

Book Reviews

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SYMPOSIUM: POPULAR LITERATURE ON AGING

- Robinson, Marilynne. (2004). *Gilead: A Novel*. New York: Picador, 247 pp. \$15.00 (paper).
- Roth, Philip. (2006). *Everyman*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 192 pp. \$24.00 (hard cover), \$13.95 (paper).
- Barnes, Julian. (2011). *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 163 pp. \$23.95 (hard cover), \$14.95 (paper).
- Hassler, Jon. (1997). *Simon's Night*. New York: Ballantine Books, \$7.76 (paper).
- Jonasson, Jonas. (2012). *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared*. New York: Hyperion Books, 400 pp. \$15.99 (paper).

Editor's Introduction

As a child, I often was caught reading under the bed covers with a flashlight. My appreciation for elegantly crafted writing and a good story well told has never diminished. Although my habit of reading late into the night continues, these days I am dismayed by the preponderance of academic reading in the stacks beside my bed and the dwindling amount of fiction I read. Quite frankly, I hope this review symposium will incite in all of us a modest scholarly rebellion to create room for literary reading in our private and professional lives. My argument is simple—reading books that engage our emotions and our imaginations can enhance the quality of our personal lives, improve our teaching, and inspire our research.

This review brings to your attention current and/or award-winning novels that offer aging perspectives, and we hope you will consider their value for learning about aging. The invited reviewers include several well-regarded gerontologists with humanistic leanings, a cultural critic focusing on

aging in comparative literature, and a geriatrician who writes an acclaimed blog on aging and health. Interestingly, given the feminization of aging, the central character in each of the books selected is a man. *Gilead*, however, is written by a woman, and three of the reviewers are women, so perhaps the gender mix in this symposium is more equal in that way. The life review process, theorized as normative by Butler (1963) some 40 years ago, and the issues of ego integrity in the work of Erik Erikson, is a key theme in four of the books. The critical nature of summing up the quality and consistency of the totality of one's life is a risky endeavor as we see in *Everyman* and also in *The Sense of an Ending*. In *Gilead* and *Simon's Night*, the review process and construction of self and meaning result in a sense of coherence and continuity and some resolution to conflicts and regrets. In contrast, the *Hundred-Year-Old Man* has no time for review—he is too busy dealing with the present.

How can reading literature enhance the quality of our personal lives? Reading a good story goes beyond entertainment—it engages our emotions and allows us to imagine what it is like to be in a different situation, one perhaps more interesting or conflicted than our own. The narrative experience invites us to remember our own personal history, to think about losses and regrets, and to reflect on what has passed and what remains unfinished. Literature is uniquely powerful in that it allows the reader to enter fully into other people's thoughts and feelings. In her review of *Gilead*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette offers a personal example of how reading can enhance the quality of our personal lives. She notes that “literature fills voids of dependability” and in the main character, John Ames, she finds a companion with a “lovable voice” who brings wisdom and the comfort

of goodness into her life when others are not available. Similarly, in *Simon's Night*, Desmond O'Neill finds himself "deeply engaged and interested in this older man." As he comes to know him, O'Neill shares in his process of life review, reflecting on past memories and conflicts. Simon reminds us of the importance of exercising control over the nature and quality of one's life and living (i.e., engaging) until we die.

Reading is capable of evoking a simulation of reality that can cause the brain to respond as vividly as if it really were a real-life experience. The same neurochemical regions of the brain are stimulated as if the experience had actually happened. Research indicates that reading can evoke experiences that augment our capacity to understand other people, empathize with them, and see the world from their perspective (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Those who assert that good books can change lives and improve human beings may be right—and that can improve all our lives.

Integrating novels into our courses can help students link the objective content of aging with the subjective human aspects. Our teaching goals are "not limited to an intellectual understanding They include the ability to make meaning in the chaos of available information, ethical reasoning and behavior, a concern for others as persons of equal value (and the ability to take the perspective of the other" (Hersch & Keeling, 2008, p. A64). Stories offer opportunities to explore questions about meaning and interpretation in thinking about aging that lack definitive answers but which are worthy of exploration (Kivnick & Pruchno, 2011). A recent report by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (June 2013) argues that "a curriculum that meets students' needs broadly and prepares them for the lives that await them, is not one that simply mirrors the map of current faculty specializations."

The inclusion of literature in our curriculum enriches student learning by deepening understandings and stimulating conversations that can change attitudes and feelings about aging. By way of empathy, stories highlight the diversity and rich complexities of aging in a way that textbooks cannot. For example, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes brilliantly depicts how the interpretation of an event and the meanings ascribed by an individual are skewed by personal memories that may differ from the same event experienced by others. Philip Roth's book *Everyman* centers on an older protagonist whose loneliness, losses, and regrets

have no redeeming conclusion. This dark story of despair can be used in teaching about aging to consider depression, the moderating impact of social relationships on well-being, and what it might mean to have a "good old age." In *Gilead*, the speech and actions of Ames convey what wisdom looks like—and the richness of that experience has the power to transform student attitudes and feelings about old age. *Simon's Night* takes a positive perspective on aging and illustrates later-life plasticity and the ability of older adults to adapt. This novel reminds teachers and students alike that old age is not simply something to endure and make the best of, but that it is possible to live and fully be engaged until the end. Finally, it is worthwhile to note that *The Hundred-Year-Old-Man* begins with the title character, Karlsson, climbing out a window of his nursing home. If he can climb out a window, then why is he in a nursing home? We need to be clear about what we want our students to learn and remember. If a book gets aging "all wrong," then that may be a fatal flaw unless that shortcoming can be used to advantage in a teachable moment.

