

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film, edited by Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung, and Raquel Medina. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023, pp. 475. \$117 (hardback); \$93,60 (eBook)

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The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film, edited by aging scholars Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung, and Raquel Medina, makes a valuable contribution to research on aging, older age, and cultural studies. The anthology offers insights into aging and older age from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, including, but not limited to, queer, gender, postcolonial, environmental, and cultural studies. It brings together 34 chapters, organized into three key sections: (1) “Genre”, (2) “Themes and Concepts in Contemporary Ageing Studies,” and (3) “Case Studies.” The aim of the book, as the editors state, is “to explore how literary and filmic narratives have addressed, contributed to, and shaped our understanding of and experiences of age and ageing in recent decades” (1). Notably, the volume includes perspectives beyond the Western paradigm, addressing aging and older age in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, bringing together both emerging scholars and established pioneers in the field of age studies.

The first part focuses on genres and aging, offering insights into alternative visions of aging that move beyond the successful aging paradigm, which emphasizes cognitive and physical health, and regards an active lifestyle as the ideal form of aging (Rowe and Kahn 1997). These chapters demonstrate how different genres challenge the linear decline narrative, as famously critiqued by Margaret Morganroth Gullette in *Aged by Culture* (2004). They do so not only by portraying experiences beyond the typical middle-class focus, but also by including characters in precarious or marginalized situations. Importantly, these genres extend beyond literature and film, including theater and poetry as mediums for challenging dominant discourses. Valerie Lipscomb’s chapter “Drama: Performing Age, Fighting Ageism” proposes an alternative reading of

theater, actively moving away from ageist stereotypes. In her analysis of *Old Enough to Know Better: Aging Well in Sarasota* (Cannon 2015), Lipscomb highlights how older adults are portrayed in more realistic and relatable ways. The script shows characters whose ages are fluid, at times stating one age only to later contradict it, thereby disrupting not only the casting expectations for a character's age but also the very concept of stable age itself, preventing the audience from following a consistent thread of characterization (31). Similarly, Vanessa Joosen examines age and aging in children's literature, highlighting how generations can learn from one another, recognizing both their similarities and differences. Throughout, the authors critique the notion of successful aging and the pressures it places on older adults. Martina Zimmermann's chapter "Writing Successful Ageing? The Aches and Pains of Illness Narrative and Life Review" underscores how "ageing happens on a continuum between health and disease, and that where we are on the continuum is, to a great extent, not in our control" (71). This nuanced understanding is echoed in Kathleen Venema's chapter on graphic novels, which presents aging as an ongoing and dynamic process. Through visual and linguistic elements, readers are invited to share the experiences of aging characters, challenging fixed or one-dimensional ideas of older age.

In the chapter "Ageing in Science, Speculative and Fantasy Fiction," Susan Watkins highlights how speculative fiction reflects Western fears of demographic aging, often depicting an aging population as a looming crisis. This vision has been termed "demodystopia," a subgenre used to refer to dystopian scenarios driven by demographic changes or centered on population issues (Domingo 2008). However, as Watkins points out, aging in non-Western speculative fiction tends to be seen as a source of wisdom and experience. The chapter engages with both film and literature, and while some of the works discussed rely on negative and stereotypical depictions of aging, others, particularly changeling narratives and folk tales, encourage readers to rethink normative ideas about time and human development. Zoe Brennan's analysis of the gothic genre, including case studies of *Twilight* (Meyer 2007) and *Midsommar* (Aster 2019), explores how the aging body is frequently portrayed as

grotesque, evoking both fascination and repulsion. This reflects a long-standing tradition in gothic fiction and cinema, from *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich 1962) to more recent films like *X* (West 2022).

Marla Harris's chapter examines detective and crime fiction, analyzing how age is used as a plot device. Harris suggests that ageism affects detectives and criminals alike. Detectives are portrayed as forgetful and mentally unreliable, which raises doubts about their ability to solve the mystery or crime, exposing readers' ageist assumptions (116). Meanwhile, older criminals exploit ageist biases to avoid suspicion. Staying with television, Maricel Oró-Piqueras's chapter examines how older adults are portrayed in contemporary TV series, arguing that the growing silver audience has resulted in more diverse and complex representations. The increased visibility of older protagonists can give a better understanding of aging and older age and can create public debate. In the chapter "It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Ending: Comedy Film and Ageing," Hanna Varjakoski analyzes Finnish comedies, a genre historically known for portraying older adults as figures of ridicule. Yet, as Varjakoski demonstrates, these films can both reinforce and subvert harmful stereotypes, offering nuanced portrayals of older women who rebel against restrictive norms of femininity. However, their defiance is at times interpreted as a sign of cognitive decline as Varjakoski has previously argued, placing them, paradoxically, both in and out of control ("In and Out of Control").

