

Utopian Method: Reimagining Age Expectations and Intergenerational Relationships Through Reader Responses to Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* (1972)

Jade Elizabeth French, Melanie Lovatt, Valerie Wright

We analyze reader responses to Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* to suggest the novel offers a platform from which to imagine new, often utopian, thresholds of aging and intergenerational relationships. We suggest the way literature encourages utopian thinking is two-fold, allowing readers to reflect on the current state of the world around them and encouraging them to reimagine new possibilities. The aim of the reading groups was to use the novel to reflect on current age norms – socially, culturally, and politically – and reimagine new social futures relating to intergenerational relationships. In this paper, we discuss the findings from using *The Summer Book* as a platform to discuss attitudes to aging, time, intergenerational relationships, and age expectations. Participants opened up a number of avenues to reimagine age expectations, categories, and relationships, whilst also relating the fiction to their own experiences, which then often translated into discussions of how age-based stereotypes and intergenerational relationships need to be radically rethought. There were three main themes that we identified from these discussions: 1) countering age-expectations on the intergenerational island, 2) creating counter-narratives through the character of the Grandmother, 3) using the novel's relational behaviors and practices to imagine better futures for intergenerational relationships.

Introduction

Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* is an experimental, largely plotless piece of fiction that unfolds over twenty-two vignettes. The narrative follows an unnamed grandmother and her granddaughter, Sophia, over one summer as they live, play and work on a Finnish island that lies in a remote archipelago. Sophia's mother has passed away and her father is a ghostly figure, often in his study and most notable by his absence.¹ The main axis of the short scenes hinges on the relationship between the grandmother and Sophia. Without the father's overt presence, the oldest and youngest members of the family offer an example of an uninterrupted intergenerational relationship between two people on opposite ends of the life course. As we have recently argued, fictional depictions of intergenerational relationships can provide much-needed nuance and imagination into discourses that are often reduced to overly simplified "conflict v solidarity" or "problem v solution" binaries (French, Lovatt and Wright). As Vanessa Joosen further argues, analyzing cultural representations of characters of different ages in media is crucial to "recognizing [...] the multifaceted nature of each stage of life, and the complexity of relationships across age groups" (5). As a book that explicitly explores "the parallel journeys and trials that link people across generations" (Harju 372) and which appeals to both children and adults, *The Summer Book* is particularly suited to prompting "grand conversations" that make rich, intergenerational connections possible (Harju *Crossover Continuum* 263). In this paper, we analyze reader responses to *The Summer Book* to suggest the novel offers a platform from which to imagine new, often utopian, thresholds of aging and intergenerational relationships.

Our interest in framing age and intergenerational relationships as *utopian* stems from evidence of existing dissatisfaction with how older age and intergenerational relationships are currently depicted (French, Lovatt and Wright; Laceulle and Baars), and a need for alternative framings. Our conceptual understanding of "utopia" is informed by Ruth Levitas's "utopia as method," which encourages "genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures,

¹ Although the grandmother and father remain unnamed, Jansson capitalizes them as "Grandmother" and "Father". As such, we use both stylings throughout the text—"grandmother" to refer to the relationship and "Grandmother" to refer to the character.

combined with reflexivity, provisionality, and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures” (xi). For Levitas, “the core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively” (xi). As novels can offer readers a fictional scenario in which to imagine themselves or societies as being “otherwise,” they cohere with a “utopia as method” approach. Literary utopias can, in Peter Ruppert’s view, “emphasize the reader’s role as an active producer of meaning” and even “transform existing social beliefs” of the reader (5–6). As a genre, Kenneth Roemer argues that “utopian literature is a fascinating site for the expansion of reader-response and reception methodologies” (136). In fictional representations, a reader is offered access to an imagined experience that is not their own. Reading literature about older age can have “an activating effect” on the reader, by which the reader goes beyond representations in the novels and begins to apply what is read to their own lives and experiences, perhaps even making a change in their own society (Ruppert 52). The way literature encourages utopian thinking is two-fold, allowing readers to reflect on the current state of the world around them and encouraging them to reimagine new possibilities. The aim of the reading groups was to use the novel to reflect on current age norms—socially, culturally, and politically—and reimagine new social futures relating to intergenerational relationships.