Literature with aging themes or protagonists can make us better researchers by inviting us to expand our frame of reference. Our research endeavors tend to keep us ensconced in a narrow and specialized area of expertise in aging. Creativity has a serendipitous element to it, and we often find it outside the routine. A novel, essay, or other literary genre takes us out of our usual world and can inspire unexpected insights or perspectives that inform our research. Best-selling authors such as Oliver Sacks, Stephen Jay Gould, and Lewis Thomas bring a humanist perspective to their science and in sharing their eclectic interests they show us the importance of linking knowledge across multiple disciplines. Similarly, reading stories reminds us of the personal nature of our research and the complexity of the issues we care about, often requiring multidisciplinary approaches to advance understanding and knowledge. Finally, reading novels also can transform and change our research in subtle ways, as we gain fresh understandings of the diversity of the aging experience. For example, the books reviewed offer a variety of perspectives on the social construction of aging, the effort to find meaning and coherency in our personal narratives, and the possibility for growth at any age.

Much of the literature on aging overemphasizes the losses and negative aspects of later life with far

less attention given to the potential for growth and change. The books reviewed are a diverse lot—just as older people themselves are—and they offer contrasting perspectives on the contingencies and complexities of aging. As a starting point, the following reviews offer reading choices ranging from lightly comic to a deeper, darker view. We hope they make you want to curl up with one of these books—or some similar works—and lead you to assign some alternative readings to supplement the textbooks and journal articles used in your classroom.

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Marilynne Robinson. (2004). *Gilead: A Novel*. New York: Picador, 247 pp. \$15.00 (paper)

If you don't yet know the voice of John Ames, you are missing what has been for me one of the stabilizing fictional experiences of my lifetime. Ames is the narrator of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004), and I turn to him—to this voice, or pen—when I need a steady, thoughtful, modest, spiritual, humorous, even-tempered companion who is capable of clear feelings and clear ideas about human perishability; filial, paternal, and marital love; America's painful racial history; and the unregarded beauties of this material world. I imagine I read *Gilead* the way people supposedly once read Virgil, thinking that any passage they happened upon would deliver them to a mind whose qualities they sought. For decades, I used to read Proust this way; Marcel's grandmother is a creation like Ames, but she does not narrate her own story. There isn't enough of her.

"Wisdom" in fiction is a verbal illusion, and Robinson creates it through Ames's endearing writing, speech, and actions. If, as my mother said, "The greatest part of wisdom is kindness," then Ames attains that greatest part in all three ways. At least he is always trying to and noticing where he falls short. It is my good fortune to know a few good people, and many decent people, and if they were always available and disposed to utterance, I suppose I would never need to locate *Gilead* on the shelf and reread at least the first half. Depending on what you seek from literature, or from people, this tropism can be directed toward many novels—and epics and nonfiction as well. Literature

fills voids of dependability. There are other times when we need a dose of wit or malice, and we also know what shelves they reside on.

The fact we know about Ames from the first sentence is that he is dying (in 1956, before there were radical interventions or alleviations) of angina pectoris—at the not-very-old age of 70-something, leaving behind a young wife and a 7-year-old son and a Congregational parish to whom he is still preaching every Sunday. He is, as ever, sitting with the actually dying and fixing a widow's plumbing. Heart disease has weakened him, although it doesn't pain him much, and in the typical American way, Robinson's protagonist conflates illness—difficulty in walking up stairs, wearing slippers in the daytime, and other people's reactions to his feebleness—with "old age." Ames talks enough about when he feels "old" and when he doesn't, that we see he can't avoid the category. Now that we know some hearty 90 year olds, and so many chronically-ill 50 year olds, some of us don't do this automatically any more. In any case, neither dying nor old age is as much of a trouble to him as his anxiety about his little family surviving without his protection and his jealousy of a younger man.

Someone might argue that his wisdom is not the speech of old age, but just his special gift—including the luck of possessing exemplary forebears and having worn away lonely decades of meditation. It also might arise from Marilynne Robinson's old habit of collecting metaphors from American writers to construct a character and her ability to tell a story better than the Moth Radio Hour and with more revelation in it. Take Ames's set-piece about the abolitionists digging a tunnel under the sandy soil of their town in Bleeding Kansas to rescue escaped slaves, into which a horse drops. The slave has to get away on his own, while they deal with the half-buried horse. And at the end of the story, we hear the voice of the slave in the dark, once he has escaped their shenanigans: "Y'all get that horse out yet?" (p. 61), laughing a little, "and that was the last they heard of him."