The second part of the anthology explores key themes and concepts in contemporary aging studies, offering alternative directions for research and revising established ideas. In "Feminism, Gender and Age," Nicole Haring and Roberta Maierhofer provide a historical context for 'anocriticism' and argue for its relevance and application within cultural gerontology and aging studies. Heather Jerónimo's chapter explores how queerness reconceptualizes age, drawing on queer theory and focusing on the representation of queer older adults in film and literature. Highlighting both the diversity of such portrayals and the persistent need for greater visibility of queer aging experiences. Josephine Dolan addresses hegemonic masculinity and its connection to the third-age imaginary as discussed by Gilleard and Higgs (2005), drawing

attention to how dominant representations of aging continue to privilege heterosexual masculinity as the ideal. Amir Cohen-Shalev examines artistic late style through the work of French filmmaker Claude Sautet, considering how Sautet's films may challenge or complicate traditional notions of artistic expression in later life. Bridie Moore investigates performances of aging femininity in recent stage productions, showing how these performances allow middle-aged, heterosexual, female audiences to identify with older actresses, revealing the cultural significance of seeing aging women on stage. Sally Chivers offers a critical reading of films where care work takes center stage, noting how migrant care workers are rarely depicted on screen. Through a close reading of the film *Still Human* (Chan 2018), Chivers highlights the lived experiences of migrant care workers and the importance of representing their stories.

Emily Kate Timms considers race, ethnicity, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives in aging studies, arguing that including these concepts allows us to see how older age is culturally constructed and materially experienced, making space for imagining diverse intergenerational futures. Ira Raja focuses on the figure of Mother India and its entanglement with narratives of aging and the nation. Analyzing Krishna Baldev Vaid's play *Our Old Woman* (2001), Raja critiques the use of age as a metaphor for political, social, and cultural decline, while advocating for an aging Mother India that embraces the messiness of real bodies, thereby legitimizing non-normative bodies (251).

Barbara Zecchi and Raquel Medina turn to Latin American cinema, discussing films that challenge hegemonic notions of aging and offer diverse representations of older age, which have the potential to destigmatize aging and open up new ways of thinking about later life. Anna-Christina Kainradl and Ulla Kribernegg analyze Lucy Kirkwood's play *The Children* (2017), in which the older generation is held accountable for a nuclear disaster, underscoring how older adults are often portrayed as responsible for the climate crisis and positioned as disposable in favor of younger generations. Hailee Yoshizaki-Gibbons focuses on aging and disability in films centered on dementia, highlighting how many of the films on dementia show how institutionalized care is the only option, and the only way for family and friends to have a life

besides the care responsibilities. This contribution shows how caretakers, which are friends and family, are themselves overwhelmed by the demands of care work. In the last chapter of this part, Elizabeth Barry discusses frailty through the case of Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011). The memoir vividly illustrates how the author feels as she becomes frail and is frailed by the world around her. Joan Didion does not see it as the end but as a new beginning, a new part of the self. The analysis challenges dominant societal perceptions of frailty and older age. Building on this critique, the anthology's second part, "Themes and Concepts in Contemporary Aging Studies," examines alternative conceptualizations and research that move beyond the Western paradigm.

This continues in the final part of the anthology, which presents case studies from various national traditions. By incorporating cultural texts and analytical approaches from different geographical regions, it further broadens the scope of aging studies and deepens the engagement with global perspectives. Katsura Sako analyzes dementia in Japanese cinema, showing how care, nostalgia, and rural settings function as powerful means of connection. Núria Casado Gual focuses on two Catalan plays centered on aging and explores how these works challenge stereotypical representations of older age. Paula Morgan addresses aging and traumatic memory in Caribbean literature, underlining how these narratives articulate the political, cultural, and ethical imperatives to bear witness to collective traumas. Elinor Shepley examines short stories about older women's lives, showing how widowhood can mark the beginning of new identities, and analyzes the recurring trope of older natives returning to childhood places in contemporary Welsh fiction. Saskia M. Fürst focuses on the older protagonist in Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2005), highlighting the importance of confronting past traumas as part of the aging process. In the next chapter, Paola Della Valle examines how New Zealand literature reflects shifting societal views and attitudes on aging. She traces a move from mid-20th-century continuity theory, focused on individual lifestyle, to late-20th-century critical gerontology, which emphasizes cultural context and social justice. Government strategies like the "Positive Ageing Strategy" and "Better Later Life" protocol highlight the role of ethnic and especially Māori

values, such as the importance of the extended value (whānau) and community. Della Valle traces a shift in New Zealand literature from 1960s portrayals of aging by Sargeson and Frame to later works by Māori writers like Tuwhare and Grace, reflecting changing policies and the growing influence of Māori culture. Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl examines Russian literature and its contrasting portrayals of older adults, either as expendable or as guardians of culture. Irene De Angelis analyses Samuel Beckett's work, where aging is presented as an inevitable, lifelong preoccupation. Marta Cerezo explores Jackie Kay's poetry as depicting age as a rebirth. Aagje Swinnen offers a close reading of Jean-François Laguionie's *Louise en hiver* (2016), a meditation on the social precarity of older adults. The final chapter by Pramod K. Nayar turns to memoirs about Huntington's Disease, shaped by "performative prolepsis" (Currie 42-43), projecting anticipated decline onto the present.

Together, these contributions offer an impressive range of perspectives on aging, specifically by moving beyond Western contexts and incorporating non-Western national perspectives. The book, as Swinnen beautifully summarizes, "counts on fictional narratives to expose ageist practices characteristic of our society and to find alternative, more inspiring stories of later life" (436). Although the volume employs relatively few methodological approaches, with most chapters relying on close readings, this limitation is openly acknowledged by the editors themselves. In conclusion, this extensive volume is extremely helpful for those seeking to deepen their understanding of the cultural dimensions of aging and its representations across different cultural products, offering original insights and thought-provoking reflections on how aging and older adults are portrayed. It makes a significant contribution to aging research and will undoubtedly serve as a valuable resource for students and scholars in cultural gerontology, aging studies, film studies, and related fields.

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