Stories of ageing

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Series editor's preface

As the new century begins we are some 15 books into the 'Rethinking Ageing' series. It seems appropriate therefore to review our original aims in the light of the response of readers and the concerns which gave rise to the series. The 'Rethinking Ageing' series was planned in the early 1990s, following the rapid growth in ageing populations in Britain and other countries that led to a dramatic increase in academic and professional interest in gerontology. In the 1970s and 80s there had been a steady increase in the publication of British research studies which attempted to define and describe the characteristics and needs of older people. There were also a smaller number of theoretical attempts to reconceptualize the meaning of old age and to explore new ways in which we could think about ageing. By the 1990s, however, there was a perceived gap between all that was known about ageing by gerontologists and the very limited amount of information which was readily available and accessible to the growing number of people with a professional or personal interest in old age. The 'Rethinking Ageing' series was conceived as a response to that 'knowledge gap'.

The first book to be published in the series was *Age, Race and Ethnicity* by Ken Blakemore and Margaret Boneham. In the series editor's preface we stated that the main aim of the 'Rethinking Ageing' series was to fill the knowledge gap with books which would focus on a topic of current concern or interest in ageing (ageism, elder abuse, health in later life, dementia, etc.). Each book would address two fundamental questions: What is known about this topic? And what are the policy and practice implications of this knowledge? We wanted authors to provide a readable and stimulating review of current knowledge but also to *rethink* their subject area by developing their own ideas in the light of their particular research and experience. We also believed it was essential that the books should be both scholarly and written in clear, non-technical language that would appeal equally to a broad range of students, academics and professionals with a common interest in ageing and age care.

The books published so far have ranged broadly in subject matter – from ageism to reminiscence to community care to pensions to residential care. We have been very pleased that the response from individual readers and reviewers has been extremely positive towards almost all of the titles. The success of the series appears therefore to justify its original aims. But how different is the national situation in gerontology ten years on? And do we need to adopt a different approach? The most striking change is that, today, age and ageing are prominent topics in media and government policy debates. This reflects a greater awareness in the media and amongst politicians of the demographic situation – by 2007 there will be more people over pensionable age than there will be children (*The Guardian*, 29 May 1999). However, as a recent article in *Generations Review* noted, paradoxically, the number of social gerontology courses are actually decreasing (Bernard *et al.*, Vol. 9, No. 3, September 1999). The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but they probably reflect the difficulties which today's worker-students face in securing the time and funding to attend courses. Alongside this is the pressure on course providers to respond only to the short-term training needs of care staff through short, problem-focused modules. Only a few gerontology courses are based around an in-depth and truly integrated curriculum that combines the very many different academic disciplines and professional perspectives which contribute to our knowledge and understanding of ageing.

There appears to be even more interest in ageing and old age than when we started the 'Rethinking Ageing' series, and this persuades us that there is likely to be a continuing need for the serious but accessible topic-based books in ageing that it has offered. The uncertainties about the future of gerontological education reinforce this view. However, having now addressed many of the established, mainstream topics, we feel it is time to extend its subject-matter to include 'emerging topics' and those whose importance have yet to be widely appreciated. Among the first books to reflect this policy were Maureen Crane's *Understanding Older Homeless People* and John Vincent's *Politics, Power and Old Age*. (More recently, Miriam Bernard's *Promoting Health in Old Age* combined elements of both the mainstream and the emergent.)

Mike Hepworth's *Stories of Ageing* is another groundbreaking publication. It is the first book by an author based in the UK to explore the potential of literary fiction as a gerontological resource. *Stories of Ageing* combines an approach based firmly in sociological theory with detailed analyses of many contemporary novels that deal with aspects of ageing. Drawing on his study of more than 100 works of fiction – both 'popular' and 'literary' – Hepworth's book demonstrates in fascinating detail how these can be sources of insight into the self in later life.

We believe that the publication of *Stories of Ageing* is an exciting development for the 'Rethinking Ageing' series, and one which reflects a growing interest in using humanistic and artistic sources to gain insights into old age. In future, we hope to continue to rethink ageing by revisiting topics already dealt with (via second editions of existing titles) and by finding new titles which can extend the subject matter of the series.

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Introduction

This book is about stories of ageing. By stories of ageing I mean full-length novels which are about ageing as experienced by a central character or a small group of characters such as a married couple or a family. Under this heading I also include stories where ageing may not be the main interest of the writer but which include significant references to aspects of the ageing process or to older people. A large number of short stories about ageing have been written but with the exception of excerpts from the popular stories of James Herriot (*If Only They Could Talk* and *All Things Wise and Wonderful*), and those of David Renwick, the author of the widely acclaimed TV situation comedy on ageing, *One Foot in The Grave*, these are not included in this book. The reason is not because short stories are irrelevant – quite the contrary – but simply lack of space. My main aim in writing this book is to encourage you as readers to explore fiction as an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society and to go out and make your own selection from the increasingly wide range of novels available. If you do so then this book will have been a success.

