

Journey into the Deeper Psychologies of Later Life

Gray Matters: Finding Meaning in the Stories of Later Life, by Ellyn A. Lem. New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2020. Pp. 288. \$69.95 (Hardcover), \$29.95 (Paperback), \$29.95 (eBook).

Old Man Country: My Search for Meaning Among the Elders, by Thomas R. Cole. New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 190. \$31.95 (Hardcover), \$21.95 (eBook), \$34.99 (Audio CD).

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Life is a process of transformations. Like rivers that run to the sea, throughout life we are in processes of beginning and becoming, growing and reforming, and coming to points of culminations and ending. Brilliantly reflecting this flow of life-experience, Ellyn A. Lem's *Gray Matters: Finding Meaning in the Stories of Later Life* and Thomas R. Cole's *Old Man Country: My Search for Meaning Among the Elders*, use life stories, creative works, and significant career contributions to elucidate the many concerns and possibilities that lie ahead in the second half of the life-course. In doing so, they move beyond the current zeitgeist of the biomedical model of aging, one in which aging is predominantly characterized by processes of deterioration and pathology, and champion a humanistic study of older age. Their analyses and discussion of the lives, personal narratives, and creative expressions gathered from older adults reveal a journey into a deeper and more profound psychology in later life, illuminating key life-concerns and an experiential realism that is lived out in older age. Thus, these works celebrate the individual holistically, broadening and extending our understanding of older age and our journey to the final points of the life-course.

Especially to be noted throughout Lem and Cole's works are the personal narratives and stories they share. Recognizing that stories connect us with one

another and express our communally shared values and creeds, the authors' analyses are particularly revealing of the evolving social structures and psychological aspects of aging. Further, from an interdisciplinary perspective, attention to the personal narrative also joins researchers in humanistic gerontology with those in healthcare, geropsychology and social work, where hearing one's life story is key to the implementation of a patient-centered style of care (Nathan et al. 2022), and in facilitating the processes of life-review and reminiscence in older age (Gibson 2011). Thus, similar to the postulate put forth by Jan Baars (2012), that there is an art of living made accessible through the life stories of older adults, Lem and Cole show how in the rich personal narratives of older people we may discover a more realistic and human expression of the ongoing processes and experiences of later life. Indeed, it is only through our careful listening and regard for the personal accounts and insights of older people that we come to understand the uncertainties and crises that arise in later life, and find new insights and diverse interpretations of what it means to grow older. Realizing too, as the renowned psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1989) advanced, that perhaps it is in the last half of the life course, those years from our 40s and beyond, where we will encounter life's greatest adventures, find new opportunities for self-discovery and creative expression, and make our greatest contributions to our families and communities.

In our advance through the life-course, it is commonly observed that as we move beyond our teen years and into adulthood, we begin to distinguish the next challenges that appear on the developmental horizon. However, looking forward in our own living, as Lars Tornstam (2005) puts forth in his theory of Gerotranscendence, we are challenged by a "nearsightedness," that is, an inability to conceptualize, and clearly consider and contemplate our own later maturity and older age. Moreover, even though we may have an awareness of age-related changes in biological and physical processes, this nearsightedness, constrained by earlier experiences and schemas of understanding, limits what might be felt, imagined, and more deeply understood as one ascends to the end of the life-course. Thus, as younger and midlife adults, we may view the world egocentrically, from the perspective of just who and how we are – relatively

healthy, socially involved, strong in our commitments to careers and social obligations, and thus perceive older age solely as a time of decline and ailments. As Lem and Cole recognize, however, despite the nagging physical complaints or illness and health crises that arise in later life, we may also discover a new freedom in our self-expression, and a more profound understanding of what our living means. So that in older age we may feel an even deeper commitment to family and community, appreciate a more important purpose in our living, find new creative inspiration, and realize novel gifts and insights gained through our later life experiences that we may offer to and share with others.

With great acumen, Lem and Cole are methodical in their gathering of stories and research materials. Yet, contextualized within a western perspective that generally reflects a comfortable socioeconomic status, there is modest discussion of later life within non-Eurocentric communities, or of the experiences of older adults who endure poverty and encounter insecurities of food, housing, and other basic-life resources. These issues notwithstanding, both authors seek to address the existential uncertainties of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness; topics of ultimate concern, according to psychotherapist Irving Yalom (2020), that all people encounter and may struggle with in life. A key distinction in the authors' approach, however, is that Cole's work offers a much more informal and biographical discussion, and pursues insights and understandings exclusively gleaned from older men who have held prominent and often privileged places in society. In contrast, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* (1970),¹ Lem earnestly seeks to address gender inequality and fill a representational void in the literature by incorporating and emphasizing the voices, experiences, and interpretations of older women, and meticulously explores the portrayal of older age and later life through written works, media, art, surveys, and interviews. Recognizing the deeper insights that may be discovered in this multidisciplinary approach, Lem notes, "the rich and diverse examples from literature, film, and more... show divergent perspectives on the aging experience and offer testimony to counter fallacious generalizations about older people" (17). Further, striving to make

