

# ENTERTEXT

Introduction to the “Ageing and Fiction” Special Issue

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## **Overview for the Special Issue**

This special issue on “Ageing and Fiction” collects selected papers from the “New Cultures of Ageing” Conference, hosted by Brunel University London on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2011. The conference was part of the Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP) that was led by a research team from Brunel consisting of Professor Philip Tew, Dr Nick Hubble and Dr Jago Morrison and ran from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2009 until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2012 in collaboration with Demos, the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) and the University of the Third Age (U3A). FCMAP was part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme. The topics covered in this issue include representations of ageing in literary texts by Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Sebastian Barry, Margaret Atwood and Philip Roth; “storying” Alzheimer’s disease; ageing in vampire fiction; ageing in the science fiction of Iain M. Banks; and an article on the FCMAP project and the narrative understanding of ageing of U3A and MO participants.

## Introduction to the “Ageing and Fiction” Special Issue

Emma Filtness, Nick Hubble, Joseph Norman and Serena Volpi

As representations of ageing circulate culturally as social and literary narratives, they radically impact upon identity, agency, attitudes, ideology, policy and even one's quality of life. Fiction, biography, academic criticism and other discourses contribute to this cultural modality. Critical and qualitative analyses of such narratives help us understand ageing both as currently experienced and the emerging shifts that indicate ways in which it may well be experienced and represented in the future.

This special issue of *EnterText* brings together a selection of papers that were originally presented at the conference, “New Cultures of Ageing”, hosted by Brunel University London on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2011. The conference was part of the Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP) that was led by a research team from Brunel consisting of Professor Philip Tew, Dr Nick Hubble and Dr Jago Morrison and ran from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2009 until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2012 in collaboration with Demos, the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) and the University of the Third Age (U3A).<sup>1</sup> FCMAP was part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme. The first day of the conference featured a series of plenary presentations and discussions to an audience of about one hundred and fifty, including many U3A members and project participants. Speakers included Professor Pat Thane, Professor Dorothy Sheridan (MOA), Keith Richards (U3A), Louise Bazalgette (Demos) and members of the FCMAP team presenting and discussing topics such as third and fourth age subjectivity and ageing policy. The day culminated with a special public event featuring leading authors Will Self and Fay Weldon in discussion on the subject of ageing in front of an audience of over two hundred and fifty. In an article written soon after the event, Self discussed how participating at Brunel, and researching and thinking about ageing, had made him consider representing ageing in his fiction more positively.<sup>2</sup> The second day of the conference consisted of parallel

sessions featuring an exciting international mix of young researchers and established and leading academics responding to the following invitation in the call for papers:

This interdisciplinary conference seeks to explore literary, filmic and other representations of ageing, addressing various questions including the following. In what ways can literature help to provide us with a longitudinal perspective on the changing experience of ageing in the post-war period? How are representations of ageing changing as we move through the early twenty-first century? In what ways are writers refiguring our imagination of the ageing body, as well as the social and physical spaces it inhabits? In what ways does literature figure ageing as a gendered experience, and in what ways have feminist and gender critics and theorists responded to these representations? What connections can be drawn between depictions of ageing in fiction and those in the other creative arts? How far can post-war and contemporary writers be argued to have perpetuated, or to have disturbed, sedimented stereotypes of ageing-as-senescence? What light can literature shed on the complex relationships between postcoloniality, globalisation and the changing experience of ageing in Britain and internationally? Does it make sense to speak of ageing subcultures, and how might literature help to shed light on the differential contexts and experiences of ageing in contemporary culture? In what ways have literary texts addressed the thorny questions of ageing and disability/capability?

The following papers illustrate something of the range of responses that were on offer at the conference. Scholarship on the relationship between ageing and fiction is an established field featuring well-known names such as Kathleen Woodward and Helen Small. The essays here refer to this existing scholarship but seek to extend analysis to new texts and also to a variety of genres, including science fiction, fantasy and life writing. We hope, therefore, that this collection provides a useful addition to the field and may perhaps provide suggestions for further work.

