

ENTERTEXT

'There is no doubt that I'm OLD': Everyday Narratives of Ageing

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Abstract

The 3-year Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP), led by a research team in the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), and conducted as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme, began on 1st May 2009 and finished at the end of August 2012. This paper briefly outlines the research and some of its findings in order to illustrate some of the advantages of its particular narrative approach to ageing and issues that concern social gerontologists among others including policymakers, stakeholders and older subjects themselves. First, it discusses the responses of members of the University of the Third Age (U3A) to reading novels with depictions of older subjects such as David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* and Jim Crace's *Arcadia*. Second, it discusses responses to the Mass Observation (MO) directive of 2009, 'Books and You', which was commissioned by the FCMAP team and situates these responses within the wider context of replies to other MO directives on ageing. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the changing nature of third and fourth age subjectivity and the importance of narrative understanding to the experience of ageing.

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Philip Tew and Nick Hubble

The 3-year Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP), led by a research team in the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), and conducted as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme, began on 1st May 2009 and finished at the end of August 2012.¹ This paper briefly outlines the research and some of its findings in order to illustrate some of the advantages of its particular narrative approach to ageing and issues that concern social gerontologists among others including policymakers, stakeholders and older subjects themselves.

The initial FCMAP research questions were concerned with investigating (a) the relationship between cultural representations of, and social attitudes to, ageing and (b) the potential of elective reading and critical reflection on selected narratives by older subjects for engendering new ways of thinking about ageing. In meeting this second objective, it was necessary to develop an approach which limited the influence of the research team on the participants as much as possible in order to foster autonomous thinking processes on the part of the respondents. Therefore, since the FCMAP team had reservations concerning direct interviews with volunteers, at least in the first phase of the project, as these would not only incorporate and represent an unequal set of relationships, their vocabulary and emphases might well convey a set of desired coordinates or implicit preferences. Instead, following Holstein and Winkler’s advice ‘to worry less about large-scale generalisations and more about getting the story right’² FCMAP assembled an innovative methodological bricolage of the personal narratives, critical reflections on group encounters and responses to fiction and other media by our volunteer

¹, “Special Issue on Ageing and Fiction,” 12 (2014): 139-157.

The current MO project was started in 1981 and is therefore one of the longest-running longitudinal life-writing projects anywhere in the world. Three times a year, MO participants receive a seasonal “directive,” which is a set of open questions that invite them to write freely and discursively about their views and experiences. For this particular study, a directive, ‘Books and You’, was issued in Winter 2009 concerning, amongst other things, participants’ responses to representations of their own age-group in political and media discourse. The directive was issued to approximately 600 people and 193 written responses were returned. In conjunction with earlier directives concerning ageing in Winter 1992 and Autumn 2006, it was possible to collate longitudinal case studies and qualitative data regarding how ageing is understood in society, how this differs between generations and how social expectations regarding ageing relate to self-understanding.

For the second strand of the study, eight reading groups were set up involving 80 volunteers, aged from their early 60s to their 90s, in the following district associations of the University of the Third Age (U3A): Banstead, Camden Town, Highgate/North London 1, Highgate/North London 2, Kingston, South East London, Tower Hamlets and Waterloo. Over the period of a year (2009-10), all groups read nine nominated novels published from 1944 to the present, a period that corresponded largely with the adult life experiences of the participants, and the groups met once a month to discuss each book and the various ageing-related issues arising. The novels were (in order of reading) David Lodge’s *Deaf Sentence* (2008), Jim Crace’s *Arcadia* (1992), Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* (2003), Hanif Kureishi’s *The Body* (2002), Trezza Azzopardi’s *Remember Me* (2004), Angela Carter’s *Wise Children* (1991), Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), Norah Hoult’s *There Were No Windows* (1944) and Fay Weldon’s *Chalcot Crescent* (2009). Groups were allowed to substitute one book from this list with another from a ‘B’ list. These novels were chosen to provide a range of contrasting vantage points on later life, and also for the thought-provoking ways in which their presentation might engage and mobilize the readers’ attitudes and assumptions. Respondents encountered a series of often contrasting and

complex fictional narratives that were focused on the experience of ageing that offered a truly multiple range of perspectives, but they still incorporated many existing social values.⁸

Clearly most non-academic people leading what they regard as their 'ordinary' lives do not obtain their view of older subjects through matters such as demographics, statistics, academic research, or even in most cases any lived experience of the elderly. They are used to producing opinions and the process of narrative exchange, that is the summation of ideas through anecdotes and short personal stories or commentary. One reading group member [WCM 008] ruminates that 'Certainly the perception of ageing has changed remarkably in the time [last fifty to sixty years] – 70 is the new 50, though not perhaps to those under 30.' Another participant in the same group [WMC 0011] reflected a change in that:

The present young and middle aged seem to share interests inside as well as outside the home to a greater extent and definite roles are now rarely restricted to one sex. Also as jobs are unlikely to be for life and career changes common and accepted, the perception of age related ideas and behaviour might become more flexible for both men and women of that generation.