In this paper we argue Jansson’s novel offers holistic representations of intergenerational relationships that challenge the apparent rigidity of normative age expectations of childhood and older age. In *Age Norms*, Bernice Neugarten suggests there are certain age-appropriate behaviors attached to different life stages that become “a network of expectations... embedded throughout the cultural fabric of adult life” (24). These expectations have a temporal dimension, acting as “social clocks” (25) that prompt “prods and breaks upon behavior” (25) such as starting school, getting married, and retiring. As Neugarten writes elsewhere “the line between childhood and adulthood is... fading” yet “[b]oth children and adults are usually exhorted to “act your age,” and they seldom misunderstand what that means” (*Changing Meanings* 75). Often the expectations regarding “acting your age” are culturally embedded (Gullette)

but they are also reflected in laws, policies, and organizational rules, that become “part of a general timetable we use for major life events” (Morgan et al, 95), each with their own socio-historical meanings and rituals across time. The way time and space are organized for children and older adults might lead to an entrenched generational distance, as those from different life stages become siloed and “separation by age continues to be accepted as normal and its consequences seen as benign” (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 643). In this paper, we present findings that challenge age-related expectations, as readers saw Jansson’s novel as actively collapsing the distance between the older adult and child, offering an example of “generational literature”, a genre that “emphasizes individuals over a life course and seeks to resist age polarized terms, such as the adult versus the child” (Jones 305). Although *The Summer Book* is based around two characters who are ostensibly defined by their ages—Sophia as child, and Grandmother as an older woman—there are often slippages in the presentation of their relationship and actions, which disrupt the expectations of such social clocks.

We suggest *The Summer Book* is a text that provoked utopian thinking, as participants displayed “reflexivity, provisionality, and democratic engagement” (Levitas xi) in discussions suggesting reader analysis can become part of the utopian method. Fiction created a space to speculate and respond to characters, settings and relationships, which in turn prompted participants to think about age norms and discuss the literary text in relation to their own lives. It has been argued in literary studies that “theorists of narrative form need to acknowledge the profound degree to which readers shape the fictional worlds they co-create” (Keen 119). Reading group participants become “resistant and active” (Littau 135) by co-creating these fictional worlds, reacting to fictional scenarios, building on them, and critiquing them. As Aagje Swinnen argues, for the field of literary aging studies, reading groups made up of lay readers of different ages can encourage rich readings that push beyond the ideological boundary of the text and be applied to real-world situations (265-266). There are, of course, limitations to reader response theory: there is “no universal reader” and intersectional identities mean readers develop multiple and differing

perspectives on each novel (Schweickart and Flynn 18). Whilst we are not making claims of an idealized reader, or that all readers would have the same response to *The Summer Book*, we found that the novel opened up responses on the topics of older age, intergenerational relationships, and age expectations that showed a desire for better relationships prompted by a text that also allowed room for imagining a better world in “real” life too. We argue that utopia is a useful and pertinent analytical tool to help us understand ways readers imagined new relational configurations between people of different ages.

With *The Summer Book*'s focus on the grandmother-grandchild relationship, the questions, ambiguities, and contradictions that arose from our discussions centered on the characters' approaches to aging. By reading *The Summer Book* alongside participant reading group responses and reflective diaries, we focus on the practice of sharing, dissecting, and analyzing stories. We present findings that suggest by engaging with fictional narratives the reading groups challenged their expectations of age norms without losing sight of the realities of both childhood and older age. First, we outline the parameters by which we approached *The Summer Book* in the context of reading groups. Next, we present the findings of our analysis where we argue that participants: 1) discussed the island as a setting that might counter age-expectations; 2) created counter-narratives in response to the character of the Grandmother; and 3) used themes such as role reversal, mutual respect and play as prompts to imagine a better future for people of all ages. Finally, in the conclusion, we discuss to what extent the reading groups created a space where participants could become “utopian readers” who analyzed and challenged the cultural representations in the novel to reimagine and understand their own intergenerational relationships and those of contemporary UK society.

Methodology: A reader response approach

The findings presented here are part of the ESRC-funded project, *Reimagining the Future in Older Age*, the aim of which is to examine the relationship between older age and future time. One of the project's objectives was to elicit suggestions as to what elements of a society are required in order to create a

less ageist society with greater intergenerational solidarity, where we are all encouraged to have more of a stake in the future as we age. To this end, we undertook a qualitative study that brought together adults of different ages in a series of reading groups. The aim of the reading groups was to explore readers' responses to cultural narratives of older age, future time and intergenerational relationships, as a way to prompt more imaginative, utopian narratives of how future time could be more valued in later life, without it being seen as a burden to younger adults. 28 adults of different ages over 18, all based in Scotland, were recruited into four reading groups, each of which met monthly, online, from June to October 2020.² Participants ranged in age from 21 to 76 and each group purposively comprised adults of different ages, to allow for a range of perspectives from people of different ages who had different experiences of the life course³. Not everyone attended all the discussions due to a range of factors including changing commitments and personal circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers shortlisted novels featuring themes of aging, time and intergenerational relationships, and the groups then chose which ones to read.⁴ Discussions were initially prompted by questions circulated in advance by researchers but were not confined to these initial questions.⁵ Out of four groups, three read *The Summer Book* and reported back in personal diary reflections as well as in group discussions.