Ames is a man of many disarming tones. Nevertheless, or therefore, if I could convince people that this lovable voice is the sound of old age talking, I would. I would like any reader, but especially young readers, to make a strict equation between his accomplishments as a companion and the age category that is becoming ever more associated with senility and ruinous expense. Not everyone becomes wise by 70—far from it. But it would be a major paradigm shift for American

culture if young readers thought we did—believed that moral and psychological gains were to be expected with aging and that they too might rationally expect them. I can see *Gilead* being regularly taught to undergraduates and graduate students the way some other American novels appear on syllabi decade after decade, in the way a canon still gets formed. And no professor would bother to comment, as I have, “Far from it”; so youngsters would draw their own inevitable conclusions. They would become more favorable both to older people and to their own futures. Fiction, if rarely, has such power.

A window shows us a world we can look out on and admire. But some novels are like a door; they show where we might place our feet to get out there. I could multiply examples, but different readers will find other aspects of Ames’s character that it is in themselves to emulate. Ames has a way of saying something strong and contrary and then appending, “I say this with all respect.” I want to add this to my own verbal repertory. Very likely it will be easier for me to do so than to develop his forbearance, although I see that respectfulness and forbearance are linked. “Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing,” he writes at one point after developing one of his favorite themes, the “pure intention” of baptizing children with water. “I take that permit to bless, and put it in my pocket.”

My friends might be surprised that an atheist can be so drawn to a religious character, but nothing in Ames’s voice grates. Robinson knows her readers are ignorant, if not agnostic. In the children’s joke in which they repeat certain letters of the alphabet, delivered to “outrageous and extravagant laughter,” “It is the L, need I say, that has disturbed” the father of the other boy. She knows she needs to have Ames say the letter it is. (For the silly pun, I refer readers to page 68 of the book.) Everyone can love the creation under their own name for it. I was far less shocked by the occasional sermonettes than by Ames saying that if he lived he would vote for Eisenhower (p. 94). In its submerged, almost cautious way, this is a deeply political novel: it is set in 1956 because the evil of the failure of Reconstruction started to be overcome then with the first stirrings, like a limb formerly tightly bound in a cast, of the civil-rights movement.

Part of the goodness of the book is Ames’s fascination with his grandfather’s furiously different way of being. Despite the fact that Ames, like his father

before him, abhors violence, he is in awe of the man who lost an eye in the war against slavery and had the ideological fortitude to comment, when people lamented the loss, “I prefer to remember than I have kept one” (p. 31). His father had a hard time getting rid of the old man’s gun, burying it, hacking it with a maul, drowning it (pp. 78–80). Whether his grandfather killed with it—and left the man to die alone—harrows our conscientious narrator a century later. We carry not only our own regrets and loves but those of our antecedents as well. And Robinson may share Ames’s dislike of conflict or feel that the Civil War was too brutal despite having one noble purpose. Or maybe it is only Reconstruction that she loathes—the way repentance and restitution never came. Hard to say. Ames seems transparent, but you can’t see through him.

Yet through the secondary figure of the grandfather, Robinson gets as close as anyone has—and this includes Emerson and Thoreau, whose many laudatory essays about the fierce, prophetic John Brown of Harper’s Ferry she no doubt knows—to making Brown understandable and awe-ful. She imagined Brown as if he lived on. As an old man, the grandfather gives away the very blankets on his bed; he talks to God in the parlor and becomes “even more flagrant in his larcenies,” prying the household egg money out of hiding to succor the even needier. Like his father, who repeated it as he heard it as a 10-year-old boy, Ames too remembers the exalted language put in the old man’s mouth. His grandfather “had preached his people into the war, saying while there was slavery there was no peace, but only a war of the armed and powerful against the captive and defenseless. He would say, Peace will come only when that war ends, so the God of peace calls upon us to end it. He said all this with that gun in his belt.” (p. 101). This is very nigh to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural in 1865 about the unending convulsion. “Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

Of course, Robinson’s minister is never quite sure—no more than Lincoln—what God’s will was. That doubt, that saving doubt, might make revolutionary action harder, but it certainly soothes the mind fretted by the human potential for careless, self-righteous action in the name of some certainty.

I so needed the comfort of goodness when I encountered *Gilead* in 2005. It was the only novel I could bear to read when my mother fell, for the second time in 4 months, and broke her sacrum, at 91, and I moved in with her for the second time and thought, “Now, my life is really over.” I developed a deep aversion for suspense—an easy, nasty trick that raises your adrenaline level when what you need, I felt, is calm. I had taught *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky’s attempt to create a good man; but empathizing with Myshkin, surrounded by Rogozhin’s evil and society’s manipulations, would have demanded too much emotional upset. Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, in the same ambitious league, would have posed similar problems. Then I found *Gilead*, which had just been published. Eventually my mother learned to walk again, and my nice life returned; I was able to make allowances for the nasty trick that narratives mostly depend on. But when my heartbeat threatens my chest, I know where to find this reliable door in the wall toward a milder state of being.