By 'ageing' I mean the period usually described as the later part of life; that is, the period in the life course following on from the years normally labelled '50+'. But I do not treat this label as anything more than a social convenience; following mainstream gerontological thinking I treat ageing not simply as a matter of chronology or biology but as a complex and potentially open-ended process of interaction between the body, self and society. Ageing, as gerontological research shows, is not a straightforward linear trajectory towards inevitable physical, personal and social decline but a dynamic process of highly variable change: ageing is simultaneously a collective human condition and an individualized subjective experience. To borrow a neat phrase from the novelist Reginald Hill, 'up and down like a fiddler's elbow' (1999: 311).

In social gerontology the term 'life course' is normally preferred in direct contrast with the concept of the 'life cycle' as a relatively fixed series of biologically determined stages through which natural life-forms move. The use of the sociological term 'course' indicates the comparative open-endedness of the 'stages', 'phases' or 'periods' into which human life is conventionally divided (Cohen 1987). In other words, the life 'cycle' of the fruit fly is determined by natural processes over which the fly has no conscious control, whereas the 'stages' or 'periods' of the human life course are not exclusively determined by biology but constructed by human beings and therefore, potentially at least, are open to individual and collective control.

In the chronological scale indicated by the symbol '50+' the point where individuals and groups begin to 'grow older' or 'enter' old age is not universally fixed for all time but historically and culturally variable (Gullette 1997). The social construction of the age of retirement at 60/65 is a good historical example. For this reason I have a preference for the term 'ageing *into* old age'. Ageing into old age is a constant reminder that during the years '50+' the point of entry into old age is literally, as I have already noted, a symbolic construct which is interactively produced as individuals attempt to make sense of the later part of life. Individuals 'enter into' old age at different points during the life course. In this looser definition of ageing, the constitutive strands of the process – biological (body); psychological (self); and society (culture and social structure) – are not seen as distinctive factors which can be separated out but as woven closely together into the fabric of everyday social life. As the sociologist Norbert Elias (1985) has shown, our biological lives are so closely integrated with culture and the configurations of interdependencies that make up our social relationships that it is impossible to disentangle them. We are at once individuals and collective social beings. In this book, therefore, the word 'ageing' should be read throughout as shorthand for 'ageing into old age'. And I write with two assumptions.

First, that ageing is never simply a fixed biological or chronological process, but an open-ended subjective and social experience. The subjective experience of one's own ageing is potentially highly variable depending on the meanings given to the body and the self. Second, that ageing should always be understood in terms of a tension between subjective experience and the human fate we all share of a limited life span. For, as Kathleen Woodward has observed, ageing 'necessarily cuts across all our lives and our bodies in a way that other differences fundamentally do not' (1991: 156). In other words, as my father was fond of reminding me, old age 'comes to us all'. But the good news is that this shared predicament gives all of us 'a stake in representations of old age and the ageing body' (Woodward 1991: 156) and it is with this stake that this book is primarily concerned.

In making my selection from the wide range of novels available I have chosen stories which I hope for the most part are more likely to be familiar to readers. Gerontologists with an interest in fiction increasingly regard novels as an important source of information about the meanings of ageing (Bytheway 1995) and readers will probably have read at least a few of the stories cited in this book and will almost certainly have heard of several of the titles. Some are popular in the sense of being bestsellers and, following the trend of

media interest in ageing, a number have either been made into films or transmitted as adaptations for television. (Examples include novels as diverse as Kingsley Amis' *Ending Up*, Nina Bawden's *Family Money*, Laurie Lee's *Cider With Rosie*, Ruth Rendell's *Simisola*, Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*, and Minette Walters' *The Scold's Bridle*). In addition, I also make occasional references to book versions of the popular television series *Last of the Summer Wine* (Roy Clarke's *Gala Week*), and David Renwick's previously mentioned collection of short stories from his TV series *One Foot in The Grave*. Hopefully the familiarity of many of these stories will make it possible for readers to compare my interpretation with their own and those of friends and colleagues, thus facilitating a more active interaction between reader and text than perhaps is possible in the academic literature on ageing.