As a discipline, “aging studies” has a tradition of fruitfully placing social science and literary methods in dialog. The methodological approach for this paper allows us to bring together elements of both disciplines through the framework of the reading groups. Aagje Swinnen and Cynthia Port suggest that

² We give participants' ages throughout this paper but so do without comment – this is to show the age-ranges involved in the discussions without drawing conclusions about their contributions based solely on chronological age.

³ For more details on the composition and context of the reading groups, see French, Lovatt and Wright.

⁴ These novels included: Neil M. Gunn's *Young Art and Old Hector* (1941), Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* (1972) and Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016), speculative fictions such as Yoko Tawada's *Last Children of Tokyo* (2014), Margaret Peterson Haddix's young-adult novel *Turnabout* (2000), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and John Wyndham's *Trouble with Lichen* (1960), as well as historical fiction such as Lars Mytting's *The Sixteen Trees of the Somme* (2014), and Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987).

cross-fertilization from both literary studies and social science can build understanding, as fiction imaginatively illuminates ideas about people's lived experiences by nuancing the hypotheses and data gathered through a sociological perspective (11). For Barbara Mitsztal, interdisciplinary connections are a symbolic process by which "works of fiction can be a source of ideas about people's experience and self-making practice and that these ideas can be further worked out by social scientists whose hypotheses can, in turn, be illustrated and illuminated by literature" (5). Although there are distinct disciplinary boundaries, most notably in the methodological approach, Avery Gordon further notes that the "border is not quite as secure as institutional mandates presume" (25). Similarly, narrative gerontologists have long connected the fictive impulses of telling a life story with the underpinnings of literary studies. For Gary Kenyon, Ernst Bohlmeijer, and William L. Randall, the way the life course is 'storied' through "biographical or narrative dimensions [of human life] is... essential... if we want to seek a balanced and more optimistic perspective on what ageing is about" (xiii). Narrative gerontology offers a distinct model to bring together the methods of social science and literary studies, as this approach emphasizes the importance of storytelling in social life, particularly where age transitions and expectations are relayed and understood.

Reader-response analysis has the potential to shed significant light on experiences of aging by using different novels to "engage and mobilize readers' unexamined attitudes and assumptions" (Morrison 3). In practice, reading groups have been found to provide spaces for open communication and reflection as well as building blocks towards better practice. The Reader Organization works on this very premise, using a shared reading methodology where a text is used as a prompt to facilitate personal sharing of experiences, and connections between readers particularly assessing the health benefits of the approach (*Our Research*). Healthcare professionals in geriatric medicine have used *The Summer Book* to communicate ways aging might feel emotionally and to improve communication and connection with patients (Roitto and Mellingsæter). In their *Being Human* festival event, Sian Adiseshiah and Amy

Culley used utopian fiction and thinking to connect with people aged sixty and over, to enable participants to share their hopes and fears for the future (*Being Human*). Helene Lohman, Yolanda Griffiths, Brenda M. Coppard, and Linda Cota suggest reciprocal learning occurs between people of different ages and can take place during book clubs and reading groups, as “intergenerational book discussion groups provide an opportunity... to understand generations from a historical perspective and uncover each other’s values and beliefs” (103). In our project, the intergenerational reading groups provided a way of discussing participants’ own perspectives alongside the fictional representations to find where commonality and differences were found (for examples of this see French, Lovatt and Wright).

Findings: Challenging age norms with utopian ideas

In this section, we discuss the findings from using *The Summer Book* as a platform to discuss attitudes to aging, time, intergenerational relationships, and age expectations. Participants opened up a number of avenues to reimagine age expectations, categories, and relationships, whilst also relating the fiction to their own experiences, which then often translated into discussions of how age-based stereotypes and intergenerational relationships need to be radically rethought. There were three main themes that we identified from these discussions: 1) countering age-expectations on the intergenerational island, 2) creating counter-narratives through the character of the Grandmother, 3) using the novel’s relational behaviors and practices to imagine better futures for intergenerational relationships.

Countering age expectations on Jansson’s intergenerational island

Jansson’s island is inhabited by three main characters—Sophia, her Father, and her Grandmother. In a study of family life in cities, islands have been used as a metaphor for how intergenerational communication can break down, suggesting that urban life is spent on several age-defined “islands” where children, adults and older adults tend not to interact (Aries). In many ways, Jansson’s novel offers the inverse of this metaphor, whereby the island offers

the chance for a family unit to come together over one summer. In *The Summer Book*, Jansson acknowledges that the reader acts as an interloper into the island's rituals: "Here you come, heading into a tight little group of people who have always lived together, who have the habit of moving around each other on land they know and own and understand, and every threat to what they're used to only makes them still more compact and self-assured" (30). The 'habit of moving around each other' also comes with flaws, as Sophia's father is often absent from the narrative and Sophia's mother has died but her loss is never really discussed. One habit that is never questioned is the father's implicit authority, even as he spends most of his time working in his study.

