

*Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age*, by Sari Edelstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 224. £58 (hardcover).

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Early in Sari Edelstein's accomplished monograph *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age*, she quotes a lesser-known Melville character Redburn who refers to a less than enthralling book as "dry as crackers and cheese" (30). That description would not be fitting for *Adulthood and Other Fictions*, which engages readers on an illuminating journey through nineteenth-century literature to explore how writers of the time period resisted cultural pressure to define "numerical age" with "stable meaning" (47).

While some of the literary works are canonical (e.g., Henry James' "Daisy Miller" and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*), Edelstein includes selections that are less famous as well, such as Louise May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), which is shown as a "tool for reimagining the meanings attached to age" (71). Edelstein rightly takes literary critics to task for too often treating age as a metaphor and choosing "not to address age as a subject" in their scholarship, particularly concerning of nineteenth-century American literary regionalism (100). A prominent example of this scholarly neglect can be seen in the dearth of material on the collaborative novel *The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors*, which includes chapters by famous writers such as Mary Wilkins Freeman, Henry James, and William Dean Howells, one of the book's organizers. Edelstein provides shrewd analysis on Freeman's "Old-Maid Aunt" chapter, which she argues disrupts that tired trope by having the "old-maid aunt" Elizabeth Talbert be an object of desire for her niece's suitor – a plot development that angered Howells and James.

*Adulthood and Other Fictions* begins by invoking Leslie Fiedler's claim in *Love and Death in the American Novel* that American literature can be viewed as a preoccupation with childhood. Rather than merely parrot Fiedler's claim, Edelstein forges new ground by arguing that many American writers "used fiction to articulate alternative understandings of age and maturation" (8). This

premise allows her to examine divergent texts from “slave narratives” to short stories and novels that illustrate how concepts of age are created by culture and defy any inherent and fixed meaning.

Chapter one, “Immaturity in Melville’s America,” focuses on the author’s familiar works like “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and *Moby Dick* and his often-overlooked 1848 “semiautobiographical novel” *Redburn* to demonstrate that the narratives in his work thwart expectations of age as a linear progression toward maturity. Instead, Edelstein sees in various characters’ resistance to “acting their ages” a refutation of “linear development” and capitalism that rewards progress and achievement (4, 44). The next chapter, “Peculiar Forms of Aging in the Literature of U.S. Slavery,” examines how enslaved people could not be defined by the prescriptiveness of age since they were denied that knowledge by their captors who wanted them to remain in a childlike dependent state indefinitely. Using the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, along with WPA testimony of formerly enslaved people, Edelstein suggests that “longevity” was a “mode of defiance” to many African Americans who did not represent “elderly” people in their works with negative markers that became increasingly common during their lifetimes (62). The third chapter, “Little Women, Overgrown Children, and the Problem of Female Maturity,” focuses primarily on Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to explore how these early feminist writers challenged the idea that old age is a time of decline, and, in fact, demonstrated first-hand the opportunities possible in later life for women in particular. Chapter four on “Locating Old Age in Regionalism” looks at the fiction of Sara Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, who both display such a “range of old characters” that they defy simple classification and often cannot be distinguished as altogether different from “midlife or youth” (111). The final chapter, “Undoing Adulthood in the Work of Henry James,” mostly investigates his 1897 novel on divorce, *What Maisie Knew*, which Edelstein suggests “unsettles the binary between children and adults” (130); the progressiveness in this novel contrasts sharply with other representations in James, such as the unflattering portrait of the elderly Miss Birdseye in *The Bostonians*, showing that James also could be subject to the biases of his day.

Besides the introduction and analysis of these works by seminal authors who are often overlooked in studies on representations of age, *Adulthood and Other Fictions* distinguishes itself by connecting with important theoretical frameworks. Edelstein states, for example, that there has not been enough scholarly “attention to the intersection of age and disability” (13). She sets out to remedy this omission by reading stories like Freeman’s “A Mistaken Charity” from that viewpoint, noting how the autonomous older sisters in the story also must rely on others due to their changing physical needs without giving up their essential identities. In addition to referencing disability studies, the book also draws upon queer studies, in particular Kathryn Bond-Stockton’s concept of “growing sideways,” which Edelstein uses in her analysis of queer childhood. In several of the chapters, Edelstein applies the concept toward characters’ development as not always “linear or progressive,” which supports the main premise of the book that “adulthood” is a constructed “fiction” (84). While some of the theoretical underpinnings worked well for her analysis (e.g., Rita Felski’s work on the feminist Bildungsroman), there were a few spots that seemed bogged down in jargon, rendering the writing less clear than in other parts of the book. These few instances could have integrated the critical theory better with more detailed explanations. For example, in the second chapter, the following line, by Jacques Rancière, is not followed up with much discourse on its relevance: “The forms of subjectivization by which individuals and groups distance themselves from the constraints of ‘normal’ are at once ruptures in the sensory fabric of domination and ways of living within the framework” (68).

In contrast, an element of the book that worked extremely well was the inclusion of nineteenth-century documents that provided evidence of how age at this time was becoming formulated as a stage with defined expectations, often negative. Edelstein brings in paintings, like those showing “stages” of men’s and women’s lives, contributing to the idea that biological age has a linear trajectory, and even greeting cards since birthday cards were first developed in the United States in the 1880s. They often show youth passing away too soon, leaving adults to bemoan their “mature” life ahead. Of great interest as well are the magazine covers, articles, and poems that Edelstein discusses to show the

messages readers were consuming on what aging would involve – everything from how their bodies would become more grotesque (particularly women’s, of course), their creativity would decline, and their overall deportment would be seen as “over the hill,” the name of a poem from *Harper’s* that spawned the phrase sadly still in circulation today. The abundance of historical evidence in the book supports Edelstein’s claim that by the nineteenth century “age had become a stigmatized status” (94). By setting the stage with this historical backdrop, Edelstein is able to highlight how the American writers included in this book destabilize age constructs and offer alternative visions for imagining the life cycle.