Old age has been described as the ultimate challenge for the novelist because it is about people who are living through the final period of their lives; a time when those who live long enough have to come to terms with changes in their bodies and the attitudes of society to growing older. Stories of ageing are faced with the problem of describing a character and his or her relationships with other people when she or he has apparently little distance left to travel in the 'journey of life'. In western culture this period has usually been regarded as one of decline; a time of gradual disengagement from worldly activities when the consolations of religion are the main resource for making sense of ageing and drawing comfort from the belief that the physical decrepitude normally associated with old age is a tiresome prelude to the liberation of the essential self (soul) from the flesh into eternal life (Cole 1992). But more recently, as life expectancy for the majority has increased, people are looking for ways of replacing or extending this scenario and finding new images of positive meaning to life after 50 (Hockey and James 1993; Gullette 1997; Hepworth 1999).

In this context my purpose in writing this book is not to offer a final definitive analysis of images of ageing in fiction (even if this were remotely possible) but to encourage readers to make their own selection of stories of ageing and to look for additional or alternative interpretations of growing older to the ones I have made. The whole point, as Gullette (1988, 1993, 1997) has vividly shown in her analyses of fictional representations of ageing, is to discover how our personal ideas about ageing (positive/negative/ambiguous) are shaped by our culture and are therefore open to the possibility of change.

For ours is probably the most age-conscious period in human history. Everyday experience and the findings of gerontological research repeatedly confirm our fascination with images of ageing into old age (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993). And over the last 20 years or so the value of fictional representations of ageing has been recognized in a number of ways.

First, gerontologists occasionally draw on fiction to illustrate the findings of empirical research or to interweave gerontology and fiction in order to enhance our understanding of ageing. Valuable examples can be found in Johnson and Slater's reader, *Ageing and Later Life* (1993).

Second, there are a number of compilations of wide-ranging extracts from fiction (including poetry) where fiction is sampled to illustrate the ageing process. These texts often present a humanistic perspective on ageing within

the traditional framework of the life course as a series of 'ages' and 'stages' from the cradle to the grave. They are usually a celebration of the richness and diversity of literary images of ageing, a good example being *The Oxford Book of Ageing: Reflections on the Journey of Life*, edited by Cole and Winkler (1994).

Third, there is the emergence, particularly in the USA, of 'literary gerontology' where experts in literary criticism and the history of literature have drawn on gerontological research (often from a psychological/developmental perspective) to carry out in-depth analysis of particular texts or writers. Examples include Anne Wyatt-Brown's study of the influence on the later novels of the English writer Barbara Pym of her own experiences of ageing and terminal illness:

> Her final work, *A Few Green Leaves*, returns to the village setting of her first novel. Yet Pym's life had changed too radically simply to revert to the style of her youth, for not only had she become famous, but she discovered she was dying of cancer. . . . Therefore she added a new note: the mature acceptance of death as part of the life cycle.
>
> (Wyatt-Brown 1988: 837)

Wyatt-Brown shows how ageing and the onset of cancer added a new dimension to Pym's work as she came to terms with her own mortality. *A Few Green Leaves* was published in 1980 and her previous novel, the bleaker *Quartet in Autumn* was concerned with the problems of retirement facing four older people who had worked together in the same office: Letty, Marcia, Norman and Edwin. The central theme, as Wyatt-Brown notes, is 'retirement . . . viewed quite differently by retirees and observers' (1992: 124). *Quartet in Autumn* was written at a time when Pym was becoming increasingly aware of growing older and facing the problem of assessing her future.

There are, therefore, signs of an increasing gerontological appreciation of the value stories of ageing can add to our understanding of the subtleties of the subjective experience of ageing (Zeilig 1997). And Wyatt-Brown has given one significant reason for this emerging interest – namely the contribution writing and reading stories can make to the issue of making sense of the differences between the perspectives of insiders and outsiders on ageing and death. Fiction is a particularly valuable resource precisely because it allows the writer, through the exercise of imagination, access to the personal variations and ambiguities underlying the common condition of growing older. An 84-year-old schoolmaster interviewed by Ronald Blythe for his now classic *The View in Winter*, said old age 'doesn't necessarily mean that one is entirely old – *all* old . . . which is why it is so very difficult. It is complicated by the retention of a lot of one's youth in an old body. I tend to look upon other old men as *old men* – and not include myself' (1981: 226) The idea that ageing is not a uniform process which completely eliminates the past self – 'the retention of a lot of one's youth' – points to the essential individuality of the experience of old age as a kind of mask. Writing within the academic context of sociological theorizing, Katz (1996: 1) made a related point when he observed that no 'single knowledge' of ageing is possible because the 'meanings of ageing and old age are scattered, plural, contradictory, and enigmatic. . . . Age

is everywhere, but the world's cultures have taught us that age has no fixed locus'.