Although the father is the character who makes the most age-based assumptions about Sophia and the Grandmother's abilities on the island, he is also overlooked as a generational influence. In this section, we present findings that examine the intergenerational island as a setting in which a variety of age expectations play out in a "seemingly self-contained miniature world" (Lowenthal 203), offering a microcosm to examine readers' responses to the age expectations between characters.

Although readers in the group agreed Sophia's father was largely absent, they felt he still exerted authority and often patronized Sophie and Grandmother by presuming their limitations. Jonathan (21) felt that in the vignette "The Visitor" the father's authority borders on age discrimination. The father leaves the island without inviting the other two characters and, as Jonathan notes, "there's all these kind of metaphors about how, I don't know, [the grandmother] feels, kind of like an object and not really thought of as a human being anymore and not worth consulting". On the other hand, Florence (55) noted, in the vignette "Morning Swim", that at first both the Grandmother and Sophia are "challenged by their age, both being told what to do to keep safe and not trusted by Sophia's Father". In Jansson's novel, there is a real terror that underpins Sophia's understanding of these boundaries, as the Grandmother pushes at them:

"[Grandmother] walked out on the rock and on towards the ravine.
"We're not allowed out there!" Sophia screamed.
"I know," the old woman answered disdainfully. "Your father won't

let either one of us go out to the ravine, but we're going anyway, because your father is asleep and he won't know" (14–15)

However, the father's authority is momentarily displaced, as he sleeps, and Grandmother not only contravenes his rules but also encourages Sophia to swim in deep water for the first time. In another vignette set on the beach, "Dead Calm", the rebellion against the father grows, when he sets up a space for Grandmother to rest out of the sun with a parasol and air mattress. This space represented to Eleanor (62) "the rules by which Sophia and the Grandmother are expected to abide" as they are encouraged to stay put and not wander too far. Each disregards this rule and goes their own way – Sophia to swim, Grandmother to smoke – before rejoining to try and chip garnets out of the stone. The fruitlessness of the task made Eleanor wonder if this is "a metaphor for Papa's rules and the apparent limitations of their respective ages?" Eleanor ends her diary entry on a reflective note:

I'm touched most by the moment when she thinks 'damned child' and 'confounded children' followed by 'that's what happens when people (the people who are old enough) won't let you do anything fun.' Upon returning to the rock, she further rebels by deliberately sitting down beside, not on, the air mattress, out from under the protection of the 'violet parasol'.

Here, the Grandmother's frustration at Sophia is read by Eleanor as poignant as the child's rebellion against the rules is mirrored by the Grandmother refusing to sit within the boundaries demarcated by the father. For Vanessa Joosen, overlooking the "generation in between," or what our readers referred to as the middle generation, can reinforce generational conflict even as other intergenerational solidarity is achieved (*Intergenerational Solidarity*). Conflict was acknowledged, as readers responded to the father as an absent but authoritative figure, the main instigator of the age expectations placed upon Sophia and her Grandmother, even when these manifested in a protective manner.

Sophia and her grandmother's deviance from age expectations was heightened for readers in the interactions between Sophia and her friend

Berenice, and Grandmother and her friend Verner. These two outside visitors to the island helped readers to distinguish between actions of Grandmother and Sophia, compared to two characters whose behavior conformed more to age expectations. Bernice is terrified of interacting with the family and the natural surroundings, realizing she cannot breach the “indivisible unit” of the “island household” (29). Sophia sees her friend Berenice as childish, insipid, and fearful, lacking the bravery Sophia has had instilled in her by her grandmother’s challenges. Similarly, when Grandmother’s friend Verner visits, he brings to the island a sense of finitude, drinking “[t]o the final landscape of our old age, as summer fades” (95). For the readers, Berenice and Verner fit too easily into the age expectations society sets for them: Berenice acts too childishly, and Verner conforms too quickly to his family’s view of his old age as a burden. Sanny (65) saw “the comparison between Sophia and her friend "Berenice" [as...] demonstrating how children of similar ages mature at different rates depending on their relationships and experiences”. Similarly, Greta (70) saw the comparison between Grandmother and Verner as “a good example of classifying people [...] both of them are old and the expectation that because you’re old you act in similar ways” but “the minute he arrived... he irritates the hell out of her” and he isn’t “happy about her challenging a lot of the things” he felt about being old. In both examples, readers appreciated the contrast between the characters as an example that not all children and older people have homogenized experiences.

Where differences might be assumed between the child and older adult, readers instead found that age distinctions were unimportant. Compared to the tensions between those in shared generational cohorts (Sophia and Berenice, and Grandmother and Verner) readers found the solidarity and similarities between the youngest and oldest island inhabitants. Jess (30) suggested Sophia and Grandmother’s “relationship feel[s] timeless – they could be any age at any time”. The timeless aspect challenged the categories and linear progression of fixed life stages. Jess continued: “I often forgot their ages as I read and had to keep reminding myself. They appear to bridge the gap between their generations – one becoming younger, the other older – to find each other (Grandma

crawling around the island with Sophia is a good example of this)". Katherine (76) noted that expectations for "the elderly or the young or the whatever it happens to be, really quite restrictive" but in the book "there was [...] respect and care" between the two characters that neutralized any condescension from either party.

