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Book Review

Review of Armengol, Josep M., ed. *Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham. 2021. pp. xii, 192. Price: \$104.35 (Hardcover); \$73 (Paperback); Open Access (eBook).

Arthur Ivan Bravo

New York City Department of Education
arthur.ivan.bravo@gmail.com

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Despite the fact that the population of aging men is growing, particularly in the Western world, there is a dearth of scholarship on how aging affects masculinity. In response, Professor of American Literature and Gender Studies Josep M. Armengol, has edited a volume titled *Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*, to rectify said deficit by considering the subject as it has been depicted in recent American narrative media. The volume mines into thematic material from mostly contemporary American fiction literature, but also discusses some non-fiction, and even television series. Contributions examine a wide range of issues, such as the problem of defining masculinity across local to global scales, the dynamic between sexuality and aging, the feminine association with aging, the aging male body as a site for exploring tensions in power and privilege, how modern capitalist society devalues older adults, and the psychological and emotional work involved in aging, just to name a few. The sources employed range in publication from 1960 to 2016, however the settings in which they take place reach from the immediate post-war era far into the imagined future. As Armengol explicates in his introduction to the volume, remedying the dearth of scholarship on aging masculinities entails more than merely considering the discrepancy between this ever-growing demographic and the relative lack of scholarly attention directed at it. *Aging Masculinities* urges us to look at the subject population as a decidedly heterogeneous one on the way to unearthing just how exactly its identities are fashioned. Towards those ends, Armengol has organized the volume's contributions according to overarching areas of concern in popular representations of aging masculinities: "Gendering Age," "Men's Aging in Popular Fiction," "Older Men in Autobiography and Memoir," "Aging Beyond Whiteness," and "Queering Age."

In the first part, "Gendering Age," the superiority and power historically associated with masculinity is pitted against the emasculation that aging bequeaths upon the masculine condition in the contemporary world. In this regard, the volume's first chapter by Juan González-Etxeberria, is an analysis of John Updike's epic yet familiar narrative of the life of middle-class everyman Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. Rabbit's life story spans the prosperous, post-war peacetime era of 20th century America, in retrospect, as is well known, a time perhaps now ripe for thinking about through the prism of how aging disturbs the very identity of masculinity, including its expectations. This is, considering how visibly the subject population Rabbit is a part of, has itself aged in the public and academic eye, all the while the very concept of masculinity has itself weathered unprecedented tension in the modern era. The concerns in González-Etxeberria's analysis are wide-ranging and

expansive. They make reference to a multitude of overarching themes in the study of aging masculinity, many of which will reappear throughout the volume. Notably, he cites from Arthur Schlesinger's timely 1958 article, "The Crisis of American Masculinity," "today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem," foreshadowing much of what follows in the volume (20). But still other themes are explored, through the thoughts and actions of Rabbit, as they occur in the narrative. They range from the feelings of general uselessness, and pointlessness in life, that Rabbit feels in his semi-retirement, to the physical, psychological, and emotional consequences of getting older that spur him to take a more passive and un-masculine role in his household, allowing his wife to take a larger role in household decision-making, to fretting over his own virility, possibly playing a role in a tryst with his own daughter-in-law. Likewise, in Chapter 3, Teresa Requena-Pelegrí posits the aging male body itself as a site where a seemingly taken for granted privilege suddenly becomes vulnerable to contention. Thus she aims to explore "the inherent tension in the aging male body that results from the different experiences of privilege and discrimination and the ways in which...possibilities for constructing non-normative identities arise..." (48). She further explicates that the "analysis of male privilege and aging offers a nuanced representation of masculinities in old age as a site of intersecting identity positions" (58). She finds two such examples in the characters of Larry Cook and Jack Kennison, in Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* and in Elizabeth Strout's novel *Olive Kitteridge*, respectively. While Larry clings to a privilege that has allowed him to unjustly and harmfully wield power over his own daughters, even after his retirement and bodily deterioration, Jack arrives at a kind of acceptance to the thought of yielding the power that privilege confers, which may or may not allow him to partake of a valued intimacy with his lover.

