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Ideas of Aging

Editorial for Imagining the Impossible

Volume 4 Issue 1 2025, Old¹

IN her essay “The Space Crone,” Ursula K. Le Guin ponders who should be sent to make First Contact with an alien species and concludes that the ideal candidate would be a post-menopausal woman, who has “experienced, accepted, and acted the entire human condition – the essential quality of which is Change” (2017, 20). Yet in a lot of sci-fi and fantasy narratives, older people and older women in particular tend to play marginal roles. The fountain of youth is a prized treasure, with fantastic worlds often imagining ways to slow down, stop, or even reverse the aging process. From vampires with supernaturally long life to the transhumanist rejuvenation treatments imagined by contemporary sci-fi, it seems our greatest fear is not to die but to age.

However, old age is also associated with wisdom and the figure of the sage or the seer. Religion and myth frequently connect old age with the control of fate and future, as with the *moirae* in Greek mythology. In ancient Rome, Cicero said, “the crowning glory of old age is respect” and in Christian iconography, God is usually depicted as an old man. Such images are often repeated in fantastic fiction, with older figures such as Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, or Mother Abigail in Stephen King’s *The Stand* offering guidance to younger protagonists. Even here, though, the old are helpers rather than agents; they can assist the hero but not be the hero, unless they can regain the physical capacities and appearance of youth.

¹<https://tidsskrift.dk/imaginingtheimpossible/>

The discourse surrounding age has become increasingly prominent in relation to sci-fi and fantasy as our social understanding of aging has changed. As the average lifespan and overall health of older generations increases, so the idea that age leads to ‘decline’ is being challenged in both popular culture and academia, with fields such as “literary gerontology” (Wyatt-Brown 1990; Kenyon and Randall 1999) becoming more widely established. As Heike Hartung and Sarah Falcus observe, “fantastic modes of literature open up epistemological and aesthetic alternatives for thinking about ageing across the lifecourse” (2023, 14). For João Paulo Guimarães, science fiction and fantasy “denature” aging, “proposing strange images of the body, the self and the lifespan that configure nonstandard, but nonetheless normal, modes of embodiment” (2023, 10).

The question of ageing is not simply about the individual but also about the social and the ways in which different generations relate to each other. In novels such as Drew Magary’s *The Postmortal* or Bruce Sterling’s *Holy Fire*, extending the lives of older generations allows them to hoard wealth and power, triggering conflict with younger generations. In the film *Logan’s Run*, in contrast, those who grow older than thirty are systematically killed off in order to preserve scarce resources for the “more valuable” younger members of society. For Sarah Falcus, dystopian fiction involves a fundamental disruption of the typical process by which generational wisdom and resources are handed down: “Our sense of an ending therefore depends upon and foregrounds narratives of ageing and generational identity, making ageing itself fundamental to dystopian writing” (2020, 66). As generational discourses about Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z become increasingly prominent, how has the fantastic imagined the different ways in which generations may relate to each other?

Old may also be considered in relation to civilisations and the supernatural. In horror fiction, age and antiquity are often sources of malevolent power, as in H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos, in which the Elder Gods or ‘Great Old Ones’ constantly threaten to destroy humanity’s fragile civilisation. In Lovecraft’s stories, incomprehensibly vast distances in time often drive the human protagonists mad, as it turns their own notion of “old” into a mere blink of an eye. Gothic literature is full of crumbling ruins and ancient rites that still retain an inexplicable power over modern characters. Sci-fi and fantasy worlds are replete with ancient civilisations that either have

or are fading from view. These civilisations may be represented as decadent and corrupt, as with the Galactic Empire of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, or their passing may be presented elegiacally, as with the Elven kingdoms of Middle Earth. In Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, human civilisations are tied to species evolution, with different civilisations emerging cyclically over a cosmic timeframe, thus rendering nation-states and empires as just temporary local variations that are subordinate to an evolutionary timescale. These manipulations of time show how "SF and speculative modes, then, explore ageing at the level of the individual, the social and the species" (Oró-Piqueras and Falcus 2023, 1).

In this issue, we invite readers to consider the different ways in which the ideas of ageing are represented in the fantastic and how these representations complicate or challenge discourses about the meaning of 'old' in our societies.

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