Building on these points of connection, readers not only engaged with the metaphorical aspects of *The Summer Book* but also began to imagine changes that could be made in their own communities. One example of this can be seen in a conversation where four participants began to develop each other's ideas to imagine new ways of connecting across generations. Jonathan (21) began by saying "there must be a way of building some sort of care service... that's kind of a lot more open to the community where people can just interact rather than kind of you only visit a home if you're visiting a relative". Next, Rose (68), remembered a program near her that brought four-year-olds together with older people in sheltered housing: "but I think for me it would be more about a community where we built houses that were like the community where old people and young people didn't all end up in different places". This led Gillian (28) to suggest a refunding of community centers where you could have "community hubs that have kids' groups and groups for adults" and Katherine (78) suggesting people investigate "adopt a grandparent" schemes. The underlying loneliness and isolation engendered by the island moved from being fictional to conceptual, allowing the participants the opportunity to reflect on ways age expectations manifest as isolation in their own communities and how this might be mitigated. Underlying the four participants' suggestions is that Jansson's island achieves something missing in modern policies: bringing together older and younger people, in a dedicated space, which allows for genuine and supportive intergenerational connection. Arguably, Jansson's island setting offers a type of utopian experiment that breaks down institutional barriers between two generations for the summer—the grandmother and grandchild. The island and the relationship are both self-contained and so offer a microcosm to examine how age expectations are enacted—and rebelled against—by the two main characters despite their differences in life stage.

Character: The relatable Grandmother and readers' counter narratives

Grandparents in the Global North are subject to many expectations about their behavior and role within a family relationship, such as educating grandchildren, passing down stories, and undertaking unpaid care (Thiele and Whelan; Bernal and de la Fuente Anuncibay). Even though grandparents play an active role in families and there are fewer expectations about how old one will be when they become a grandparent (Bernal and de la Fuente Anuncibay), depictions of grandmothers still typically represent them by a series of cultural markers: the image of a woman who has white hair in a bun, sits in a rocking chair, and wears glasses. Crawford and Bhattacharya's survey of children's picture books from three different geographic locations in the United States offers one contemporary example of the homogeneous grandmother figure. Although there are some nuances in modern children's books, it was found largely that "ageist visual stereotypes have been maintained" (Crawford and Bhattacharya 140). In an article exploring semiotic representations of grandmothers, Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Rosamund Moon argue that two examples of stereotyping occur where grandmothers are either seen as positive domestic figures, or as transgressively acting inappropriately for their "age," which the researchers find are equally ageist and sexist in their deployment. In this section, we present readers' responses to Jansson's *Grandmother*, a figure who was read by the majority of readers as "authentic" and, as such, offers a counter-figure to the stereotypical grandmother, be she homely or rebellious.

One issue with the lack of diversity in the portrayal of older women and grandmothers is that they are either reduced to stereotypical images, like those outlined by Patricia A. Crawford and Sharika Bhattacharya, or they do not appear at all. Kathleen Woodward describes women's aging bodies as rendered "paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible" (163). For Woodward, visual culture aims to "erase" the older woman's body: "first we see it, then we don't" (163). The paucity of diverse representations of older women in contemporary society has been further challenged by Naomi Richards et al, who have sought

to create “alternative” representations of older age. Grandmother, as a character, offered readers something outside of the usual superficial characteristics associated with older women: be that a reliance on a stereotypical physical portrayal, or, as a drastic contrast, the invisibility of their role. At first, Ashleigh (37) felt “really frustrated with not having an identity for the grandma” and wondered if it was “a bit of a comment on that kind of invisibility of older people.” But Ashleigh continued that the way Jansson drew the character “kind of made me feel like I got to know her more through her questions and her [...] very funny kind of turns of phrase and her moods.” Rebecca (48) also saw the Grandmother as “well defined” and “believable,” arguing that the novel challenged “typical” stereotypes of older women and grandmothers, who are “either sort of really evil, like, wicked grandmas or they’re really, really nice and just lovely and there’s no kind of, you know, edge to them at all.” Participants pointed to the moment the Grandmother rolls up a bundle of clothes to make it look like she is lying underneath a parasol, in order that her son won’t look for her as she goes exploring and smoking, suggesting a rebellious nature and “edge.” For the readers, the character goes beyond the superficial, physical characteristics of grandmotherhood to give a sense of her interiority, personality and emotional landscape, highlighting her distinctive language and actions that could not be universalized and that are not age-bound aspects of herself.