¹ For more information on de Beauvoir, see the [Forum containing three articles](#) published in *Age, Culture, Humanities* (issue 3).

known the essence of later life experiences, Lem astutely demonstrates “how creative works bring out the humanity of what older individuals grapple with, including the ordinary satisfactions and frustrations of a many-decade life” (25). Thus, in juxtaposition, Cole and Lem convey the apprehensions as well as fulfillments of older men and women, and tacitly bring into awareness age and gender stereotypes as well as cultural norms that promote inequalities, and that arouse moral concerns for social equality and equity.

In her *Gray Matters*, Lem is keen to note the many different aspects of parent adult-child relations, including role-reversal (e.g., child providing economic and emotional support for the parent), estrangements (e.g., parents and children socially separated and no longer in contact with one another), reconciliations (e.g., how to come to terms with relationship problems), and intergenerational reciprocity (e.g., fulfilling a sense of obligation to provide care for older parents in exchange for the support and care they provided while growing-up, or being immersed in a dilemma of what care, if any, should be offered in light of the feelings of past hurts, wrongdoings, or family dysfunctions). For adult children who are caregivers for their parents, Lem establishes connections with Erica Jong’s novel *Fear of Dying* (2015) and Noah Baumbach’s film *The Meyerowitz Stories* (2017), and discusses the concerns expressed for being the good daughter or good son, and taking care of one’s parents. Lending a deeper psychoanalytic interpretation, Lem considers the Jungian archetype of Hero and alludes to other archetypal personas that may overtake our life-story, influencing our feeling, thinking, and acting as caregivers for older parents.

Taking on ageist stereotypes (e.g., that old age is a time of incompetence, that older adults are asexual or not interested in romantic intimacy, that age-related physical and mental declines preclude ongoing personal development or sentience of being, etc.), Lem avers that “[d]espite the strong social indoctrination that older women’s bodies should elicit shame and scorn ... literature and women in real life provide counter examples that challenge these negative prescriptive messages to show that an older appearance does not have to come with critical self-scrutiny” (153). With concern for later life intimacy, Lem notes how Kent Haruf’s novel *Our Souls at Night* (2015), poignantly

portrays the companionship and intimacy shared by two neighbors whose spouses have long since died. Further, exploring the drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography of older adults, Lem suggests that beyond the noted age-related physical changes depicted by artists like Louise Bourgeois, Lucian Freud, and Cindy Sherman, that the images also reveal the complexities of later life, as well as the confidence and boldness of older persons who are living as more established and authentic people, celebrating a new elan and depth of perspective that is only revealed and comprehended through one's own experiences of aging. From both virtue ethics and psychoanalytic perspectives, this authenticity denotes an expression of the person's "true self" without influence of the ego or external factors, so that the older adult's living is directed by one's own unique creed of personal values and beliefs.

Lem recognizes the difficulties of declining health, changes in social roles and status, and financial insecurity that affect identity, and that give rise to greater incident of suicide in older white men (Conwell and Thompson 2008). Guided by Betty Friedan's *The Fountain of Age* (1993), Lem suggests that women may have a greater ability to shift one's identity to effectively cope with the demands of older age, having learned to be resilient in overcoming earlier life-challenges. Offering the generalization that "men may have a more difficult time of expressing their emotions on this series of life changes" (Lem 177), she embraces the premise Lynne Segal asserts in *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (2013), that perhaps women are more cheerful about the processes of growing older than men. In support of this reasoning, Lem notes the darker personifications expressed by male authors who depict older age to be like that of a scary movie, or that suggest they are the exemplification of gross physical and mental decay, and how these threats to self-image may lead to contemplation of suicide as a way of ending one's agonies. Providing balance, however, she indicates that perhaps these negative depictions of aging are humorous or self-protective expressions made by the authors, and that similar characterizations are also found in the literary works of women writers as well. Insightfully, Lem also identifies the varied ways dementia may be characterized within Indigenous cultures so that the elder's personal agency is still recognized.