The first essay in the collection, Serena Volpi's "She Called in Her Soul to Come and See': Representations of Ageing in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", analyses representations of ageing in two key novels from the African-American literary tradition. She considers these novels as examples of *Bildungsromane* (novels of formation) that develop into *Vollendungsromane* (novels of completion), linked by the theme of loss. Using Annis Pratt's analysis of a branch of the female Bildungsroman, she provides a reading of the experiences of the novels' protagonists in order to show how "development denied in youth is reached at a later stage in life in which characters acquire a voice and, through it, new possibilities for action and representation". She uses intersectionality theory and oral history to explore the roles of orality, tradition and intergenerational communication, as well as the multiplicity of identity and power-relations, showing that age can be used as a resource for liberation: Janie Crawford, the protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is able to affirm her voice after years of silencing and submission, and Celie in *The Color Purple* acquires independence and agency after a life of abuse and bullying. Volpi demonstrates how Hurston and Walker do not link representations of ageing to a progressive loss of abilities, but to a progressive awareness that transforms into resistance, offering an alternative representation of ageing within African-American literature.

Sarah Herbe, in her essay "Memory, Reliability and Old Age in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture: A Reading of the Novel as Fictional Life Writing*," discusses the two alternating strands of first-person narratives that form the novel, reading it as a work of fiction that borrows elements of form and content from genres of life writing, part of a "trend" that includes McEwan's *Atonement* and Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the focus of another essay in this special issue. Herbe argues that the narrative strategies borrowed from life writing are employed in Barry's novel to deal with themes of truth, reliability, memory and old age, and that the novel can be read not only as a by-product of a memoir-boom but as a commentary on the practices of life writing and life writing criticism. Herbe explores the relations between autobiographical memory and old age through the aged female narrator, Roseanne McNulty, and complements her analysis with references to findings by psychologists and cognitive scientists. Herbe shows that telling one's life story in the face of imminent death is not only a narrative device to create tension and allow for

analepses, but a real-life phenomenon where reminiscence works as a form of death preparation.

Emma Filtress in “‘The end or The End’: Ageing, Memory and Reliability in Margaret Atwood’s Fictional Autobiography *The Blind Assassin*” explores the way in which representations of ageing and autobiographical motives are intertwined in Atwood’s novel. Iris’s account of her own life in a present tense which blends old age with previous stages of her life leads Emma’s analysis of the (un)reliability of the protagonist’s memory and of her narrative which, if not properly ‘true’, can be still considered ‘authentic’.

In “Resisting Conformity in Philip Roth’s Late Writing”, Alex Hobbs explores the ideas of ‘Late Style’ in two recent novellas *Everyman* and *The Humbling* by Philip Roth, arguing that these texts challenge accepted notions of social acceptability in old age. Hobbs develops current understandings of the notion of late style by expanding the category further to include discussion of ‘late writing’ – previously explored relatively little compared with other media – and by considering ‘reception, style and issues of mortality’. Viewed through theoretical material written by Edward W. Said and John Updike, *Everyman* features a protagonist mentally struggling to prepare himself for death, while *The Humbling* describes a man futilely trying to fight off his old age with sexual experimentation. Hobbs explores the fascinating complexities and contradictions of both Roth’s texts and the category of late writing itself, arguing for the importance of further discussion on this topic.

In “Storying Alzheimer’s Disease in Lisa Genova’s *Still Alice*”, Sarah Falcus argues that literary narratives “allow for the exploration of the contradictions of the relationship between ageing and disease [that] non-fictional narratives may not” and, in particular, offer a way of interrogating the casual association of Alzheimer’s disease with a negative understanding of old age. After surveying a number of different approaches to writing about Alzheimer’s in fictional and biographical work, Falcus proceeds to a close analysis of Lisa Genova’s *Still Alice* that focuses on how it employs the device of focalisation to address the challenges which the illness poses to narrative and to representation. In this manner, the novel enables the reader to share Alice’s experience of how she is treated by others and the ways in

which they construct her as an Alzheimer's patient. Falcus concludes by discussing the importance of popular novels such as *Still Alice* for articulating the possibilities of selfhood and agency in Alzheimer's.