The essence of believability and authenticity that the readers identified in the grandmother’s character led them to create their own counter-narratives during the reading groups (Laceulle and Baars 37–39). For Hanne Laceulle and Jan Baars, counter-narratives can be used as a “strategy” that provides alternative stories to challenge stereotypes of aging and offer authentic representation that has an intergenerational criterion: “viable counter-narratives should... both challenge the way younger people perceive later life, as well as the way old people experience their own ‘age identity’” (39). One alternative story was noted by Katherine (76), who was impressed that the novel highlighted the Grandmother’s status as an older adult as a contradictory and complicated experience. She felt the novel would be a “great template for a good old age” because “the elder one [is] being respected and treated with compassion and

not condescension, assimilated into the family life as an integral part, and not (as is so often these days) cast aside as being of little interest". The Grandmother was, for Katherine, an "ideal" character to work towards—someone who was both "innately rebellious" and "still made the effort," portraying a model type of older person. Furthermore, Katherine wrote that the Grandmother "seems to have accepted her own demise as a natural part of things, with neither resentment nor regret, and again—ideally perhaps—that is the best way." Rose (68) echoes this aim as she was inspired by the "possibilities in the relationship between very young and very old, showing that it doesn't have to be sentimental, as it's sometimes characterized." The "possibilities" of showing a character who was "feisty," "unconventional," unsentimental, and as standing outside of her expected role and life stage stood, for Rose, in powerful "contrast to many more traditional portrayals of old women." For Katherine and Rose, the Grandmother's encompassing of feistiness and frailty, resistance and acquiescence, and her anticipation of death with no resentment or regret, provided a more clear-eyed, honest, and ultimately welcome depiction of older age than is often the case. This can be read as utopian in Levitas' advocacy of the term as something holistic and contingent, rather than fixed and reductive, as well as offering a counter-narrative to the stereotypical depictions of grandmothers often encountered in literature.

Character relationships: Role reversal, mutual respect, and play

Role reversal was seen as another way that Sophia and her grandmother debunked age expectations. For Rose (68), the most interesting dimension of the age-related elements was that "the roles kept reversing and [...] they both kept acting as though they were the other one's age." However, this role reversal was not necessarily age-coded (a child-acting-adult or vice versa) but rooted in subtle exchanges of power. For example, Rose continued that "sometimes the wee girl was in charge and sometimes the granny came back in charge again, but it was all very subtle I thought." The relationship between the two characters was viewed as being balanced. Jonathan (21) picked up on the way the characters "mutually support and learn from each other" and that "it's not just in one direction." In terms of the Grandmother and Sophia, Katherine (76)

felt they held a “mutual respect” and Fiona (42) saw them as “co-conspirators” whose characterization did not present them as perfect: “there was a lot of understanding there, you know, despite the fact that they fought.” The moments where the grandmother and granddaughter interact without interruption were seen to manifest in small gestures.

By contrast, readers did not always construe the mutual bond between grandchild/grandmother as positive. As Greta (70) noted, “the thing they shared was that they were both people [...] who other adults thought shouldn’t have a say... they were both being told what to do.” Greta suggests that Sophia and the Grandmother are forced into their age roles because others disregard them, for example, when they are told not to swim or are uninformed about the father’s party. As Greta continued:

there’s an expectation of acting in a certain way because you’re a certain age and that’s what I think the grandmother and the grandchild shared, you know, obviously different expectations of them because they’re different ages and I think that’s why there’s a lot of tension around between them because they’re not necessarily, this sort of fantasy story about going to your grannie’s is great and you have a great time and, you know, it’s not the reality because they’ve been pushed into that situation because of what’s happened in their family

Here, Greta noted that the novel is enacting a sort of “fantasy story” that was rooted in the playfulness and mutuality of the characters. Greta felt what was shared instead was an outsider status, one that didn’t necessarily bring the characters together holistically but rather because they have been ‘pushed into’ a circumstance that is dictated by their respective ages.

For the most part, though, readers agreed that even though the child and grandmother shared experiences, a successful intergenerational relationship did not mean being in perfect harmony with one another all the time:

ELIZABETH (60): I think it was quite a scratchy relationship, I mean, they’re quite bad tempered with each other but also I think they’re in a way on the same side against the third lot of generation that’s in there which is the father and the mother

who's dead, and so it's almost as though... the parts that are from the grandmother's point of view, she's partly protective but she's partly also finding Sophia an irritation and also treating her as an equal in a battle against that middle aged generation that's trying to prevent either of them doing what they want. So I think it's more complex than just the child and the grandmother, and similarly I think Sophia sometimes she's more acting with her father's side to look after her grandmother and sometimes more with her grandmother to rebel.

