respectively by Bădulescu and Chupin. The contribution by Skenazi examines the conceptualization of the aging process in the 1610 poetic creation of the French writer Etienne Pasquier. This erudite article may be difficult for those unfamiliar with early modern literature, but it is a good example of how the social and historical reality of a remote period can be approached from an aging studies perspective. Miquel-Baldellou’s contribution is a comparatist study of prototypes of aging in novels of the Victorian period in England and the United States. The study shows how the two countries’ attitudes toward conservatism and innovation resort to images of the

old and the young. Other trends in contemporary literary criticism, equally informed by cultural studies, are exemplified in the essays by Domínguez-Rué and by Zilles, which deal with age-related disabilities from the point of view of disability studies, as well as from feminist and gender studies. These latter two studies resort to some of the style and jargon of their respective fields, which may make them difficult to follow for the uninitiated reader.

A possible complaint about this otherwise diverse volume is that most contributors are from Europe, especially from German-speaking countries, which reflects

the geographical location of the annual encounters from which the collection originates. With three exceptions – authors largely from German-speaking countries, the volume's non-descriptive title, and the occasional use of jargon – this collection is a varied yet unified volume exemplifying how a cultural studies approach is especially appropriate to reveal how words and images conjure up constructions of aging. Besides those interested in aging studies, the volume offers a good starting point for researchers in social sciences and humanities interested in how their respective fields are expanding to cover new topics, such as aging studies.

Atul Gawande. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Toronto, ON: Doubleday Canada, 2014

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*Being Mortal* is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology. It is a book about the modern experience of mortality – about what it's like to be creatures who age and die and how medicine has and hasn't changed this experience. Atul Gawande dissects the shortcomings of the medical system when it comes to aging and the elderly adult. He posits that the medical community's reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm inflicted on people and denied the basic comforts that most require. Specifically, when a doctor or system fails to acknowledge that the power to push against the limits of aging is, and always will be, finite, the potential for harm and damage is great.

Gawande, a surgeon and professor at Harvard Medical School, notes that the modern scientific capability has profoundly altered the course of human life: people are living longer and better than at any other time in history. These scientific advances, however, have turned the processes of aging and dying into medical rather than natural experiences – matters that, today, are mainly managed by health care professionals. As recently as 1945, most deaths occurred in the home. By the 1980s, however, only 17 percent did. Despite these statistics, medical professionals often prove to be alarmingly unprepared for the experience of death. Gawande himself reports a lack of preparedness in regards to aging and dying. His only experience with “death” in medical school occurred when he was given a dry, leathery corpse to dissect; a “death” experience that was solely a way for him to learn about human anatomy. What's more, Gawande's medical textbooks

featured almost nothing on aging, frailty, or dying. As a medical student, for Gawande to understand how the dying process unfolds, how people experience the end of their lives, and how this affects those around them seemed to him beside the point. Instead, the purpose of medical school was to teach how to save lives, not how to tend to one's demise. In fact, Gawande reports that 97 per cent of medical students in the United States take no courses in geriatrics. Yet, within a few years of his medical career's beginning, Gawande encountered patients forced to confront the realities of decline and mortality, and he quickly realized how ill-equipped he was to help them.

Based on his experience, the author suggests that often, doctors are pursuing delusions in the hopes of circumventing what they see as failure: death. Frequently, doctors treat death as if it were yet another medical problem to overcome, offering treatments that they believe are unlikely to work. Uncomfortable discussing patients' anxieties about death, doctors habitually fall back on false hopes and treatments that are actually shortening lives instead of improving them. Specifically, Gawande tells of a determined young woman with terminal cancer with whom he felt ill prepared to confront the mortality of her illness. His solution was to avoid the subject altogether. Ready to try anything, the woman went through multiple rounds of chemotherapy, radiation, and experimental drugs, experiencing numerous side effects while steadily getting sicker. When her body could take no more, she and her family realized how unprepared for death they were. This account, like many others, illustrates how