These quotations from Blythe and from Katz show how the diverse meanings of ageing coexist at both individual and cultural levels. Ageing exists in the mind of Blythe's schoolmaster in the form of a conscious reflection on personal ideas and beliefs about his changing body and self as he remembers it in the past. His experience of ageing is in effect an act of comparison between his subjective vision of himself as an older individual and the appearance of the other older people he is in a position to observe. His observations make a connective link with Katz's reference to the role of the wider symbolic world of culture. There is here an interactional process which in certain respects is comparable with the individual experience of reading a story of ageing; a comparison which immediately raises questions concerning the relationship between the author, the text and the reader. As the work of literary gerontologists clearly shows (see, for example, Gullette 1988, 1993; Wyatt-Brown 1988, 1992), evidence about the aims and intentions of creative writers when they address issues of ageing is difficult to unearth and dangerous to interpret. Quite simply, writers vary in the use they make of ageing as a subject for a story – there are significant differences between the in-depth analyses of the ageing self found in, for example, Pat Barker, Penelope Lively, Julian Rathbone, and May Sarton, the tragi-comedy of ageing in the work of David Renwick, and the manipulation of popular stereotypes of ageing found in some of the work of crime novelist Agatha Christie. Huge difficulties also stand in the way of making accurate assessments of the use readers make of texts. The experience of reading stories – the sense you or I make of, say, Nina Bawden's *Family Money* – may well vary widely because reading is simultaneously a private act and a social act. Reading is a process of symbolic interaction where the reader has some freedom to interpret the text according to his or her own ideas, emotions and consciousness of self. Because reading is the exercise of a social skill engaging the private self it is dangerous to make assumptions about how other people interpret the stories of ageing they read.

And yet amidst all these problems of interpretation one thing is abundantly clear. Fiction evidently adds a further dimension to our understanding of the quality of the ageing experience. Because fiction is a creative mental activity requiring author and reader to extend her or himself imaginatively into the minds of other characters, novels are in the advantageous position of admitting readers to a variety of different perspectives on the situation of an ageing individual – the view of grandma's ageing, for example, from the positions of different members of her family in Margaret Forster's *Have the Men Had Enough?* This space, opened up by creative licence, enhances the reader's appreciation of the subjective experiences of someone who is consciously aware of the process of growing older. A sense of sadness, for example, one of the emotions often associated with ageing, is movingly described in the following extract from Celia Dale's crime story with the ironic title *A Helping Hand*. The subject is Mrs Fingal, a wealthy, lonely, widow befriended by a middle-aged couple, Josh and Maisie Evans. Even when seated comfortably in their garden (they have taken her into their home):

> Sad thoughts came to her when her bones ached, although she concealed this too; thoughts all of the past, happiness taken away, loved ones who had died but who still peopled her head and her heart, so vigorous, so alive in her recollection that they forced themselves out of her mouth, a stream, a dream of what she had been when life was still happening to her. She tried to dress her memories gaily, for she was aware that even people as kind as Mr Evans were embarrassed by sadness. . . .
>
> (Dale 1990b: 60)

In this book I make no claim to offer a definitive or final analysis of an author's motivation, the content of a text or the reader's interpretation (even supposing for one moment that this would be possible). My interest is basically in the *potential* of fictional representations of ageing to engage our interest and concern. Undoubtedly the emotions, long neglected in studies of ageing, are engaged by certain stories (Hepworth 1998). Ultimately, writing and reading are processes of emotional and intellectual interaction where symbols – words – are the currency. As readers we interact with the text in terms of our understanding of the words before us; and this understanding involves an interplay between shared meanings (for example, of words such as 'ageing'; 'old'; 'declining years'; 'later life') and our own personalized versions of them ('my' ageing; my 'old age'; 'my' declining years; 'my' later life, as distinct from yours or the ageing of the characters in a novel).

In this book I have attempted to interpret my selection of stories of ageing within a 'symbolic interactionist' framework. Symbolic interactionism is one of the branches of sociology that places a high value on the role of the imagination in the development of the concept of the self. According to symbolic interactionism our sense of individual selfhood develops from infancy through the human capacity to become aware of the way others see us. An awareness of personal selfhood depends on the human ability to imagine the perspective of the other: to put ourselves, in other words, into other people's shoes. The self is not seen as something we are born with but as emerging out of interaction with other human beings and continually shaped by interaction with other people throughout the entire life course. The self, then, is a kind of social gift reflecting the essential interdependency of every one of us.