For example, that the elder is no longer “present” to the community, or in their journey through the circle-of-life have “returned to a second childhood,” or that the person manifests insight into the supernatural world. Thus, Lem shows through her discussion of cultural narratives, literature, film, and the arts, the depth and great variety of experiences that may be encountered in older age, promoting an awareness that later life is much more than just a time of waiting for death. Importantly, Lem offers a discussion that may disseminate to younger people new ways of seeing older people – as individuals much like them, with concerns for romantic intimacy and relationships, and also involved in processes of becoming as they too encounter existential challenges and strive to live authentically.

In contrast to Lem’s work, in his patriarchal *Old Man Country*, Thomas R. Cole “seeks to reclaim and enhance the humanity of older men in the Fourth Age” (11). Using the metaphor of life as a journey, Cole premises his work “on the idea that however old we are, there is always a green growing edge in our story, always a hidden path of personal growth” (9). Thus, in contrast to Laslett’s (1989) distinction of a Third Age where robust health allows one to still live independently, engaged and fulfilled in life activities, while the later Fourth Age is a time of declining health and functionality that robs the person of self-agency, Cole introduces a reconceptualization of the Fourth Age. That is, that despite the physical and mental declines that may occur late in life, older people may still act autonomously and freely, finding and expressing a joy for living through their creative expressions, personal meaning making, and social relationships. Thus, incorporating but going beyond Shakespeare’s reductive characterization of old age announced in the play *As You Like It*, Cole suggests the Fourth Age as a time where one may experience a “second childishness and mere oblivion... but also... periods of sheer fun, appreciation of beauty, powerful religious and/or spiritual experience, community and family engagement, and continued work and artistic development” (11).

Using an interview method that does not incorporate a set order of questions for all respondents, Cole focuses on what later life is like for the person posing questions such as: “Am I still a man?; Do I still matter?; What is the meaning

of my life?; and, Am I still loved?” (14-21). Perhaps due to concerns for self-impression management or unresolved inner conflicts that such questions elicit, Cole notes “some conversations took place that never made the book” (12). Nevertheless, seeking to find personal understanding from the conversations with those he interviewed, throughout the monograph Cole shares the stories of the older men as well as about the milestone events of his own life. There is a sense that he finds empathic connection with George Valliant, whose father also committed suicide and who also experienced estrangement from children after divorce; shares a comradeship with Hugh Downey’s television broadcasting and his own film making; and, equally holds and is inspired by Dan Callahan’s great interest in the meanings and purposes of older age. With keen insight, Cole describes and characterizes the many ways older men may represent themselves in later life, and the novel life understandings and philosophies they may communicate: such as having a more profound understanding of the sacredness of each person’s life, as expressed in the universal spiritual and humanistic philosophies articulated by Sam Karff, James Forbes, and Ram Dass, or a greater realism and understanding of life purpose, as embraced by Red Duke, who in his cowboy pragmatism has inscribed on his tomb-stone how his life and death may be understood: “Piss on the fire, call in the dogs. This hunt is over” (45).

While Cole seems to imply that age-associated decline in libido and physical strength threaten what it means to be a man, his discussion alludes to other difficulties and challenges that may be encountered in older age, and gives hint of the redefining and shifting expression of self-agency that may occur. In a very personal way, Cole notes that from the many interviews he has discovered new insights that “leave me with great courage to live my own unfolding and uncertain story... less afraid of the future” (165). Thus, like a river that flows on to the sea, late in life Cole envisions a return to a point of origin, a place where, “my existential significance will continue to be wrapped up with my family... and the Covenant that God made with Noah and renewed with Abraham... feeling grateful for being alive, for having my ‘soul restored to me in compassion” (168). These non-secular concerns inspire Cole’s outlook on later

life and are also found in the stories of older men he interviewed, yet comparatively, are not characteristic of Lem's discussion.

Therefore, offering insights into the varied experiences of older men and women, Lem's and Cole's texts are recommended to be read as companion works. Importantly, the authors promote a critical analysis of personal and cultural narratives, literary works, film, art, and other artifacts that reflect our human-experiences, and that describe ways to understand how we may live and find meaning and purpose in later life. Both authors provide a captivating and informed discussion that casts light upon our deeper psychology, ways of defining self-agency, the influence of cultural frameworks, the existential concerns and uncertainties encountered in later life, and how we might be and how we might become in older age. They announce new freedoms and possible pathways in our transcendence into the latest moments of the life-course, and celebrate relief from age-related biophysical decline and illnesses that may be realized through our creative expressions and in a humanistic approach to living. Reflectively, similar to what is communicated in one's creative works and life's endeavors, they seek to address enquiries posed since ancient times: What is my origin? How can I be happy? What will the future be like? And, especially for the reader, they implicitly solicit: What will your older age be like?

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