The second part of the volume focuses on the representation of aging masculinity specifically in popular fiction. In Chapter 4, M. Isabel Santaulària-Capdevila echoes González-Etxeberria's findings relating the desperation, even resignation, in the face of the inevitable process of aging, when looking at how famed horror author Stephen King has portrayed the aging male in some of his most well-known novels such as *It*, *Dreamcatcher*, and *Doctor Sleep*. In King's narratives, Santaulària-Capdevila finds a near-unbearable abundance of pain, the angst bitterly earned from a loss of innocence as inevitable as aging and death. This recalls Simone de Beauvoir's observation from *The Coming of Age*, that "old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization," touching upon the risks of power and purpose that come with the modern, capitalist way of life (31). Nevertheless, she argues King's narratives present alternatives wherein patriarchy is thematically contested even as his aging male protagonists cope with their respective conundrums at least partly by discovery of decidedly feminine values such as "love, memory, childhood, and friendship" (75). Meanwhile, in Chapter 5, Ángel Mateos-Aparicio Martín-Albo finds in the fictional lives of the male protagonists of the science-fiction television franchise *Star Trek*, namely James T. Kirk and Jean-Luc Picard, both the problematic trappings of an American heritage built on colonization and imperialism as well as the creative freedom inherent to the genre to consider alternatives to existing conceptions of aging.

In "Older Men in Autobiography and Memoir" (Part 3) the relevant writings of two prominent Jewish-American authors, Philip Roth and Paul Auster, are considered. In her contribution, "Self-Representation 'Between Two'" Esther Zaplana employs psycholinguist Luce Irigaray's concepts of the "sexuate" identity or subject, the related need for a culture "between two" or "being in two," and considerations of an "other," towards realizing some sort of "self-representation" (102-103). She uses these in order to articulate Roth's own relationship with his dying father as narrated, and to potentially realize "an ethics of care in a relationship with older and elderly individuals which involves respecting the differences arising from old age" (106).

The volume's final two parts, "Aging Beyond Whiteness," and "Queering Age," discuss thinking about aging for non-white and queer or non-heteronormative males, respectively. Regarding the former, Mar Gallego appraises African-American author Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Love*, firstly to identify the author's "attempts to defy denigratory stereotypical designation[s] of black men," and secondly to do the same towards articulating her visions for new or alternative relationships reflecting her ethics as a "feminist and anti-racist" (125). Tellingly, the formula of said ethics and values, informing such relationships, echoes those of other contributions in the volume, such as the idea of achieving self-realization by nurturing relationships with others, as proposed by Irigaray (Chapter 6, 97). In much the same spirit, though specifically responding to a post-9/11 and globalized era, Marta Bosch-Vilarrubias selects five notable novels from the late 90s into the noughties written by Arab women about aging Arab men.

As mentioned, the volume's final part, "Queering Age," explores aging as depicted in fiction but specifically for queer or non-heteronormative males. Apart from this, it also summarizes and complements findings and alternatives arrived at in the prior contributions. In "Sex and Text: Queering Older Men's Sexuality in Contemporary U.S. Fiction," volume editor Josep M. Armengol mines the subjects of aging queer or gay men in literature with the intent to deconstruct the traditionally held, narratively dominant, stereotypical assumptions attributed to them. Perhaps fittingly, the volume's final contribution, "On Long-Lasting Humanimal Friendships: Gayness, Aging, and Disease in Lily and the Octopus" by Ignacio Ramos-Gay and Claudia Alonso-Recarte, provides a thought-provoking coda of sorts to one of the many thematic undercurrents informing the volume throughout, that of relationships, and by extension, care given and received. The authors add to this theme by invoking the work of poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, through the concept of "Becoming-Animal" (174-175). This concept denotes a tendential attempt by an individual to defy the existential gulf that emerges between them and someone else that they care about, but are aware may pass on.

To be sure, the field of study devoted to aging masculinity, as depicted in any contemporary fiction, is vast, and the aims of *Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* are nothing if not ambitious, yet also an admirable effort. Potent analyses are directed toward a careful selection of the output and major works of prominent American authors of various backgrounds, yielding a useful diversity of interpretations of how aging masculinity has been portrayed in fiction. Due to the fact that the overwhelming proliferation of fiction in media sees no end, and that portrayals of aging masculinity will almost certainly be present in any such production, this volume will likewise serve as a welcome introduction into an area of research and discourse that will hopefully grow with the contributions of future scholars. Those working in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, comparative literature, and media studies, to name a few, but specifically with a reflexive focus on the contemporary Western, industrialized world, as well as anyone interested in contemporary American fiction and its literary criticism, will find much to start their work off from here.