Marta Miquel-Baldellou's "From Pathology to Invisibility: The Discourse of Ageing in Vampire Fiction" is concerned with the way in which the depiction of the vampire has changed from one of aged appearance during the Victorian period to outstanding youth in more recent fiction such as Ann Rice's *An Interview with the Vampire*, adolescence in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, and even childhood in John Ajvide Lindquist's *Let The Right One In*. Miquel-Baldellou argues that this evolution from an old to a young appearance seems to respond to the significant change of interpretation from 'the vampire as nemesis' to 'the vampire as a double figure'. Her analysis of this evolution leads into a discussion of the way conceptualisations of old age respond to a constructed self-image as a result of interaction with others – what Herbert Blumer would call symbolic interactionism. By analysing instances of the evolving image of the literary vampire, Miquel-Baldellou is able to evaluate the effects of the shift from the pathologisation to the invisibility of old age.

In "Ageing Culture: Senescence, Rejuvenescence and (Im)mortality in Iain M. Banks' Culture Series" – a paper written before Banks' untimely death in 2013 – Joseph Norman examines how ageing will be experienced in the future as portrayed in the Banks' utopian fictional world. In the pan-galactic civilisation known as the Culture, individuals experience childhood, adolescence and early adulthood as we do, before then enjoying a period of about three centuries of relatively fixed physical age. Theoretically, they could choose to continue taking anti-ageing treatments indefinitely but, as Norman discusses, Culture citizens tend to make the decision to stop taking the treatments after about this period of time and opt to die at a place and time of their choosing. However, by using non-Culture characters such as Zakalwe in *Use of Weapons* and non-Culture contexts such as the Earth of the late 1970s in 'The State of the Art', Banks relates these utopian possibilities to present-day concerns ranging from moral responsibilities to the threat of boredom. As Norman highlights, Bank's fictional exploration of ageing, while exploring the possibilities of longevity that might arise in the future, is primarily concerned with how to live those lives meaningfully rather than pointlessly.

Finally, Nick Hubble and Philip Tew's "There is no doubt that I'm OLD': Everyday Narratives of Ageing" outlines the research and findings of the above-mentioned FCMAP Project in order to illustrate some of the advantages for researching ageing of the approach to narrative employed. In particular, this article compares the responses of U3A and MO participants in the project and uses this qualitative data to interrogate the relationship between the third and fourth ages. The examples discussed here are different but related to the qualitative data examined in the book-length publications resulting from FCMAP: Nick Hubble and Philip Tew, *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research*, which was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013, and Louise Bazalgette, John Holden, Philip Tew, Nick Hubble and Jago Morrison, *Coming of Age*, which was published by Demos in 2011.<sup>3</sup>

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Details of the FCMAP Project and its findings can be found in *NDA Findings 28*:

[http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/assets/files/NDA%20Findings\\_28.pdf](http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/assets/files/NDA%20Findings_28.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Will Self, Review of *You're Looking Very Well* by Lewis Wolpert, *Guardian*, 30 April 2011:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/01/looking-very-well-lewis-wolpert-review>

<sup>3</sup> *Coming of Age* is available to download as a pdf: [http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Coming\\_of\\_Age\\_-\\_web.pdf?1302099024](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Coming_of_Age_-_web.pdf?1302099024). Hubble and Tew also gave evidence to the Birmingham Policy Commission on 'Healthy Ageing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', which is included in the resulting report: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/research/policycommission/healthy-ageing/Healthy-Ageing-Policy-Commission-Report.pdf>