“The first obligation of religion is to maintain the sense of the value of human beings,” Robinson said in a *Paris Review* (Fay, 2008). As Social Security continues to be attacked, now even by the Democratic President, in the name of the supposed deficits and “our children,” Washington is now waging a different kind of war, “of the armed and powerful against the captive and defenseless” old. “Old age” is a category branded all over with ugly tattoos, nowhere near being deconstructible by age studies. If you are an antiageist—and it is hard not to grasp the need of it these days—then maintaining the value of old people is your first obligation also. *Gilead* makes the obligation feel sweet.

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Philip Roth. (2006). *Everyman*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 192 pp. \$24.00 (hard cover), \$13.95 (paper)

Philip Roth, a prolific 20th and 21st century author, turned 80 this year. His first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, published in 1959, won the National Book Award; his 31st book came out in 2010. Between the ages of 65 and 75, when many authors’ output has diminished, he produced eight novels including *Everyman*. However, in October 2012, Roth announced he would no longer write or read fiction.

For more than 50 years, he has won numerous awards: a Pulitzer Prize in 1997; the first (and only American) winner of the Franz Kafka prize; the Man Booker Prize for lifetime achievement; a third PEN/Faulkner Award (the only person so honored); and most recently, the 2013 PEN/Allen Foundation Lifetime Service Award.

His books often have been controversial, especially *Portnoy’s Complaint*, a graphically scatological work, full of the 1960s, in-your-face rebellion. They are not everyone’s cup of tea as exemplified by a recent Bliss cartoon of a couple in a “relationship conversation” in which she says, “It’s not you, Robert, it’s the Philip Roth novel on your nightstand.”

His writing draws heavily on his own life: academia; the sexual revolution; Newark, New Jersey; and Jewish culture and traditions. He focuses on issues of one’s identity, rebellion by dutiful Jewish middle-class boys, generational strife, brotherly ties, and immigrant families living the American dream. The rollicking humor of *Goodbye, Columbus*, so priceless for this reviewer and other readers in the 1960s, is rarely present in *Everyman*. Nostalgia and physical and mental pain reign; laughter is *not* the best medicine.

The title draws on a short medieval morality play, *Everyman*. Every man must die once and death comes to all, regardless of rank; only by accepting death’s certainty can man endure its horrors. A focus on aging, desire, illness, and death is found in both Roth’s books, *The Dying Animal* and *Everyman*, published in 2001 and 2006, respectively. In the latter, he emphasizes these and other *Oxford Book of Aging* (Cole & Winkler, 1994) themes: love and death, immortality and physical extinction, and generational relations and individual linkages. In particular, the role of life review is featured as our everyman (never identified by his name) takes stock of his life at age 71, seeking to make sense of his past and its relationship to his present. However, he is not living a “good old age.” His saga is not about the redeeming powers of suffering, and he is no Dylan Thomas rampantly raging against death.

The story begins with his funeral in the Jewish cemetery where his parents and grandparents are interred and where he visited to honor his mother and father just before his death by cardiac arrest during surgery. Attendees include his two estranged sons from his first marriage; his older brother Howie, who loves him deeply; his second wife Phoebe, mother of his adoring daughter Nancy; Maureen, his caregiver/

mistress after his quadruple bypass years ago, during his third marriage; and some former colleagues and residents of his retirement village. In their eulogies, Nancy and Howie describe the family connection with the cemetery, the Eden-like life provided by the father's jewelry business, and our protagonist being a good, reliable boy who liked being around girls. Howie describes his brother's last years of multiple health problems, surgeries, and loneliness.

This body-focused life story chronicles our everyman's experiences with death, starting in childhood: finding a dead body on the beach and his first surgery at the age of 9 years when another young boy sharing his room dies. He is haunted by those memories, the near-death of his father at age 42 from peritonitis (that he also suffered when transitioning from his failed first marriage to his second), and the impact of his parents' deaths on him, Howie, and Phoebe. Eluding death and bodily decay becomes the central business of his life. In his battle to "remain an unsailable man" at age 50, he tries to "play the young man's game" of extramarital affairs. He is not present when his mother dies; he has been philandering in Europe. Confronted and then abandoned by Phoebe, he loses the two women who were the source of his strength. As he wryly observes, decomposing families is his specialty.

This pattern contrasts with the good boy of his youth who did his parents' bidding: attend college, go into advertising rather than pursue art, get married, and have children—living and dying "on terms decided by the bodies that lived and died before us." His key relationship is with his older brother who has always looked out for and preserved him from fear and worry. Although Howie has been more successful in his career and family life, he does not envy him; his one solidity has been his love for his brother. But with deteriorating health, he finds himself poisonously envious of the "triumphantly healthy" Howie. Increasingly, he cannot bear to be or converse with him.