The relationship between the Grandmother and Sophia offers an example of “processes of oscillation between polarized juxtapositions” that occur within intergenerational relationships, such as those “between solidarity and dependence, between moral obligations and self-interest” (Lüscher 196). Readers identified with the ‘scratchy relationship,’ which moved, as Rose (68) put it, between being “friends, equal, caring, sometimes combative, loving, comedic, learning, unconventional in some ways, complementary, understanding, respectful.” Ashleigh (37) saw in the “generational shift” a recognizable relationship between “Sophia [as] an irritant to her grandma but at the same time they really need each other as well.” The multi-faceted representation of the characters and the intergenerational relationship between grandmother and grandchild was seen to be “real” and “representative.” As Rose continued, “in some ways their relationship is typical. There is a lot of genuine, unconditional love between them, even though they can fall out and have arguments.”

The way the two characters played together was seen as a particularly transgressive way of altering the expected behavior in both older and younger life stages, without infantilizing older people. Jonathan (21) noted that this play also translated into the way the pair approached storytelling, making up their own realities. Christine (53) highlighted the vignette “Playing Venice” as an example of a creative world being built. In this vignette, Sophia and Grandmother play in the island's marshes building gondolas for a Grand Canal. After a heavy rain falls, Sophia is devastated that their miniature world has been washed away, and Grandmother spends the whole night building a new Doge's

Palace, even going so far as to make the new version look like it has been rescued in the flood by emptying her ashtray and rubbing it into the model. The attention to detail from Grandmother, and her willingness to empathize with Sophia and encourage her imagination without coddling her was a “lovely [...] image of a grannie playing like a child.” Rebecca (48) saw their playful relationship as a way to challenge Sophia’s father as in their “world of stories they can do whatever they want, they’re not sort of constrained by what society says they can do or, you know, so that’s maybe another reason that they don’t necessarily want to have the facts if you like.” Through play, creativity and storytelling Sophia and her Grandmother create a new world for themselves, one that is not bound by age-related expectations. This coheres with Levitas’ holistic view that we should aim to “flourish” and adds to critiques of work that reduces creativity in older age to an “intervention” intended to improve health and wellbeing outcomes in a narrow, instrumentalist sense (Gallistl 2601).

Some readers felt the creative relationship between Sophia and the Grandmother was enabled *because of* their different ages. Florence (55) felt both characters’ “life at this stage is intertwined and on the outer reaches of “adult” neither carrying the full weight of responsibility.” She suggests that the middle generation—represented in *The Summer Book* by the father—cannot engage with play because of work and other duties. Considering this, participants began to put forward ideas that would encourage space and time for people of all ages to creatively engage. Kirsty (36) suggested “a younger retirement age might [encourage intergenerational friendship] if there was a wider span of people enjoying the same activity together?” Elizabeth (60) suggested that a Universal Basic Income would free people up to do more voluntary work and Jonathan (21) suggested “[A four-day week] would massively free up people to do what Sophia and her grandmother are doing which are, you know, exploring and playing and being creative [together].” As Florence continued in her diary, the island setting allowed the creative relationship to “[flourish] in the simple, confined, and natural surroundings of the island.” Through play and storytelling, the central intergenerational relationship in *The Summer Book* emphasizes the importance of having autonomy to experience age-related

transitions on one's own terms, rather than having them ascribed (for example, by the father). In this sense, we argue that here we see an example of readers using utopia as method as they discussed the novel holistically, reflexively, democratically, and provisionally (Levitas) and generated real-world policy solutions (UBI, four-day week) based on their reading of the fiction.

Discussion and summary of findings

On the face of it *The Summer Book* does not necessarily aim to directly present its reader with a “utopian” model of society. For example, the absentee presence of the father reminds us that Sophia and her Grandmother are enacting a utopian vision of what an intergenerational relationship *could be* on the island, but which might not be realized in wider society. Jansson offers a world that seems like one we might understand and identify with. Yet, the solitude and intense focus on the intergenerational relationship on the island between Grandmother and Sophia offers the chance to “experience vicariously an alternative reality” (Roemer 79) where the benefits of mutual respect, solidarity and scratchy relationships can flourish and be explored. In its normality, sometimes banality, the book offered ways for readers to “perceiv[e] the imaginary culture as being significantly better than the present” (Roemer 79). Through the island setting, readers broadly felt that the way the oldest and youngest characters were thrown together in this environment showed the positive elements of a hermetically sealed society, insofar as it provided an environment to experiment with shared experiences across the life course. Participants in the reading groups suggested it was important not to idealize the intergenerational island because it did not include the middle generation; the father is silent or, when we do hear his voice, often a figure that perpetuates age expectations. The relationship between the Grandmother and Sophia is like the island setting itself—both “sure and self-sufficient” (30) but also entrenched by its own rituals and environment. As such, the intergenerational relationship functions like an island narratively might in a utopian novel, becoming a self-contained case study from which to imagine new systems and ways of doing things. Although the island does not always act as a truly cohesive

intergenerational space (indicated by the father's authority, and the tensions with Berenice and Verner) participants did feel it was a space in which grandmother and granddaughter could exist as themselves rather than "child" and "old woman." Readers did not shy away from the difficult aspects of intergenerational relationships and discussed practical solutions that could work in their own communities, such as creating intergenerational community hubs. Thus, *The Summer Book's* central relationship between the grandmother/grandchild not only challenged age expectations but also offered utopian possibilities for ways intergenerational relationships might be better cultivated in society.