One significant aspect of our interdependency is our reliance on shared meanings in order to communicate with each other. If our ability to reciprocate is in some way impaired, the resulting breakdown in communications can produce interpersonal difficulties as the following example from Marika Cobbold's *Guppies For Tea* shows. Here Amelia is discussing the difficulties of looking after her beloved grandmother Selma who is an invalid and becoming confused:

> 'That's what's so disconcerting.' Amelia stirred the earthenware pan filled with vegetable soup. 'One moment she's the old Selma; with it, sensible, the sort of person you feel you can go to with your problems. Next thing you know, whoosh, she's gone, replaced by this large, malfunctioning child.' She looked across the kitchen at Gerald. 'It's really very upsetting.'
>
> (Cobbold 1993: 47)

It is unlikely that everyone who has just read this passage will have also read the novel from which it was taken, but few, I imagine, will have any problems understanding the meaning of the words. The shared meaning seems very clear but the personal implications for each one of us who reads this passage may well be very different, depending on our own experience and observations of dementia and infantilization, which is the process through which we perceive old age as a reversion to a 'second childhood' of dependency on others.

Ageing is at once collective and personal (the population of the world is ageing/I am ageing; but the two are not the same though they may well coincide at certain salient points). My gerontology students often include in their essays the phrase 'ageing is very much a personal and individual experience' and it is not unusual for academic writers on the social dimensions of ageing to include some reference to their personal interest and motives. In his carefully researched socio-economic history of middle age in twentieth-century Britain, John Benson refers to his own experience of ageing into middle age:

> I know a good deal about middle age. I started this book when I was 48, and finished it when I was 51. When I was 48 I celebrated my silver wedding anniversary, when I was 49 I was told that I might have glaucoma, when I was 50 I received birthday cards saying that although I didn't look fifty I probably had done once, and when I was 51 my wife and I decided to save seriously for retirement.
>
> (Benson 1997: viii)

T.R. Cole's *The Journey of Life*, a vivid and painstakingly researched history of ageing in American culture, opens with memories of his family and his grandparents and the explicit acknowledgement of his 'search for personal meaning' (1992: xvii) in ageing as a motive for his investigation of changing attitudes and perceptions. In quite a different kind of book, Kathleen Woodward's sophisticated literary and psychoanalytic analysis of ageing and poetry writing *at last, The Real Distinguished Thing* (1980), there is a reference in the preface to her personal reasons for her academic interest in the later work of poets such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. Woodward's second book, *Ageing and Its Discontents* (1991) is the result, she confesses, of a painful personal awareness as a younger person of the physical difficulties experienced by older relatives – what she calls the 'darker tone' of her work (1991: 23). Here she concentrates more closely on the contribution of imaginative fiction to our understanding of the limitations of our biologically ageing bodies. The book contains a number of painful recollections of much-loved relatives in old age, describing, for example, the last days of her grandmother in the hospital wing of a retirement home:

> My grandmother had been there for years. She was all bones, curled up into herself. She muttered and murmured to herself. I could not make out what she was saying. I wanted to know what she was thinking, what she was feeling. She had never cultivated a language of intimacy, or at least not to my knowledge. Now she was physically incapable of communicating her experience. And I did not have the resources to imagine

her experience. It seemed to me at that infinitely expandable moment that youth and age were indeed the greatest opposites of which life is capable, as Freud had remarked. I wanted a sense of her subjectivity, which so definitively escaped me. Hence, perhaps, this book. I wish too that the endings of the lives of my other grandparents, so painfully stretched out in incapacity, had been different and their experience more accessible to me. And hence, perhaps, my emphasis on the discontents of ageing.

<div align="right">(Woodward 1991: 24–5)</div>

It is worthwhile comparing the above autobiographical quotation with the excerpt from Marika Cobbold's fictionalized description of infantilization previously cited. Again, readers will have no problem in understanding the dilemma expressed in Woodward's poignant account though, again, different readers will doubtless react in different ways. Reference to the personal nature of our interest in ageing inevitably raises the issue of identification; that is, the identification of the reader with characters in a novel, with the story-line, or with certain of the main themes. In *Safe at Last in the Middle Years,* Margaret Gullette has defined identification as 'the fundamental *condition of possibility*' (1988: xvi). By 'possibility' she means not only the resource provided by the entire range of stories of ageing that are actually written down and published, but the wider freedom we enjoy to make our own interpretations of these stories and our ability to creatively develop and expand their themes. We are not, therefore, merely passive readers of fictional representations of ageing but actively engaged in using these books to make sense of our own experience of growing older. In her study of creativity, ageing and gender, Gullette (1993) argues that a critically engaged reading of fiction invites readers to explore the possibility of alternative images of ageing; to 'think age' in a new and positive way. Her view is that a critical attitude towards stories of ageing sharpens our awareness of the tension between the shared vocabularies of ageing and our personal experience and expectations: 'once we begin to think age, a more mysterious and intangible project emerges: to discover what our own culture is serving up for us, and what each of us has consumed or resisted' (Gullette 1993: 46).

