

The Art of Caregiving in Fiction, Film, and Memoir, by Jeffrey Berman. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. 286. £90.00 (hardback); £28.99 (paperback); £26.09 (ebook).

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Although the human need for care is universal, caregiving is commonly deemed unpalatable and too difficult to discuss, especially where it is associated with ageing, infirmity, and death. Care has often remained hidden, and scholarly assessments of the rich representations of care to be found in cultural forms such as literary fiction, film, and memoir are few and far between. In particular, the figure of the caregiver has been neglected in such assessments. Berman's absorbing and incisive monograph brings such material to the fore, dealing head-on with what he refers to as "inconvenient truths" (17) and making a distinctive contribution to the recent surge of interest in care in the humanities.

The scope of Berman's volume is extensive. It engages with works from the nineteenth century to the present day by literary luminaries as diverse as Leo Tolstoy, Edith Wharton, and Alice Munro; by best-selling authors in the Health Humanities such as Atul Gawande; and by non-literary authors such as age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette. It also explores styles and strategies of caregiving in films by Ingmar Bergman and Michael Haneke. Throughout, Berman focuses on unsettling narratives that explore hard choices and that show, with unflinching clarity, the consequences of caregiving for the carer. His case studies are often holistic, mapping an author's broad contribution to our understanding of caregiving over a range of writings. Thus, his examination of John Bayley's remarkable work about caring for Iris Murdoch traces developments through the entire trilogy, while the chapter on Gullette draws on six of her published texts. Berman's attentiveness to the critical reception of his chosen works further enriches his analysis, a particularly notable example being his discussion of the impact – including in clinical instruction – of Haneke's 2012 film *Amour*.¹ Thus, each chapter weaves skillfully between a wide range of works that help to illuminate its principal focus. Berman is also

¹ See also [Gullette's](#) critique of *Amour* in *Age, Culture, Humanities* (issue 4).

scrupulous about context, remaining alert throughout to the changing historical parameters of caregiving, including increased longevity, changing family structures, the rise in end-of-life care, and the ethical challenges posed by the right-to-die movement.

The title of Berman's book is apt, for his study concerns not only the art required to create subtle and powerful depictions of caregiving, but also caregiving itself as a (difficult) art. Berman himself writes as both scholar and caregiver. Further, his preferred case studies are precisely those crafted by people who have first-hand experiences of caregiving and who are courageous and determined enough to share with us its intimate details. The mutual enhancement of the personal and the scholarly in this volume lends the whole the epistemological authority associated with immersive research, wherein researcher and object of study are closely connected, and researcher vulnerability may surface. Berman explores the challenges of writing about caregiving, the difficult balance that must be sought between truth and discretion, and the knotty ethical issues that are at stake throughout.

While his chapter headings sometimes crystallize a given tendency within caregiving (e.g., caregiving as 'divine gift' or 'progress narrative'; or, conversely, as 'murderous' or 'avenging'), such mapping is never made at the expense of the complexity and contradictions within each story. Key themes that thread through the volume include the caregiver's conceptualization of their evolving identity; the complexity of emotional response to caregiving, from compassion to rage; intergenerational care; the rationale for making creative works based on experiences of caregiving; and the stylistic features of the works selected, such as the challenging "rhetoric of dementia" (195) as elaborated by certain writers. Berman is sensitive to nuances of affect and embodiment as they are worked out at the boundaries between caregiver and care-receiver, and he homes in appreciatively on deft expressions of emotional entanglement, as well as rooting out any sugar-coating, sentimentalism, or platitudes that soften the hard facts about ageing, illness, and care. His delicate but determined challenges to Gullette's insistence on progress narratives and refusal of decline narratives make for powerful reading. Berman expresses disappointment at Gullette's

suppression of a memoir about caregiving for her father, and her elision of any depressing material from the 2011 memoir *Agewise* about caring for her mother. His frustration at her “highly edited vision of caregiving” (231) spills beyond the chapter devoted to her work and is revealing of a key debate about whether, and how, to represent the darker material that is often bound into relationships of care. The pursuance of this question constitutes one of Berman's key contributions to the field. His book is the richer for teasing out the ways in which decline is manifested in a wide range of narratives, as well as discussing the complex emotional and practical responses of carers to it.

Further virtues of Berman's book are its accessibility and readability. Narratives of caregiving can take us rapidly far outside our comfort zone, but Berman is a considerate and careful guide, drawing us deep into challenging material and encouraging steady reflection by the pace and lucidity of his argument. It is worth noting that some of the author's structural decisions are double-edged: for instance, the brevity of some of the sub-sections can feel limiting, and the book's expansive range of reference means that it sometimes suggests avenues it does not have the space to pursue (it is puzzling, for example, that Annie Ernaux's seminal memoir *I Remain in Darkness* is covered in a sub-section which, while entitled 'Annie Ernaux', comes in at less than a page). Overall, however, Berman's book is an engaging read, from which we emerge with a powerful sense of caregiving as a fundamental human experience; one which is, or will almost certainly be, our business. His study constitutes a profound meditation on human interdependency and vulnerability. It is an extraordinary example of what we can learn from the creative arts and from work in the humanities about ageing and care.

WORKS CITED

Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Agewise*. The University of Chicago Press, 2011.