

Fierce with Reality: Literature on Aging, edited by Margaret Cruikshank. Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2017. Pp. 192. \$29 (paperback); \$28.50 (electronic).

Reviewed by Jade Elizabeth French, Queen Mary, University of London (j.e.e.french@qmul.ac.uk)

Fierce with Reality: Literature on Aging, edited by Margaret Cruikshank, is a collection specifically created in the spirit of the nineteenth-century miscellany form. It hosts a wide range of works, from folk-tales to poetry, and from short stories to personal and philosophical essays. Literary images of “the old” are nothing new, but as Cruikshank suggests they are often portrayed negatively as “miserly, cranky, obsessed by sex but sexless, incompetent, drunken, bitter, childish, demented and worthless...” (3). These unrelentingly pessimistic portrayals are not there to elicit empathy from the reader. They have other work to do within the narrative that renders them as stereotypes; they might represent social decay, be truculent to change, or hold wisdom for a younger protagonist to learn from. In response to these stereotypes, Cruikshank’s edition seeks to find those “literary images of ‘the old’, [that] when skillfully and unsentimentally rendered, engage our emotions” (2). The writers included in this collection report on a range of experiences, facing both triumphs and traumas. Crucially, too, the pieces reflect on the intersectional experiences of aging, offering stories through the lenses of culture, class, religion, gender, race, and sexuality. Sitting within the frame of “lived experience,” the writers and themes go beyond ageist tropes to flesh out unique experiences of aging.

Although the collection rejects negative stereotypes, it does not shy away from painful experience. The introduction hopes that for younger readers “even its bleak passages will suggest to those under seventy that the country of ‘the old’ is not a forbidding or alien territory” (5). Bleakness and pain are important; indeed, some of the most vital contributions in the collection come from this perspective. In “Old Age” by Paul Moran, a man looks into the mirror and recoils: “Behind the image in the looking glass, I think I can see the distorted, ugly face of death” (56). Grief is another topic that is faced square on, as Moore’s speaker is left behind and proclaims, “I rock and watch / the road. No

sign of him / these twenty years” (119), and Lisa Asnis writes an article, entitled “Six Years After – Death of a Spouse” (121). But within these moments of sadness, loss, and pain, the impulse to write overtakes, even in the face of death, as Josephine Alexander declares: “I don’t want to die in my sleep... I want the experience of dying, even if I cannot write about it afterwards” (115). The desire to record experience runs throughout the book and provides an intimate insight into even the most difficult aspects of growing older.

The book is organized thematically, rather than chronologically. This format places the interdisciplinary works in conversation with one another as voices speak across time. A minor point of frustration is that there are no dates attached to any of the poems published (although each writer’s lifespan is included in their biography). However, ordering it this way creates a conversation by pulling together experiences of aging from different eras. Furthermore, these cross-generational conversations open up broad issues such as ageism, humor, and loss, as well as more idiosyncratic themes such as “Homage to Grandmothers” and “A Kaleidoscope of Images.” The miscellany approach means that there are also bound to be gaps in the collection and the reader is not provided with insight as to why certain themes are chosen over others. For example, a lack of illness narratives feels like a missed opportunity to engage with another experience that might have allowed for the inclusion of works by the likes of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker. The introduction laments the absence these particular writers in the collection as they passed away before sixty but dying too young lends greater power, perhaps, to living old. Overall, though, with its breadth of material the book would be a good teaching aid, offering a range of different insights and ways “into” the topics of age studies that could then be expanded upon to include other various viewpoints.

In the range of themes covered, one of the most prevalent topics that runs through the collection is that of intergenerational dialogue. Spanning time periods and generations, there are many creative pieces that speak back to youth in order to problematize its privileged status in society. These conversations might be meaningfully critical, as in Gloria Wade-Gayles’ piece: “We love young as much as we love white and we continue to privilege male over female” (65).

They may be like Ida VSW Red's freeing opening: "Now, I'm an old woman / free-ranging belly & thighs / breasts and desire / judging everyone younger" (71). They may be poignant, as in Masako Cohen's retold folktale "Cursed Mountain for the Old", where an elderly mother reaches the "age of abandonment" (61) and is left by her son in the snow during a full moon. Grandmothers, in particular, are hailed as a source of strength and knowledge. Although this runs the risk of reducing older women as an innate and instinctual source of wisdom, it also acknowledges the powerful place that intergenerational relationships hold and asks us to place ourselves, as readers, within a genealogy. The introduction sets out the need to appeal to both older and younger readers, and this is most effectively felt in the pieces that offer this traceable path to the future.

Overall, this is a collection that refuses stereotypes. It shows how literature can speak back to misconceptions. Writing is a way of opening up a subjective lived experience, and the more older writers share, the more varied and multiple a reader's understanding becomes. Breaking the monolith of "old age" is this collection's main aim and one it largely succeeds in doing. This is not to say there are no gaps, but the miscellaneous approach means this work sits as a part of a larger invitation. It is an encouragement to gather *more* stories, folktales, poems, and essays, setting them within Cruikshank's aim to open up the mysteries of aging and create dialogues between the young and old.