After 9/11, he abandons living in New York near Nancy and heads for the Jersey shore, a place of happy memories, to live in a retirement village where conversations are litanies of medical procedures and grief for lost loved ones. In his self-imposed exile, he undergoes devastating loneliness, even though he is painting and teaching art classes. He had thought his joy of swimming, passion for painting, and some peace and quiet would sustain him in his later years, but they don't. He is hit hard by the loss of three former colleagues, and his attempt to become friends with a seriously ill woman in his class is

derailed by her suicide. An unsuccessful flirtation with a young woman on the beach symbolizes his loss of erotic power. Just when he decides to return to New York, hoping to stay awhile with Howie or live with Nancy and her children, his plans are scotched by Howie's being in Tibet and Phoebe suffering a stroke and going to live with their daughter. He experiences huge regret at having wounded and wronged Phoebe and acknowledges he must manage alone. And although he has vowed to worry about oblivion at age 75, he never has the chance to do so, dying at 71 after an almost clinical discussion with a grave digger at the cemetery (shades of Hamlet!) where his forbears are buried and he will be, returning us to the novel's beginning.

For those seeking insights into the diversity of aging experience, *Everyman* paints a partial picture. Roth's dark-hued palate depicts the end of life as a time of resignation and loss of hope, rather than a search for acceptance of death found in the morality play, in Kubler-Ross's research, and in Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture*. Not all older adults are terrified by death; spiritual growth and identity play an important role at the end of life in many cultures (Atchley, 2009). Furthermore, *Everyman* is centered on male loss of sexual prowess and career-based identity. If this were about a woman facing old age and death, doubtless it would be painted in lighter hues symbolic of the sustaining quality of social and familial relationships. One cannot help but feel compassion for our everyman's feelings of despair. But this reviewer wishes one of his physicians had written a prescription for his depression as a pathway to his achieving some peace of mind at the end.

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Julian Barnes. (2011). *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 163 pp. \$23.95 (hard cover), \$14.95 (paper)

Cards on the table: If someone establishes a Julian Barnes book club, I would be pleased to join the charter. Lest one attribute audacity to a reviewer charged with commenting on a book recognized with the 2011 Man Booker Prize for Fiction (with three of Barnes's earlier books being short-listed), by an author who had previously won the Somerset Maugham Award, the Shakespeare Prize,

the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and the E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, let me assure readers I am even more in awe after my multiple readings, and two listenings to the audiobook, than I was just scrutinizing the jacket squibs. Not surprisingly, the same year Barnes received the Man Booker, he also garnered the David Cohen Prize for Literature. Would it add to his aura to mention that in 2004, he was named *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Ministry of Culture, among other accolades? Where does that leave mere mortals?

As the *raison d'être* of this review symposium is to remark on the use of literature in the teaching of gerontology, let me make clear that is my focus and take it as self-evident that Barnes knows whereof he speaks as author, narrator, and novelist.

Though short and snappy, *The Sense of an Ending* is no mere *amuse-gueule* but a carefully crafted *mise-en-scene*: sparse, with precious little larding but ample foreshadowing of protagonist Tony Webster's self-referential construction of memories, the malleability of time, and self-serving life-world recountings. Right from the get-go, he reflects on the fact that what one remembers is not always the same as what one may have witnessed and that there is a predicate logic based on one's reflexive position contouring the geography of our past. As becomes clear in the course of his autobiographical narrative, memories are distillations, mediated by an agenda of self-affirmation. In an early recounting of a classroom discussion of causes attributed by historians to this or that event, one of Tony's cohort responds to a teacher's questions with the thought that to interpret and analyze an historical account, one need know the history of the historian. By implication, the same might be said of all narratives, autobiographies, and recollections; not only the history but current intentionality affects the shadings of what one remembers of experience. In short order, Barnes parses the human condition in such a way as to cut the Archimedean high ground from under behavioral scientific explanations utilizing mechanical models as organizational metaphors to explain conduct and replace them with a postmodernist perspective maintaining that what is real depends on an interpretative template grounded by the vantage point of actors and by their purpose-at-hand so that in and of themselves, memories are self-authenticating: *ipso facto*. Well-intentioned gerontology instructors might steer students to a similar understanding of experience and the creation of meaning as purposely propositional

via a lengthy exegesis on Gestalt psychology, field theory, Pierce, James, Dewey, the symbolic interactionists, and so on, to make the point about interpretative practice. Alternatively, they can share Barnes's wonderful novel to progress to the same line of reasoning rather more expeditiously.

Among Barnes's masterful turns is that he is cognizant of reflexivity in human consciousness and sets up a situation later in Tony's life wherein he is made aware that his self-comforting memories and the leitmotifs of his version of his life and past behavior may be a far cry from what his interaction partners experienced. As childhood pal Adrian reaches back from beyond the grave, and his youthful acerbic relationship with Veronica resurfaces—they were friends with onetime benefits—and after Tony is informed of a small remittance in her mother's will coming his way, he must confront evidence that his version of affairs is self-indulgent. Many years later, in reflecting on a letter from Adrian about Adrian's taking-up with Veronica and asking Tony for a green light, Tony comes to the realization that he is trying to come to grips with his "memory now of (his) reading then of what was happening at the time." Not far on, he notes that time does not act as a fixative; rather it is a solvent for memories—leaving only the useful bits. Is there a more apt characterization of the relativity of recollection?

