

*Ageing Masculinities, Alzheimer's & Dementia Narratives*, by Heike Hartung, Rüdiger Kunow and Matthew Sweney. London, Bloomsbury, 2022. Pp. 224. £76.50 (Hardback), £26.09 (Paperback).

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While Alzheimer's Disease and dementia have been widely addressed in both cultural production and humanities research since at least the mid 1990s, recent years have seen a flourishing of representations across written, stage and screen formats. This is to be welcomed, increasing visibility and de-stigmatization and potentially producing a shift away from essentialist definitions, stereotypes, and objectification of patients. That said, dementia seems at times to be everywhere these days, and can all too often function as a metaphor or synonym for ageing, for anxieties around apocalyptic demographics of rapidly ageing societies and an accompanying "crisis of care," and even broader worries around the sovereignty of the self in an increasingly technologized age. While the growth in dementia narratives no doubt reflects a widening awareness of an increasingly prevalent disease, they equally call for a corresponding critical scholarship that seeks to explore their broader social and cultural underpinnings. This collection of essays, focusing on one such cultural framing – masculinities – makes a valuable and highly engaging contribution to that work.

The book is divided into four sections: 1. Conceptualizing masculinities, dementia care and embodiment; 2. The poetics of dementia and masculinity: Between eulogy and negation; 3. Masculinity and dementia in film: between laughter and violence; 4. Perspectives on masculinity and dementia in memoirs and fictional narratives. These headings are unwieldy perhaps, but they structure and shape the book across ten essays that benefit from a firm sense of editorial purpose and direction. The editors are to be further congratulated on the quality and international scope of contributions they have attracted, blending familiar and emerging figures in the field. While a short review cannot do justice to the full range of ideas and scholarship in the collection, and what is considered

noteworthy is inevitably skewed by personal interests, all of the essays have merit and value.

The introduction argues for approaching dementia/Alzheimer's Disease as a deeply gendered affliction within which male patients and male caregiving have yet to be fully explored. Noting a "cultural master narrative of dementia" which focuses on impairment, struggle, and decline, the editors propose a "shift of terrain" that acknowledges how dementia is culturally constructed and "is circulating incessantly in the public sphere . . . so as to make visible and interrogate what types of narratives are used, who is speaking for whom and what the silences and lacunae are in public conversation" (6). Setting out to approach dementia through intersectional approaches encompassing masculinity and ageing studies, the editors foreground a thematic motif of care, something that will come up in a number of essays. If, as has been traditionally argued, masculinity has been identified with autonomy and independence and male care understood as economic provision and protection, how might a more holistic conception that includes care-giving and care-receiving inflect such understandings? Clearly, an "ethics of care"-inspired approach that moves beyond narratives dominated by the perspective of the caregiver offers not only potential for more complex representations of patients but also of masculinities more generally.

Part One opens with an essay by Martina Zimmerman, who has written widely on cross-cultural understandings and representations of dementia. Zimmerman's chapter sets the tone of the collection as a whole and the editors use it to introduce themes and elements which will be taken up elsewhere and bookended by Heike Hartung's final chapter. In this comparative discussion of three first person accounts that respond to the ageing and/or dementia of the writers' parents – Michele Farina's *Quando andiamo a casa: Mia madre e il mio viaggio per comprendere l'Alzheimer* (2015), Nick Taylor's *A Necessary End* (1994), Jonathon Taylor's *Take me Home: Parkinson's, My Father Myself* (2007) – I found myself (and not for the last time) noting texts to consult later. While two of these deal with mothers (the collection's closing case studies will deal with men), all are written by adult sons and thus offer useful perspectives on men as carers in the broadest

sense. Each takes the death of their parent(s) as an opportunity to reflect on different aspects of what they have experienced, variously national histories and social attitudes to ageing, healthy ageing, or life-writing itself. For all the variety of contexts and self-awareness of the writers, Zimmerman nonetheless notes that each offer redemptive conclusions and hopes for modes of ageing for themselves in which they will maintain identity and sense of self.

Two other contributions round out this section on embodiment, which develop from social and theoretical contexts rather than primarily textual ones. While both are highly engaged and well written, they have a snapshot/partial quality that perhaps develops from a sense that they are condensed from wider studies. Nonetheless they raise issues and themes that find discussion elsewhere in the collection. Annette Leibing and Cíntia Engel write about dementia care in urban Brazil based on two “vignettes or incomplete narratives”: one exploring family dynamics around dementia care in relation to ageing parents and another focusing on patient-carer dynamics in a clinical setting. The writers submit that these reflections on the complexities of caring masculinities are “only a first step” and helpfully suggest that “accounts of masculinities should be longitudinal” as “masculinities vary across national and intergenerational settings” (50). Melinda Niehus-Kettler’s essay – “Becoming one of the Others: Embodying and eliminating fabricated natures” – offers what she terms a “thought experiment inspired by my kith and kin” (53), a highly theoretical essay that forges a concept of “body precepts and knowledge” as a means of conceptualizing the issue of personhood in dementia and that seeks to repudiate the notion that living with Alzheimer’s involves a loss of selfhood.