The relatability that readers identified in the Grandmother further offered a way of creating counter-narratives that sought out unconventional representations of grandparents in literature. Brand actively calls for "more nuanced understandings of age deployed as fictional and utopian characteristic[s]" to encourage new ways of thinking about aging across the life course (*Age to Otherness*). The utopian elements of the Grandmother's character do not lie in a simplistic, positive portrayal of her experiences but rather are rooted in the difficulties and realities of moving through age transitions. The fictional depictions make space for characters that may not be "ideal" but are realistic, offering a useful counterpoint to policy that centers "successful," "active," "healthy" or even "friendly" (Chivers 1–2) aging. However inclusively worded policy documents and academic articles strive to be, they can often reinforce an ideal type of older person who must overcome everyday trials. The discussions in these reading groups suggested that a truly meaningful representation of later life would also make room for both the pleasures and pain of transitioning into older age: the Grandmother's grumpiness, loneliness, and acceptance of her shortcomings rang true to our readers.

Participants read the relational interactions of role reversal, mutual respect, and play as ideal elements of an intergenerational relationship between a child and older adult, leading participants to imagine societal solutions to bring people of all ages together. The "activating effect" of the utopian reader (Ruppert 52) was partly elucidated by the solitude of the island and intense

focus on the characters of the Grandmother and Sophia. Following Levitas' "utopia as method," the aim of the reading groups was not to create a blueprint for a new world or to design their own utopia, but to use the novel to reflect, deconstruct, and reimagine their current and future social worlds. The interpretative act of processing the characters' transitional changes reflected readers' negotiation of their own, subjective experiences considering the social positionality and relationships that inform our understanding of aging, as seen in the discussions and diary entries. Discussions of this relationship led to readers imagining new ways of conceiving intergenerational relationships, built from a shared space of creativity. Rather than a binary understanding of aging across this relationship, the events in Jansson's novel highlight that when each character is treated as an individual by one another they flourish. The granddaughter and grandmother were viewed as having shared, reciprocal experiences despite age differences, which pointed to the need for more space and time to develop this kind of close relationship. Readers liked that Jansson's novel did not deny characters' identities as a child and older adult, even though the novel seeks to show the dangers of inaccurately reducing people to their "proper" age categories.

In the relationship between the Grandmother and Sophia, participants in the reading groups began to deconstruct and question age normativity and the way in which older people might "age code" or be "age coded" (Krekukla 8-9). As Levitas notes, "utopia as method" seeks to facilitate holistic thinking about new futures, and ways humans can flourish—not merely exist—in such futures. Readers began by analyzing and deconstructing the settings, themes, and characters in *The Summer Book* but went beyond this to also apply these ideas to their own lives in contemporary UK society. The reading groups gave participants a space to develop into "utopian readers" who analyzed, deconstructed, and rebuilt the cultural representations in the novel to reimagine and understand their own intergenerational relationships and age-related expectations and transitions. Fundamentally, readers rejected normative scripts of age transitions derived from age-coding that ascribes particular behaviors to distinct age categories. Instead, they used the novel to reimagine more

permeable age transitions that, while based in a reality of age-based change, allowed for more playfulness, mutual respect and interaction between people experiencing life course transitions at any age.

Acknowledgements

We thank all of the participants in the study, and we are also grateful to anonymous reviewers for their comments on this paper. For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising. The data supporting the findings reported in this paper are available on request from the UK Data Archive repository.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant ES/S011889/1).

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Jade Elizabeth French is currently a Vice-Chancellor Independent Research Fellow at Loughborough University, where she works on ageing, care and intergenerationality in twentieth-century literature and visual art. Her monograph *Modernist Poetics of Ageing: The Late Lives and Late Styles of Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2024 and she has published in *Feminist Modernist Studies*, *Modernism/modernity*, and *The Gerontologist*.

Melanie Lovatt is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Stirling, U.K. Her main research interests converge around time, ageing, the life course, and relationships. She is also interested in fictional representations of ageing and time, and creative research methods. Her most recent project was *Reimagining the Future in Older Age*, which explored the relationship between future time and later life.

Valerie Wright is a historian of modern Scotland with particular expertise in gender, social and urban history. She is currently a Lecturer in Modern Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh. She is the co-author of *Glasgow: High-Rise Homes, Estates and Communities in the Post-War Period* (Routledge: London, 2020) and *Deindustrialisation and the Moral Economy in Scotland since 1955* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2021).