Space precludes much attention to other perceptive psychological revelations that come to Tony, as for instance when he opens a letter from a mutual chum long after it was mailed telling him of Adrian's suicide. The torrent of emotions he experiences as he postulates explanations for Adrian's offing himself turn out to be so wide of the mark that he was not even playing in the same ballpark. Nonetheless, they provide the preconditions for a dysfunctional reconnection with Veronica, even as Tony, in a self-reflective passage, comments that we build up an infrastructure of reasoning to justify whatever decision or opinion we hold.

The thoughtful reader will certainly appreciate the diction, syntax, and point of view (current, contemporaneous with events, etc.) as well as the implied humor and the echoes of the 1960s, 1970s, and later and will identify with Tony's contention that we invent different pasts for others and for ourselves. Many of his ruminations orbit about questions of the foundation of memories, and the recognition that they are not always "tainted" by truth but by a personal agenda. He notes, and readers discover in ways Tony does not realize, that memories are, after all, autobiographical narratives

that are self-referential, bound by a red thread interlacing a coherent sense of self, of identity, of our understanding of how we got where we are.

Smacked in the solar plexus with the realities of the actual letter he had sent to Adrian on the occasion of Adrian and Veronica getting together, Tony comes face-to-face with an epistle that is beyond oafish, far more malevolent than his polite recollection. The vileness of his youthful vituperative vocabulary is repugnant, the letter ending with “may the acid rain fall on your joint and anointed heads,” knocks Tony from his self-righteous perch to the point where he not only acknowledges remorse but concedes same to Veronica in an apologetic E-mail, in response to which she excoriates him, concluding with the retort that he “just doesn’t get it.”

Of course the novel has a revelatory dénouement that stands as a synecdoche for what happened to Adrian, and to Veronica—one that flies in the face of Tony’s explanation of events he does not begin to fathom. Recognizing that over the years memories are akin to film-loops, with the usual stuff spooling-out over and over again, reconfirming emotions in reiterative chains leaves Tony no closer to understanding himself, Veronica, or Adrian’s demise. An unforeseen issue crops-up and, despite Veronica unbraiding him in no uncertain terms, finally brings an element of comprehensibility to Tony’s otherwise muddled worldview. The past may hold us in a firm grip, but it is not always transparent. Early-on in their lives Tony and his chums viewed themselves as being in some kind of holding pen in which they wait to be released into their lives when life and time itself will speed up inexorably. What he comes to realize is that all of life is some kind of holding pen, and a release from one leads only to another, larger pen. In that way, sense is created and lives ordered.

The Sense of an Ending is quite remarkable, and having read it cover-to-cover no fewer than three times and listened to it twice, I recommend it to any reader wanting an exciting journey and a quick overview of a number of psychological themes relevant to life-course analyses. Barnes himself provides a profound text for the inquiring reader and for those who might prefer an audiobook, the version voiced by the late Richard Morant would surely suffice.

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Jon Hassler. (1997). *Simon’s Night*. New York: Ballantine Books, \$7.76 (paper)

One of the key hallmarks of aging is interindividual variability, a deepening complexity that is in marked contrast to the often deadening simplification that society imposes on the concept of aging. High-quality art is notable for facilitating multiple, and often contrasting, points of view in a unitary whole and is therefore an ideal vehicle for exploring gerontological concepts with students (O’Neill, 2011). In addition, the perceptive artist may detect patterns and phenomena well ahead of their description through academic research (Huf & O’Neill, 2005). We can access these helpful insights into aging through the arts in many forms, from movies such as Pixar’s remarkable *Up!* (O’Neill, 2009) through music—whether that of the late Leonard Cohen or *Metamorphosen* by Richard Strauss—to the visual representations of aging by Rembrandt or Helene Schjerfbeck. However, literature is the most common artistic substrate in the medical humanities, and the written word remains the bedrock of our engagement with students and fellow academics.

Simon’s Night, a delightful and gently comic novel from the sadly under-celebrated Jon Hassler (1933–2008), is an ideal starting point for this type of exploration. One of a series of novels describing both small town life and the travails of working in the humanities in small universities in the American Midwest, the central trope is of a retired professor of English who checks himself into a retirement home at the age of 76.

Elegantly mapping out his journey over the course of a week, in chapters each devoted to a single day, we are exposed to a cornucopia of gerontological themes: nursing home entry, intergenerational support, cognitive changes of aging, the plasticity of later life, life-course review, sexuality and spirituality in old age, the questionable wisdom of rigid advance care planning, and the folly of trying to over-anticipate the future. Yet to the first-time reader, it is the narrative that captivates, and these elements of aging reveal themselves in subtle ways, embodying Ovid’s dictum of “ars est celare artem”—the art is in concealing the artifice.

