

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film. Ed. by Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung and Raquel Medina

2023-12-13|by: Oana Hergenröther

The Handbook offers not only fundamental research but also new directions and perspectives on ageing in literary and film studies.



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The Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film, edited by Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung and Raquel Medina (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023) comes—to mirror the editors’ introductory remarks—at a moment of maturity: age and ageing studies, they say, have made a journey since the early 1990s, ‘coming of age’ themselves (and in this they evoke the phrase coined by one of the prominent scholars in the field, Anne Wyatt-Brown). In the 21st century, the inclusion of literary and cultural studies in the mainstream of studying age and ageing has reached its maturity, thanks to the scholars who have succeeded in challenging and supplementing the long-standing dominant public discourse on the topic, which had traditionally only centered on the political, economic and demographic dimensions of age and ageing. Increasingly, there has been awareness in the interdisciplinary academic setting that the human life course revolves around our understanding of time, and that, as such, literary narratives and narratives in general are crucial to our understanding of age and aging. Narratives themselves are driven by and centered around temporal structures, in whatever narrative form—sequential or otherwise—they might be presented, so the bond between studying age and ageing, and narrative has, therefore, been recognized as inherently important.

Moreover, today, the interplay between intersectional and interdisciplinary academic endeavors on one hand, and literary and cinematic production on the other is a dynamic one, developing into many different directions. There is an awareness of the component of aging and the life course that is informing not only academic discourse but cultural products of different time-spaces as well, as the editors themselves point out in their Introduction, and it is this crossroads of the mutual influence between lived and creative reality that the texts in the Handbook try to illuminate.

The thirty-four chapters in this volume are envisioned as three thematic clusters looking at (1) Genre, (2) Themes and Concepts in Contemporary Ageing Studies, and individual (3) Case Studies.

The comprehensive first part of the book explores how the Bildungsroman, poetry, children’s literature, drama and performance, genre literature such as SF and Gothic, but also multimedia works combining the visual and the textual, are all informed by conceptions and preconceptions of how we age, how we change or how we die. Special attention is given to writing that focuses on illness and life review, as well as, in the field of the visual, to TV and cinema productions which, as one of the title suggests, have been shifting the ways in which ageing and old age are represented on screen, be it in growingly popular TV series or in Hollywood.

The second part, looking at themes and concepts in ageing studies today, spans a lens that encompasses the intersections of age and ageing with: gender, queerness, questions of authorial late style, postcolonialism, climate change, disability, dementia; in both literature and film. Several chapters look at discrete spaces such as India, Latin America and Guyana, but also non-white, non-middle class ageing experiences within the Global North, making a strong case for the need to continuously consider ageing experiences in their varieties and facets and lived embodiments, and to widen the scope beyond that of the Western-European and North-American vantage points. This part brings, among others, a chapter on care homes and the effects and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on them, as well as a discussion of the concept of frailty as seen in and represented by the

life writing of Joan Didion.

In the third part, the editors bring together chapters that have different starting points: examining individual artists (among others Samuel Beckett, Alice Walker), or, conversely, national traditions (e.g. Wales, New Zealand, Russia), or global ageing. The authors cover a number of cultural contexts, from Caribbean fiction to Japanese cinema to new Catalan theatre, showcasing one of the strongpoints of critical age studies in the humanities: in-depth analyses of individual stances and the use of multiple analytical tools to pinpoint the political in the personal, and the individual in the grand narratives.

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film brings together established names in the field, along with newer ones, which enriches this volume in the variety of its approaches and adds a layer to the problematized adjective of 'contemporary' from the book's title. The potential for interdisciplinarity that the study of age and ageing and critical gerontology have is well showcased in this collection, with a wide range of paths of inquiry coming to the fore as well as branching into different directions. As many praises from acclaimed scholars in the field have already pointed out, it is a timely publication that will have a twofold importance: outlining the substantial research that has been undertaken in the field since the 1990s, and endorsing potential new inquires and names.