Stories of Ageing should be read in the light of Gullette's critical perspective. As the products of historically established systems of ideas and beliefs about ageing stories make a significant contribution to 'thinking age'. Novels are one source of our ideas and beliefs about ageing which, to borrow again from Gullette, offer 'material for the use of different readers', and readers will 'take what they can use' from the book (Gullette 1988: 45).

Stories of Ageing is an invitation to explore fiction as one source of ideas about the ageing process and their possible influence over our individual subjective experience of growing older in contemporary society. It should be read as an exploration of fictional images of ageing in a selection of novels published during the period from the 1930s to the present day. All the novels cited are fully referenced under the heading 'Fiction' at the end of the book but readers should note that the date of publication is the date of the copy I have consulted and not necessarily the date when the book was first published. It is not

a chronological history of themes of ageing in fiction, but is intended to be an exploration of one of the key issues involved in an understanding of the experience of ageing – namely processes of interaction between the body, self and other people. The key issues of ageing in Chapters 2 to 6 – body and self; self and others; objects, places and spaces; vulnerability and risk; and futures – can be cross-referenced with mainstream questions concerning biological ageing, the ageing self, friendship, dependency, loneliness, caring, the emotions, the quality of life, successful and unsuccessful ageing, and the future of ageing found in most gerontological textbooks (see Bond *et al.* 1993). The main difference between this book and other texts in social gerontology is the use of examples drawn from the world of the creative imagination, as seen from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

While the novels I have chosen focus on particular aspects of the ageing experience, I suggest that they can be linked via the insights of symbolic interactionism with more general or universal ideas about ageing as a process which has emerged from gerontological research over the last few decades. Diane Vaughan has noted that the key problem in sociology is the tension between the individual and society. Sociology, she argues, is 'only possible because human behaviour is patterned' but at the same time 'the path of each individual life is unique and unpredictable' (1988: 9). The same difficulty, as I noted above, pervades discussions of understanding ageing, and the structure of the book – the particular framing of stories of ageing – sets out to reflect the interplay between the body, the self and society in the six chapters.

The chapter headings indicate key aspects of the ageing process as analysed from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Chapter 1 introduces the symbolic interactionist approach in greater detail and highlights areas of correspondence between symbolic interactionism and stories as meaningful narratives of ageing. I also provisionally distinguish five variations in the themes of stories of ageing in terms of the quality, depth and intensity of focus on key aspects of ageing as an interactive process.

In Chapter 2 I take a closer look at the interaction between the body and the self, taking the view that although ageing is ultimately grounded or 'embodied' in biological change – if the body did not age there would literally be no gerontological story to write or read – the relationship between body and self raises important questions about the meaning of the life course with which we have to struggle as we grow older.

Chapter 3 develops this interactional theme further, to expand on the role of relationships between the body, the self and other people. In Chapter 4 I extend the interactional chain to include the interdependency of self on objects (the symbolic role of 'biographical objects', Hoskins 1998, in shaping the self) and the part played by places and spaces (such as the 'home' and the residential 'home') in shaping age identities.

One of the central issues in any discussion of ageing is the problem of the specific risks associated with physical frailty and with particular places and spaces, such as a high crime area of an inner city, and Chapter 5 looks at examples of the dangers to which older people are exposed. I also extend the concept of risk to include what in one sense may be interpreted to be more

positive aspects of risk – as displayed in fictional treatments of older people as risk *takers* – and sometimes as posing a threat to other (including younger) people. Finally in Chapter 6 I take up the question of the future of human ageing in relation to the interplay between past, present and future in the life course.

Because ageing is ultimately about human constructs of the meanings of life and time these ideas inevitably exercise a significant influence over the ways in which we make sense of growing older. Much of our thinking about later life takes place within a framework of the 'ages' and 'stages of life' inherited from past times, which are in certain respects very different from our own (Cole 1992). It may well be that the models of the life course we have inherited will be much less appropriate in years to come – the 'decline narrative' in fiction has recently come under sustained critical attack (Gullette 1988, 1993, 1997) – but there is a still a long way to go and the future largely remains, as it has always been, a matter of speculation.