The potentially stultifying nature of residential care is the first aspect that strikes us: the routines, the limitation of private space to a single cramped and crowded room, and the circumscribed variability of the company and conversation. But from

the start, we are deeply engaged and interested in this older man, a process that extends to his co-residents. This in itself is a good starting point for discussion—older people are interesting, and no less so those with dementia, which clearly affects a number of the residents.

Separated but not divorced, one prompt for Simon's choice was an awareness of what a present-day and gerontologically attuned reader would interpret as modest memory changes. The consequences of these lapses are seeds of later plot development: forgetting where he had left his car and burning down the wall of his house. As he undergoes a medical examination in the local health center, we become aware of his discomfort with his own aging body when he is confronted with the attractive young woman physician.

The confines of life begin to wear more precipitously for another resident, a taciturn Native American whose sole focus of conversation manhandles every topic back to the refractive lens of hunting—and eating—wild geese. In a funny scene with gentle echoes of the trajectory of the Native American character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Keseey, 1962), he sneaks up to the roof to stage an illicit goose-hunt which goes awry so he has to be hospitalized. This is a catalyst for a change in dynamics in the residential home and leads to a deepening of Simon's relationship with the young physician and her partner.

The pace quickens when he has to retrieve his car from the impound lot in a nearby city. A series of repairs require him to spend some days there, mostly sitting in a mall trying to read the autobiography of Leonard Woolf (English political theorist and husband of Virginia Woolf). He is repeatedly thrown off course and cast in the role of sympathetic ear and absorbent shoulder for a string of the troubled and dispossessed. The juxtaposition of academe with the grittiness of mall life and unreliable car mechanics provides for rich comedy and a stimulus for quickening his life-course review. As originally described by Butler (1963), the process is a normal developmental task of the later years, characterized by the return of memories and past conflicts. Life review can result in resolution, reconciliation, atonement, integration, and serenity. Of course, it also can turn out badly.

For Simon, it allows him to escape being defined by his memory loss, a foreshadowing of Anne Basting's *Forget Memory* (2009), and alerts him to the need to grasp the opportunities that remain to him. Sentinel events from his past return to him,

and we journey with him in his trajectory of making sense of the various strands, frustrations, and limitations of his earlier life. In addition, it is clear that the line of the supplicants in the mall value him in a manner that we can only see as inevitable the more our acquaintance with the character grows.

We also gain insights into his belief system and spirituality, an area of burgeoning importance in gerontology. The beauty of this book is that we see all this from the point of view of Simon, a neat foil to the somewhat drier tone of the studies on spirituality and aging that we might discuss with students. Hassler is perhaps one of the few modern novelists to give sympathetic insight into the role and nature of Catholic belief in later life and in particular its relationship to human vulnerabilities.

In a tightly plotted denouement, involving a number of funerals—as well as the burial of the amputated leg of one of the residents of the home—which coincides with the return of the wife who left him nearly 40 years earlier, we recognize a fresh start for Simon.

In this skillfully crafted and entertaining novel, everything has its place and significance; this includes the title, *Simon's Night*, which is a reference to a Stevens (1942) poem used as an epigraph to the book:

After the final no there comes a yes.
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun.

This nocturnal allusion is a strong metaphor for the darkness of much of popular discourse on aging, with gloomy portents of decay and inevitability. The plasticity and capacity for growth, change, and meaning in later life is something that an undergraduate student may find difficult to appreciate from a distant vantage point, and Simon's dawn, arriving near the Sunday of the week, is a sparkling counterblast, free of any taint of worthiness.

The core importance of engagement and agency is clear. In the closing pages, Simon speaks of how he had believed that between life and death, there was an intermediate form of existence, a dormant state: through his journey, he realizes that dormancy is a form of death and that short of death, there is no alternative but life. This recasting of old age as an active and vibrant experience, albeit of a different flavor, hue, and speed compared with that of earlier stages, is the burning heart of this novel, and as both a younger gerontologist and

as a fellow man, I felt enriched—and simultaneously entertained—by the experience of reading this book for the first time. On a second reading almost two decades later, it had lost none of its power, accessibility, and relevance. For any gerontology program that wishes to harness the power of art as a portal to the marvel of aging into later life, *Simon's Night* makes a compelling case for its inclusion in the reading list.

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Jonas Jonasson. (2009). *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared*. New York: Hyperion Books, 400 pp. \$15.99 (paper)

What is a 100 year old supposed to be? As a gerontologist, it's easy to forget that not everyone thinks about old age systematically—how changes in physical and cognitive function affect later life, ecological perspectives, social policy, what it means to grow old, and so on. As someone immersed in issues and controversies regarding later stages of life, I find it difficult to know where to draw the line between finding humor or finding fault in how older people are depicted in novels or other media. The type of oversensitizing that can stem from having too much of a disciplinary perspective points to the need to step back now and then and rethink aging from a different perspective. The humorous novel, *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson (2009) provides such a perspective. In fact, one can read it in two ways, each with its own advantages and disadvantages: (a) as a gerontologist and (b) as everyone else.

