

*Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman*, by Jeanette King. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xvii + 221. \$100 (hardcover); \$95 (paperback); \$74.99 (electronic).

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*Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism* evaluates the representation of aging women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction by drawing on relevant contextual resources from the fields of psychology, sociology, and medicine. In three deliberately organized sections, Jeannette King investigates the “tensions and contradictions” (xi) discernible between imaginative literature that seeks to embody the post-menopausal woman and the hegemonic discursive contexts within which such texts were produced. King’s foremost purpose, and her major contribution, is to argue for the ability of narrative and literary representations of the aging woman to generate alternatives to traditional conceptualizations of aging as decline, instead creating “gendered strategies for resisting the social consequences of ageing” (xvi). King convincingly asserts that narrative is particularly apt in depicting the nuanced subjectivity of the old woman that is often detrimentally absent from sociological and medical discourses within the predominantly Western, patriarchal tradition that she is critiquing. Through an effective blend of close literary analysis and an extensive survey of germane feminist theory and medical writing, King achieves her goal of demonstrating the possibilities engendered by narrative representations of aging women.

King’s text is structured chronologically, thereby charting shifts in literary form as well as highlighting discontinuities between fictive portrayals of and historical responses to aging women. The opening section of the text takes for its subject the crucial role of older women in the nineteenth-century women’s movement. King catalogs the “lived experience” of “old campaigners” to “challenge the negative normative discourses” (3) that viewed the older woman as surplus, immoral, and unhealthy. King’s first chapter provides an incisive commentary on the manner in which social and medical ideologies sought to

contain the old woman that initiates a nuanced comparative analysis of how the Old Maid caricature emerged from such discourses and was both reflected in and challenged by contemporary authors including George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. The methodology established in the first section of the book characterizes the remainder of King's study, including its compelling second section, which contains the bulk of her argument on twentieth-century fiction: that the older woman productively "become[s] the narrative center of consciousness" (38) following the turn of the century.

Each of the nine chapters in *Discourses of Ageing* feature the merit of King's perceptive interpretations and, on the whole, the remainder of the book progresses logically, treating a diverse range of issues, including King's analysis of twentieth-century literature and its relationship to second-wave feminism, which she contends was inherently ageist in its ideals. The fifth and sixth chapters are especially noteworthy, dedicated to the topics of the generation gap and autobiographical writing, respectively. In the fifth chapter, King seeks to demonstrate how discourses of aging are "culturally determined" (74) and develops astute close readings of Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* as well as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to demonstrate how fiction offers a means of bridging a generational gap that commonly places old and young women in conflict. Furthermore, King constructs a persuasive argument that, by positioning the old woman as possessing both personal and collective memories, Lessing and Morrison propose a shift from "conceptions of identity as difference from others to conceptions that stress identity with others" (99), thus producing a model of care that is intergenerational, incorporating the previous, present, and next generations. In the sixth chapter, King applies Robert N. Butler's concept of life review, the "dialogue between past and present selves" (101), positioning it as "uniquely valuable" in constructing fictional depictions of the interiority of the aged woman. In this context, King reads Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* to explore how the narrative consciousness of the aged female protagonist in each text serves to remind the reader of the richness of experience held by the old, countering the declensionist narratives in medical and social discourses against

which she positions her close reading. Following such cogent literary analysis, the third and final section of the book continues to demonstrate the possibility of locating a discourse of aging femininity within fiction amidst the relative silence on old age in twentieth-century feminist movements. It is in this part of the book that King returns to her central question of how fiction can produce a discourse of aging, and she offers Angela Carter's *Wise Children* as a principal model of such a text, one in which the central female character invents and performs her own "fiction of identity" (173). In King's reading of Carter, her previous discussions and interdisciplinary concerns come to a head and conclude in a meaningful way with her suggestion that age, like gender, is a socially constructed category that can be subverted and engaged with from an "oppositional perspective" (172).

King's strengths in *Discourses of Ageing* are many; her adeptness in literary analysis and her ability to present a compelling, coherent argument produce a convincing study of perceptions and representations of the old woman. The works she studies are international in scope, and her breadth across time is expansive, allowing her to productively draw comparisons in works published across the careers of theorists central to her discussion, including Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. King's choice of primary texts for analysis support her thesis and substantiate her claims that imaginative literature may be suited to represent the "dignity" of the older woman because it possesses the "power to constitute the subjectivity" (41) of such an embodied position. King successfully unifies literary analysis, social and medical discourses, and pragmatic understandings of contemporary Western culture in order to demonstrate the importance of narrative in recognizing the fullness of aging women.

*Discourses of Ageing* is an important text for any thinker interested in age and aging studies. King's theoretical framework is comprehensive, her literary analysis is extensive, and her engagement with destabilizing cultural myths surrounding age, illness, and gender is thorough. It is particularly through her focus on menopause that King challenges narratives of decline often associated with old age in Western culture. Furthermore, *Discourses of Ageing* serves to

commence a discussion of aging, gender, and invisibility that can be productively elaborated on by future studies. The criticisms King levels at the exclusionary practices of second-wave feminism are well-documented and raise questions concerning race and sexual orientation that are treated in some detail within this work, but certainly merit further consideration.