1

Stories of ageing

The main theme of this book is the contribution fictional descriptions of ageing can make to our understanding of ageing as a socio-psychological process. Stories of ageing are regarded as a cultural resource each individual can draw upon to enhance his or her appreciation of the subjective and inter-personal dimensions of the experience of ageing. As previously indicated, the main conceptual framework of this book is sociological, and the stories I have selected to write this particular story of ageing have been interpreted from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

This chapter has three aims. First, to introduce the key ideas of symbolic interactionism. Second, to review the symbolic interactionist perspective on stories as narratives. And third, to describe five variations in the stories of ageing which I have selected for this book.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is an attractive conceptual framework for under-standing the experience of ageing for two basic reasons, one following from the other. Namely, the central role symbols and images play in the social organization of human life and consequently the central role played by symbols in the creation of the individual human self.

To put the whole issue into a nutshell, human life is not instinctual but social, and as such it has a long history (Elias 1985). Because human beings are essentially interdependent creatures, relying on each other for survival and support, life is fundamentally a socially organized cooperative activity. Unlike animals whose behaviour is largely determined by inherited instinc-tual patterns of motivation, human life derives motivation and meaning from the social and cultural context. That is to say, it requires the ability to co-operate and communicate in situations where individuals meet and interact

according to certain rules and expectations. The basis of cooperative activity is communication, and the characteristic feature of human communication is the symbol. We relate to each other not in terms of basic instinctual drives but through complex patterns of symbols indicated by words like 'mother', 'father', 'brother', 'friend', 'enemy', 'youth', 'middle age', 'ageing', 'old age', 'grannie', 'grandfather', 'incontinence', 'care assistant', 'matron', 'director of human resources', and so on. Without our inherited cultural repertoire of symbols, human life would not be possible. A good test of the key role of symbols in everyday life is to try to live without them. (In fact one of the problems of later life is the risk of losing the capacity to communicate symbolically through failure to recognize or remember the images that connect each individual self with others – diaries, photographs, newspapers, material possessions, places and stories about the self are the connective tissue of social life).

Symbols, comprising visual and verbal images, are an essential feature of human interaction and communication (i.e. the 'interaction' that is 'symbolic'). It is symbols that transform higher-order animals into human beings, enabling us to move beyond the basic biological conditions of our existence to experience a sense of personal identity or selfhood in the world of ideas and the imagination. According to Norbert Elias, it is symbols which free human beings from innate or instinctual patterns of behaviour; a process he describes as 'symbol emancipation' liberating us 'from the bondage of largely unlearned or innate signals and [leading to] the transition to the dominance of largely learned patterning of one's voice for the purposes of communication' (1991: 53). As the cultural heritage of our long-term cultural history, symbols extend the human imagination and potential and open up the prospect of future change.

Social interaction is therefore accomplished through the symbolic communication of shared meanings. As Gubrium has observed in his study of Alzheimer's sufferers and their carers in the USA, personal troubles like senile dementia have to be expressed in a language which is shared. In his sociological analysis the problem of Alzheimer's disease is constructed and communicated in symbolic terms when it is described variously as ' "a funeral that never ends" ', a disease that ' "makes shells of former selves" ', or metaphorically as a thief who ' "steals the mind" ' (Gubrium 1986: 119). These emotive symbols are the 'public cultures' through which private troubles are expressed and one carer relates meaningfully to another (Gubrium 1986: 118). Our understanding of ageing, therefore, is formed and given structure through the symbols we use to make sense of this ambiguous complex of biological, psychological and social changes. One set of images Gubrium chooses to illustrate his analysis of the role of symbols in giving meaning to Alzheimer's disease is the poetry composed by caregivers and sometimes sufferers themselves. These poems are again highly emotive, putting into words the subjective feelings aroused by an awareness of memory loss in the 'victims' themselves and the sadness and despair experienced by carers watching the decline in the 'mental life' of a loved one (Gubrium 1986: 128). They provide, in Gubrium's words, 'insight into the link between privacy and culture.' (1986: 128). Here is one example:

On one occasion, in a support group, a caregiving wife, who, having presented her feelings, paused for a moment, fetched a piece of paper from her purse, and remarked, 'I clipped this out of a paper and I just wanted to read it to you because – it's a poem – it puts into words what I think we all feel but find it hard to communicate.' She then read the poem. In her audience's focused attention and responses afterward, it was evident that these special words somehow penetrated and conveyed the commonality of their sentiments, the 'thing' they all shared but couldn't describe, something now being collectively represented and communicated. In the poem, they unified their distressing privacies and, as such, recognised the depth of their common experience. As someone quietly responded, 'That says it all.'

(Gubrium 1986: 128)

Poetry, of course, is one form of storytelling. As recorded in Gubrium's research it is a cultural resource carers draw on to create a sense of social solidarity – they are all facing a common experience – and also to give meaning to the ageing experiences of those they care for and to symbolically prolong the continuity of their personal identity. In this sense poetry is a medium for constructing both the self of the 'victim' and of her or his carer.

