

***Ageing, Gender and Illness in Anglophone Literature: Narrating Age in the Bildungsroman.* Heike Hartung. New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 252. \$148 (hardback); \$54.95 (ebook).**

Reviewed by: Devoney Looser, Arizona State University (devoney.looser@asu.edu).

The German word “*Bildungsroman*” (with *bildung* often translated as education and roman as novel) is a well-known term among students of English literature. It signals not only a novel of education but a novel of development—sometimes called a coming-of-age narrative. *The Oxford English Dictionary* identifies the emergence of the term in the language in the early twentieth century. Later twentieth-century feminist critics worked to revised its standard focus on young heroes to heroines, with some identifying the alternative tradition of a female bildungsroman. Rarely, however, have humanities scholars of any stripe taken seriously the “age” dimension of the *Bildungsroman*’s coming-of-age dimensions. Heike Hartung’s book shows us, in a carefully theorized and researched literary historical account, just how much we stand to gain by doing so. The *Bildungsroman*, as Hartung argues, “narrates age as life in time” (221).

Hartung begins her study in the late eighteenth century, not only because it saw the wide, popular emergence (often called the “rise”) of prose fiction, but because it also coincides with the emergence of what Michel Foucault calls “biopower,” the “beginning of the political control over life.” This concept, as Hartung persuasively argues, maps on to “the experience and representation of aging” (2). She identifies both “an individual and a biological story of development” in the emerging *Bildungsroman* (2). The historical and literary conventions of *Bildungsroman* narratives, as she tells it, are deeply marked by age-related matters, as well as by gender.

The book’s introduction offers useful insights and concepts from leading voices in age studies scholarship, showing how and why these thinkers should be brought to bear on the Anglophone *Bildungsroman* of the late eighteenth century to the present. The book’s opening section presents

its foundational arguments, as well as material on what Hartung calls the “burden narrative,” a form she identifies as common to stories of childhood and old age alike. She provides engaging readings of Anthony Trollope’s *The Fixed Period* and P. D. James’s *The Children of Men*, showing their “shared eugenic undertones” and transformation of “the burden narrative of old age into one of ‘demented’ or ‘diseased’ old age” (36).

Section two considers the eighteenth-century origins of the age-inflected *Bildungsroman*, with a particular focus on illness, looking at the writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*) and Frances Burney (*Evelina* and *The Wanderer*). Goethe, she argues, shifts “the epigenetic concept of growth to a concept of education” (58), providing “a composite concept of ageing which transcends the binaries of youth and age by including potentiality, open-endedness and error in its notion of development” (69). With Burney’s fiction, she considers the now-infamous foot race between two elderly women in *Evelina*, as well as paratextual materials.

The nineteenth-century novel is the focus of section three, with readings of the fiction of Maria Edgeworth (*Belinda* and *Helen*), Jane Austen (*Persuasion*), Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations*), and George Eliot (*Middlemarch*). As Hartung argues, using Franco Moretti, “one of the features of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* is its exploration of a social space that effectively dismantles the continuity between generations in favour of ‘mobility and interiority’” (115). She builds on her premise that “the emergence of the life sciences in the late eighteenth century has promoted a notion of development as a dynamic and teleological principle” (109). Especially interesting is her reading of *Persuasion*, arguing for our seeing Austen’s last completed novel as presenting “a differentiated picture of gendered ageing” and exploring different “ageing styles” (131; 139). Hartung also argues that Dickens’s texts “abound in images of old age, often represented in stereotypical figures who combine the attribute of old age with another social identity that is regarded as dangerous or troubling” (146). In her reading

of Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Hartung demonstrates that maturity is illuminated in "different contexts," with age categories "used as symbols in the novel's complex reference system and multiperspectival narration" (155).

Section four moves readers into the twentieth century and to dementia narratives, ranging through a large number of authors, including Diana Friel McGowin's *Living in the Labyrinth: A Personal Journey Through the Maze of Alzheimer's*, Thomas DeBaggio's *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Alzheimer's*, and Dutch writer J. Bernlef's *Hersenschimmen* ("Out of Mind"). The age-inflected and illness-inflected writings of dozens of other authors are considered, including Elinor Fuchs, Alice Munro, and Don DeLillo. Hartung also includes an extended section on Samuel Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*. The last section of the book argues that "the burden narrative of dementia becomes prevalent in the late twentieth century in the form of realistic rather than satirical or dystopian fiction" (36). Throughout the book, Hartung provides "new readings . . . of canonical novels from the perspective of age" (221).

Ageing, Gender and Illness in Anglophone Literature is a well-written, convincing book that will be of particular value to those who have yet to grasp the significant links among histories of fiction, gender, subjectivity, aging, and old age, from the eighteenth century to the present. Hartung strongly argues for the need for and value of our deepening such links. As she puts it, the *Bildungsroman* "turns ageing as a process into the central topic of the novel" (222). She generously gives credit to the many theorists of age studies and critics of the novel who have inspired her work.

If the book has a weakness, it is in selecting texts that have already received significant treatment in humanistic studies of midlife and old age. Trollope's dystopian *The Fixed Period*, and Dickens's *Great Expectations*, with its unforgettable Miss Havisham, have been investigated by previous scholars of age studies in the Victorian period. So, too, have the texts by Burney, Edgeworth, and Austen, previously treated by scholars of age and aging in the late eighteenth century and the Romantic period. To

be sure, Hartung builds on this work by previous critics, often in ways that prove fruitfully connective and that will serve to move our field forward. But the book will be particularly useful to readers for whom the ideas of age, and old age, as useful categories of historical analysis are not yet familiar ones. Hartung's book introduces and illuminates a rich body of literary, historical, and scientific material—on narrative, development, gender, age, old age, illness, and dementia—with grace and clarity, as well as with great critical skill.