Nevertheless, as the same participant reflects, the first book encountered by all groups, David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence*

⁸ , " Special Issue on Ageing and Fiction," 12 (2014): 139-157.

Elderly people usually have less energy and ambition than younger people so tend to socialise less and care less if society leaves them alone. (I suspect that sometimes people, esp. Men, who don't want to socialize – and these tend to be retired – are happy to live in such a mess that visiting their home is an embarrassing experience and a stressful one, for others).

This response was fairly characteristic of those reacting to *Deaf Sentence*, where the division between the third-age son and the fourth-age father offered a ready-made template to members of the U3A reading groups in discussing societal concerns with respect to age, which meant although they might otherwise reject these as stereotypical, instead they ascribed them to the older figure with whom they did not personally identify. Our critical interest therefore became focused not just on why the problematizing, prejudicial social viewpoint continued to predominate seemingly amongst what might be regarded as the defining characteristics used to position elderly subjects and to construct or negotiate their subjectivity and agency in negative terms, but also on why these attitudes remain even among themselves while talking about other individuals or other age groups. Consider the example of isolation that features in many of the selected texts, a condition which respondent HIL007 regards as an urban phenomenon: 'I think the elderly who live in towns are far lonelier and more nervous of the young than those who live in the tight knit community of a village.' Interestingly despite the social trope and narrative of isolation reflected in these texts, the overwhelming evidence from participants in their reflections suggests that with regard to mutual group and self-perceptions, they felt neither isolated nor infirm in any fundamentally debilitating and self-defining fashion (which is not to say that they didn't have a variety of health problems, but that these were conditions with which they considered they demonstrably lived with in a successful fashion, thus overcoming any limitations). The experience and commentary of our respondents demonstrates that many regard themselves as being capable of being as sociable, physically and/or intellectually active and robust as the rest

of the populatio. For them such alien stereotypes would seem to fundamentally misrepresent the realities of their lives.

However it remains a fact that both isolation and frailty can be conditions of some of the older population, and in a curious fashion such conditions seem then almost metonymically to evoke a presupposition of the overriding images of older subjects that informs the social, aesthetic and ideological narratives of our culture. The process of arriving at such apparent norms is intriguing. People never simply live out old age in cultural isolation. They live it through culturally and historically specific frameworks that are mostly a synthesis of public and private understandings exchanged as narratives about others, which both draw upon and sustain cultural representations of ageing and the older subject as an archetype that are difficult to dislodge. HIL007 draws upon the example of the ageing and retired journalists that meet toward the end of Jim Crace's *Arcadia* and which include its narrator, the biographer of Victor, the central, even more aged, protagonist: 'The episodes with the buffers were quite interesting – they had been side-lined because of their age.' Hence at a certain level it is not so much ageing

One example of the complex of narrative concepts involved can be illustrated using reader group responses reflecting on both Crace's narrative and their own experiences and views, in terms of ageing and isolation (the latter a central motif of the text). Assessing this set of relations has implications for anyone assessing how generally held views on a context such as ageing and older subjects might be seen to be potentially grounded on a more fluid basis than is suggested by such archetypes. The novel revolves around the later life and reminiscences offered for a biography of the eighty-year-old plutocrat, Victor, who appears largely divorced from the world. Respondent WMC004 comments 'He has a hibernating temperament, behind his shield of wealth and advancing deafness he does not like to deal with people.' SEL002 had reservations about any empathy or understanding, stating 'I did not respond as an old person to any of Victor's age-related problems. This man was old, sure enough, but so cushioned by his millions and minions that it did not matter.' Another member of the same group, SEL004, reflected on the way in which the group discussion had concluded the novel was 'certainly not about old age, except tangentially, before nonetheless commenting that 'I marked references to old age – there are some twenty – and some of them did resonate with me. Many of them are comparisons of Victor and myself which tend to make me feel complacent: Victor is much wealthier than I am but his life seems much more arid and friendless than mine.' Respondent CBL003 summarizes the character's position thus: 'Victor is basically a lonely, solitary old man who doesn't really understand human relationships.' As CBL003 says of another respondent, 'CBL006 considered the book boring and had no relevance to *normal* older people' [emphasis added]. Another participant in this group, CBL004, adds:

There is a sense of people in their 60s being old and past it – “grey and powerful as pigeons” Was this the public perception in 1992 when the book was written? Certainly it is not so now when 60 is the new 50 and the government expects us to work to 70 before we get our state retirement pension.

