

The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and Aging, edited by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Aagje Swinnen. Cham: Springer Nature, 2024, Pp. 612. \$219 (hardback); \$179 (eBook)

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The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and Aging, edited by age studies scholars Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (University of South Florida) and Aagje Swinnen (Maastricht University), makes a significant contribution to critical age studies in the humanities. The collection provides a platform for dialogue between researchers from different academic disciplines that share an interest in interdisciplinary age studies and beyond. As the editors state, the aim is to “cut across often fiercely guarded disciplinary boundaries” in order to foster “much-needed conversations” (1) with the hope of bridging the long-standing gap “between the humanists and the gerontologists” (3). The ultimate goal, thus, is to enrich the field of age studies and related disciplines, learn from each other, and offer a more holistic understanding of the complexities of the process of growing older and later life.

Contributions from both established and emerging scholars span a wide range of topics and methodologies, incorporating insights from the social sciences; cultural, queer, posthuman, environmental, gender, disability, and postcolonial studies; race theory; feminist criticism; as well as narrative, social, literary, and cultural gerontology. Although close reading remains a cornerstone of literary criticism in this edited volume, the diverse approaches collectively highlight how humanities-focused perspectives on later life can better illuminate the multifaceted nature of aging. The contributors further demonstrate how a nuanced comprehension of aging can enhance our ability to critically engage with and interpret literature through a life-course perspective, thus opening up new avenues for current and future scholarly research. What facilitates the readability of this anthology and its internal cohesion is the inclusion of a critical contexts section at the beginning of each chapter, which offers a comprehensive introduction to the subject, followed by a conclusion that suggests potential

avenues for future research.

The volume contains twenty-nine chapters, organized into four main parts that reflect ongoing conversations in this growing field of study – Part I: Intersections and Intersectionalities; Part II: Traveling Concepts; Part III: Methodological Innovations; and Part IV: Archival Inquiries. The first three sections mainly focus on contemporary texts, while Part IV offers engaging approaches to aging across different historical periods (from medieval times to the twenty-first century), genres (novels, poetry, drama, life writing, memoir, and myth), and other texts, including transcribed interviews, reported reading experiences, creative writing exercises, and the experiences of reading and writing groups. I am particularly intrigued by and commend the editors (and the authors) for bringing together contributions that engage with medieval and early modern literatures – an emerging and promising area of enquiry. By offering a historical perspective on older age, and situating the process of aging within a specific historical context, the authors enhance age studies while simultaneously broadening the scope of historical and literary inquiry. For instance, Harriet Soper examines the Old English verse hagiography *Juliana* and the fifteenth-century spiritual biography *The Book of Margery Kempe* to show how these texts challenge the normative stages of the life course, commonly referred to as the Ages of Man. Soper suggests that modern life-course categories (such as infant, child, adult, etc.) are a continuation of this tendency to categorize age; however, the medieval texts reveal that such systems can be destabilized, hence revealing the fluid nature of aging. Relatedly, Christopher Martin engages with selected early modern artifacts to illustrate the enduring mythic aspiration to extend the human lifespan. As he argues, the ‘fountain of youth’ legend, despite its iconic status, was viewed with contempt in the early modern period. This critique reflects a broader cultural and intellectual skepticism toward fantastical and pseudoscientific ideas of rejuvenation and immortality. In contemporary times, particularly within transhumanist ideologies, there is a continued interest in extending human lifespan, and overcoming the limitations of aging, similar to the aspirations seen in early modern myths. As Stephen Katz asserts, examining aging in historical contexts prevents us from interpreting the past

through a reductive framework of either underdevelopment or progress. To fully comprehend how cultural and intellectual perspectives on older age have evolved, it is essential to recognize that the past should not be viewed as less advanced, more romanticized, or more ‘liberated’ than the present (40). The final section, Part V, is authored by a prominent voice in age studies, Margaret Morganroth Gullette. In her chapter “Are Older People Still Human? On Ageist Humor,” the scholar interrogates popular visual culture: comics, cartoons, and birthday cards, and highlights how they often reflect ageist humor and age-related stereotypes in Western societies. However, she also acknowledges that “alongside the vulgarized, hostile, politically powerful comedic world depicted up to this point, one can also find images of affection, kindness, respect, friendship, and solidarity. These values and relationships survive in popular media” (582). Gullette advocates for intervention in the public sphere, calling on age critics and scholars to actively engage in the pursuit of age justice.

Any critiques of this volume are minor, with the primary concern being that the majority of contributors are from English or American Studies, and predominantly engage with English-language literature. However, the editors acknowledge this limitation, observing that, despite the field of cultural and literary age studies having been active for over two decades, its most prominent scholars are mainly based in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe, with the majority also being affiliated with the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) and the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) (5). And yet, the editors successfully address the issues of canon formation and the Anglophone-centric focus by curating contributions that transcend the Western perspective. For example, Raquel Medina examines the intersections of postcolonialism, aging, and gender through a comparative analysis of the later-life works authored by Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Medina highlights the diverse representations of aging, death, and love within the framework of Latin American magical realism. Nicklas Freisleben Lund and Peter Simonsen explore what they term ‘contemporary Scandinavian gerontological poetry’—21st-century poetry from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden that reflects on the experience of aging as expressed through the lyrical

I.’ Their analysis investigates “how it may feel and what it may mean to age in the Scandinavian welfare states” (508). The other contributions explore a diverse range of media and genres, including children’s literature (Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako), queer studies and young adult literature (Linda Hess and Anika Ullmann), digital tools in the context of children’s literature (Vanessa Joosen), and dementia as portrayed in graphic memoirs (Rebecca Garden and Erin Gentry Lamb). The authors of this volume offer interdisciplinary perspectives on aging and collectively enrich the discourse by bridging multiple fields and methodologies. By incorporating these varied perspectives, they broaden the scope of age studies and bring attention to different life stages that show that aging is an ongoing process of transformation. They also reveal the ways in which sociocultural attitudes towards age intersect with themes such as identity formation, intergenerational relationships, and sociocultural roles and expectations. This extensive edited volume, thus, makes a significant contribution to age research and serves as a valuable resource for students and scholars in literary studies and life writing, social gerontology, medical humanities, cultural studies, and related disciplines.

Personally, as a scholar in the field of literary age studies (with an interest in history), I find this collection highly engaging for its diverse and thought-provoking approaches to literature and aging, which lay a strong foundation for continued exploration in the years to come. As the editors note, “the study of aging in relation to literature is continually evolving, always in discussion with other disciplines, and avidly exploring new approaches that stand on ‘the shoulders of giants’” (2-3). This metaphor of standing on the “shoulders of giants” captures the idea that each new insight in the field is built upon the foundations laid by those who came before us. And it is precisely through this collective intellectual endeavor, driven by curiosity and a shared commitment to fostering more inclusive futures, that we find inspiration to push the boundaries of age studies in transformative ways. In the inaugural issue of *Age, Culture, and Humanities* (2014), Chris Gilleard observed that “unlike gerontology, aging studies is still young, still open to future developments” (36). While this perspective held true back then, this edited volume reveals that age studies has

already ‘come of age,’ blossomed, and is no longer a fledgling subfield within broader gerontological studies. It stands firmly on robust shoulders, poised to shape the future.

WORKS CITED

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