The book, translated from Swedish, depicts the current and past adventures of Allan Karlsson, who, as the title implies, climbs out the window in his room at the “Old Folks Home” 12 min before the start of his 100th birthday party. The book chapters alternate from episodes in Karlsson's past, where, what seems at times like a cross between Forrest Gump and Chauncey Gardiner, he accidentally connects with many world leaders (e.g., Franco, Stalin, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, Roosevelt) at key points in history. For example, after having to flee Spain after Franco's demise, Karlsson finds himself serving coffee to the scientists at the

Los Alamos research facility. Week after week, Oppenheimer and the other scientists discuss their struggle with solving the nuclear reaction problem. One day, while pouring, Karlsson simply states, “Excuse me, but why don't you divide the uranium into two equal parts?” (p. 114).

Karlsson's first true talent lies in his ability to blow things up—buildings, people, or anything else in the way. It seems that just about everyone has an obstacle in their path every now and then that needs removing, whether it's physical or perceptual, such as personal barriers or biases. His second talent, drinking vodka, often gets him in and out of trouble. For example, during a dinner with Stalin, “Allan had happened to quote the wrong poet and in a few seconds a pleasant dinner had been transformed into a catastrophe” (p. 234).

Later in life, Karlsson finds himself at the Old Folks Home at the age of 99 years and 8 months, after he inadvertently blew up his own house while seeking vengeance on a fox that had killed his cat. Jonasson describes Allan's first encounter at the home: “He was welcomed by the director, Alice, who smiled a friendly smile, but who also sucked the joy out of Allan's life in laying out for him all the rules of the home” (p. 389). Meals were served at 6:45, 11:15, and 18:15. No smoking or drinking or watching television after 11 p.m. was allowed. Faced with the choice of attending the party (with no vodka) or seeing what other options awaited him in the world, Allan climbed out his window with no plan. After all, Jonasson describes Allan's sole ambition at this and other points of time in his life thus: “He just wanted a bed, lots of food, something to do, and now and then a glass of vodka” (p. 237).

Allan's new adventure starts minutes after he leaves the home, when he steals a suitcase from a local thug at a train station, a suitcase that Allan hoped had clothing his size but actually was filled with money instead. As Allan makes his way across Sweden, he picks up a few friends along the way who also realize during the journey that it is never too late to reinvent yourself and that there are welcomed surprises in the most unlikely of places.

From a gerontological perspective, the book has it all wrong. Karlsson is 100 years old, yet he is able to walk for miles with little trouble as long as there's the promise of food and vodka at the end. There is no life review, only forward thinking. Turning 100 is meaningless to Allan and his friends. In fact, the only people who seem interested in his age are the authorities who are pursuing him. At

first, the authorities assume that Allan is a victim. What else could a 100-year-old man be? Later, as bodies are found, Allan becomes the prime suspect. Allan comments at one point, after seeing a news report about himself, "If I hadn't known it was me, I would have felt sorry for that old guy" (p. 108).

A gerontologist reading this may well come to a similar conclusion: "If I hadn't known about aging, I would have paid less attention to what he shouldn't be able to do and more attention to the story." Reading this sort of book is an excellent reminder that it's easy to pay too much attention to structures and less attention to the things that matter, like the pure enjoyment of the adventure. It can be a reminder that in an effort to better understand aspects of older age, it's easy to forget the human part of being older.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Biography

Robert N. Butler, MD: Visionary of Healthy Aging, by W. Andrew Achenbaum. Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, 288 pp., \$40.00, £27.50 (hard cover), \$39.99, £27.50 (ebook).

Biology

Biology of Aging, by Roger B. McDonald. Garland Science, New York, 2014, 368pp., \$105.00 (paper).

Cultural Studies

The Ages of Life: Living and Aging in Conflict? edited by Ulla Kriebnernegg and Roberta Maierhofer. Transcript, Bielefeld, Germany, 2013, 256 pp., \$35.00 (paper).

Dementia

The Geography of Memory: A Pilgrimage Through Alzheimer's, by Jeanne Murray Walker. Center

Street, New York, 2013, 360 pp., \$22.00 (hard cover).

An Unintended Journey: A Caregiver's Guide to Dementia, by Janet Yagoda Shagam. Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2013, 427 pp., \$20.00 (paper), \$11.99 (ebook).

Aging Families

Kinship and Cohort in an Aging Society: From Generation to Generation, edited by Merrill Silverstein and Roseann Giarrusso. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2013, 350 pp., \$65.00 (hard cover).

Global Aging

Global Aging Issues and Policies: Understanding the Importance of Comprehending and Studying the Aging Process, edited by Yushi (Boni) Li. Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Springfield, IL, 2013, 384 pp., \$49.95 (paper), \$49.95 (ebook).