Part two contains several essays dealing with poetry. The most developed of these is Katharina Fürholzer’s subtle meditation on the Pia Tafdrup’s collection *Tarkovsky's Horses* (2010), a 50-poem cycle by the Danish poet on her father in the final stages of dementia followed by a discussion of Canadian poet Anne Carson’s “Uncle Falling” chapbook in her collection *Float* (2016) by Dae Jung and João Paulo Guimarães. In a multi-layered analysis of the former - a “biography of the father and the autobiographical experiences of a daughter who has slipped her father’s mind” (73) - Fürholzer posits that poetry allows

writers to do something that prose writers cannot: attempt to create a link between clinical symptom and literary style “in which the gutters between the individual poems can be understood as a visual portrayal of the dementia gaps of memory and narration” (75). The term “gutters” here seems especially suggestive, not only as the space where the reader is forced to create narrative connections but also, in another sense those spaces where fluid(ity) drains away. For Fürholzer, the intertextual relations within Tafdrup’s collection (such as the writings of Dr August Alzheimer himself and the film *Andrei Rublev*) offer similar gaps and half remembered resonances that resemble the fragmentary and de-subjectifying experience of dementia. Nevertheless, she proposes that the poems also suggest that there are facets that remain immune to dementia, that there are aspects of fatherhood that cannot be infected, “that the father will always remain someone who loved and was loved” (88). This theme of enduring personhood is also found in other essays.

Parts Three and Four focus on film, fictions and memoirs dealing with dementia and masculinities, which are engaged with through several interesting case studies and deft readings. Two chapters deal with contrasting dementia-themed international genre films (German comedy and a Korean thriller) that broaden existing textual and critical approaches. Stefan Horlacher and Franziska consider some recent dementia-themed European comedies, particularly Tim Schweiger’s often puerile *Honig im Kopf* (2014) and its English-language remake *Headful of Honey* (2018) and conclude that even if comedy has the potential to break with taboos and negative associations around dementia, these films are “more interested in staging the disease [for comic effect] than in adequately representing or understanding it” (121). The frustrations of fragmented memory have long been a staple of the crime film narratives, so it is perhaps inevitable that this trope would be extended to include dementia. Raquel Medina’s rewarding essay about Korean thriller *Memoir of a Murderer* (2017) examines what appears to be a clever reworking of the trope in which the leading character is an ageing serial killer who cannot remember his crimes due to cognitive decline. Medina moves beyond genre study however, by situating the film’s characters within a rich analysis of intergenerational and

violent masculinities in a patriarchal Korean context and examines how the film explores “philosophical considerations around the notions of time and space experienced by a person with dementia” (139). Medina has previously written about this film in her monograph *Cinematic Representations of Alzheimer's Disease* (2018) and this well-honed essay develops and benefits from that groundwork.

The final section of the book offers analyses of dementia narratives in fiction and memoir. Teresa Requena Pelegrí explores how “male privilege” manifests itself in Jonathon Franzen’s seminal portrait of male dementia *The Corrections* (2001), in order to examine how it is “qualified and modified by intersecting parameters of age and disease” (176). Michaela Schrage Früe considers two texts by young male European writers: the Austrian Arno Geiger’s *Der alte König in seinem Exil* [*The Old King in his Exile*] (2011; trans 2017) and Irish author Ian Maleney’s *Minor Monuments* (2019). Geiger’s book, inspired by his father’s dementia diagnosis and decline was something of a literary sensation, winning many awards and translated into 28 languages, while Maleney’s book – inspired by his grandfather – also attracted strong praise within literary journalism. Such success speaks not only to the achievements of these young male writers but also, perhaps, about how dementia has come increasingly to the fore as a seam of artistic exploration and potential for reflection, a practice which, as Hartung observes elsewhere, brings with it myriad ethical risks. In a detailed comparative study, Schrage Früe nonetheless finds two texts by writers who find “value in caring for their parent or grandparent” and thus provide “much needed counternarratives to popular representations of dementia” and which crucially “insist upon the unchanging personhood of the dementia patient beyond the disease” (159).

Heike Hartung’s final essay rounds out the collection on a high note that functions both a companion to Schrage Früe’s contribution and as indicated, a bookend to Zimmerman. Hartung considers the ethics of life writing at play in Tilman Jens 2009 memoir of his father, the German writer and intellectual Walter Jens (*Dementia: Farewell to my Father*) and what she identifies as its central intertext: Philip Roth’s *Patrimony* (2013). The author brings these into productive comparison and contrast by focusing on their attitudes to care and

“caring masculinities” in particular. Noting that caregiving has, in the past, been generally assumed and practiced as a feminine activity, Hartung observes how Tilman’s unsparing portrait of his elderly father plays out an “intimate violence” in which the “son uses the father’s own words against his present state of illness” (184), contrasting his previous status as an intellectual and self-determined subject with his current state of illness, raising questions around its ethicality in the process.

While Roth’s book similarly “exposes” his father at his most intimate and bodily vulnerable, Hartung notes that the son here assumes the role of caregiver – “like a mother to me” in the words of his father – which significantly changes the meaning and purpose of the memoir. This emphasis on attitudes to care liberates the texts as merely “representations” of dementia and foregrounds late life phases of father-son relationships that oscillate between intimacy and Oedipal conflict.

As the editors note in their introduction, while “dementia stories” proliferate across a myriad of forms and formats – blogs, expert papers, literary and moving image genres in traditional and digital media – there is, nonetheless, “a remarkable concurrence in the themes, images and stories told about the disease” (2). While the case-studies may not always deviate too far from such tropes, an intersectional lens of gender/ageing masculinities, a determinately international and transcultural approach, and a broad range of contemporary texts and intertexts, make this an original and rewarding collection.

## WORKS CITED

Medina, Raquel. *Cinematic Representations of Alzheimer's Disease*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018.