OUL005 stresses certain attitudinal elements rather than regarding ageing as a fixed negative condition: 'Reading Crace has made me think old age isn't a problem, it's old people.' For OUL003 the novel is prejudiced since it foregrounds 'the physical disabilities of the older characters [which] pepper the text . . .' which OUL003 proceeds to enumerate at length, adding as

presented as inefficiency and inadequacy, surplus to the requirements of modern society.’ KSL007 responded to the Crace text with negativity about its view of ageing ‘I was resentful about the stereotyping of the characters as it produced very negative feelings in the reader. There was no attempt to balance the stereotyping with positive qualities of ageing. Therefore in younger readers it was likely to reinforce prejudices about the old.’ It was also clear that the social interaction undertaken in the reading groups mirrored a range of other such U3A activities experienced by many of the participants, who regarded these as important if not essential in remaining active and socially engaged.

The majority of the responses to the MO ‘Books and You’ directive contrast

condition of being 'old'. However, she does not simply reject 'old age' but projects it further forward into a time not yet reached, and not onto others. It is possible to conjecture that the experience of writing for MO over the years has taught her not to be premature about closing off the future but to leave a neutral openness for her writing of herself. In hindsight, this openness was a wise choice as can be seen from her response to a similar enquiry 14 years later in 2006:

As I shall be 80 years old in less than 3 months' time, that leaves no doubt about my position in the scale of age. I have very firm ideas about the categories and the need for people to be aware into which one they fit. For example, it incenses me when both men and women (but men more often) advertise themselves as "young 60", or even "young 70": it's a mixture of pathetic and ridiculous. I think middle age begins at 45, and old age these days at 70, because life expectation has increased to make a 90th birthday seem quite commonplace. It's a most extraordinary contrast with what I

However, it is possible to break down the paragraph into several different sub-

become infirm, my two rooms are on one level and very convenient. And I'm never lonely, as so many old people are.

It can be seen that when not feeling obliged to relate her personal narrative to the wider cultural narrative, a more positive picture of old age emerges in which it can be seen as a stage of life rather than a period of decline. Furthermore, it should be noted that this picture emerges because the longitudinal narrative focus of MO allows its participants a space in which to contest dominant narratives. This becomes further apparent from the observer's response to the 2009 directive in which she rejects the invitation to generalise in favour of staying true to her narrative understanding of her own particular situation:

In all manner of ways the world seems to have changed with astonishing speed in the last 20 years, and that applies to books and their contents as much as anything else. I find it rather hard to understand the meaning behind the question 'Have representations of your own age group in books seemed true to you?' My age group is as diverse as any other; I don't suppose many old people read sociological books about our age group and there are not many characters aged over 80 in films or TV dramas. It seems to me that these days people over 60 are divided between those who try to pretend they are still young and can't face up to advancing age, and those of us who accept it, however reluctantly, and keep the core of their personality little changed. That's how I see it; I always refer to myself as a pensioner since that is what I am; nor am I one who is 'young at heart'. But I am not an old fogey, either.

Through continually narrating her own experience in negotiation with public narratives of ageing, this woman has discovered a way of positioning herself as old while resisting cultural stereotypes.

Furthermore, the MO material allows us to see how a similar process functions in the following generation of observers approaching old age. For example, a female who was 63 at the time of the 2006 directive and who most definitely does not consider herself old in any respect, with a living mother of 102, indicates how the 'third age' subjectivity of the 1980s and 1990s is being supplanted by the recognition that people undergo a period of being unequivocally old which amounts to a comprehensive refutation of Lazlett's notion of a fourth age of 'decay, decrepitude and death'. One can see in her account, how the concern has shifted from defining her retired existence directly against the 'old old' of the fourth age, as some responders to *Deaf Sentence*

unable to move with the times, and content to be seen as this? It bothers me if they do.

To conclude, many respondents in the reading groups and MO clearly understand that age prejudice is still a self-legitimizing social prejudice, especially one might add given that much of contemporary culture obsesses largely with youth and beauty. Many participants reflected explicitly on that socialized process or set of responses, when ageing subjects are considered less attractive, a process that serves to confirm long-