The social and personal significance of the role of storytelling in making sense of ageing is also confirmed by Dorothy Jerrome in her research into old people's clubs on the south coast of England. Stories are not only read in privacy but are publications which are exchanged between individuals to cement group solidarity. Jerrome describes how a set of library books published by the magazine *Woman's Weekly* was used to maintain contact between a group of older women and one member who seemed to be in danger of losing touch with the others. Books and magazines are not only collections of words with shared meanings but are material articles for sustaining social relationships: 'the lending and borrowing of books and magazines is a vital part of the club communication system' (Jerrome 1992: 40)

Symbolically created meanings are a vitally important constituent of personal and social life and are inevitably therefore a valuable source of information about the ways in which we make sense of growing older. If, for example, we want to understand why a particular older person is dissatisfied with his or her transfer into residential accommodation it is probably a good idea to find out what she or he means by the word 'home' and the personal meaning of the transition from 'home' to 'a home' (Fairhurst 1999). Similarly, the physical distress associated with illness in later life is communicated to others symbolically in words such as 'where do you feel the pain, mother?' – 'Down my arm, dear'. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the experience of the ageing human body is mediated through symbolic interaction and thus extended well beyond the flesh and blood that is the basis of our existence.

If all aspects of human life are made meaningful through the display, structuring and communication of symbols – bodies, food, clothing, shelter, emotions, sexuality, childrearing, ageing and the life course – the individual self-consciousness of each one of us can be seen as a symbolic experience. And our sense of individuation, of being conscious of a separate identity from

the other people around us, is expressed in relational terms. That is to say, in terms of an interdependent relationship between self and others. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 2, the self can be divided into two parts: the self privately experienced in our inner subjective world, and the self communicated to others through our interaction with the external social world. One of the problems we face throughout our lives is that these two aspects of experience are not always harmoniously integrated. Doris Lessing's *Love Again* explores the emotional vicissitudes of Sarah Durham, a woman in her sixties who self-consciously examines her emotions, her motives and the quality of her relationships when she falls in love with younger men. One of her main concerns is the propriety of love in later life. Is it appropriate for a woman aged 65 to fall in love with younger men? How does it look to others? How do these men see Sarah? What does the relationship mean to them? How does she feel about herself?

> it was not possible she was in love with a handsome youth she had nothing at all in common with except the instant sympathy she owed to his love for his mother. Perhaps when he was seventy, well pickled by life, they might mean the same thing when they used words – yes, possibly then, but she would be dead.
>
> (Lessing 1996: 104)

Love Again explores the interaction between the subjective and social dimensions of Sarah Durham's self as seen through her own eyes. Because it is about the problem of love between an older woman and younger men it highlights some of the subtleties of interpersonal interaction and the difficulties Sarah experiences in communicating her personal feelings in a society where such relationships tend to be disapproved of. The intensity of the emotions Sarah experiences and her desire to embrace them does not totally obscure her awareness of conventional attitudes towards the public expression of such desires. She is simultaneously her own person and the creature of her times, and her thought processes are a reflection of these tensions and the problems she faces in resolving them. Lessing, the novelist, uses her creative imagination to open up an aspect of the experience of ageing which is often a closely guarded personal secret – 'locked in the heart' as we sometimes say – and is certainly difficult to express in conventional words.

The symbolic meanings of the private and public self, and the tensions existing between them, have profound implications for the experience of ageing. This is because close relationships with others, like love and friendship, are only fully brought to life when a shared understanding has been established. But the achievement of such a shared understanding is itself a precarious business. Sarah Durham has to come to terms first of all with the realization that she has fallen in love with Bill and then with the problem of publicly expressing her love. As we have seen, some of her difficulties are derived from the social expectation that older women are not supposed to fall in love with younger men, and if they do they are certainly not expected to express their feelings.

It is possible to extend the interactional problem of a tension between the subjective and the social self further to include the barriers to communication

that stand in the way of self-expression in later life when individuals become confused or dementing. If, for example, I begin to experience any of the problems associated with dementia – difficulty remembering the time, the day, the place, whether I have read the newspaper or not, difficulties over identifying myself in the mirror – then the relationship between myself and others may well become more and more strained as time goes on. If for some reason you don't understand what I, as an older person, am saying – if I am using what you consider to be an inappropriate language, or if I am inarticulate, confused, or have lost my memory of experiences we have shared – then I shall have problems in expressing myself to you and you may well begin to think that I am no longer my 'old self'. If for any reason my command of the symbolic resources required to express the self you recognize has been changed in some way (as happens when Sarah Durham falls in love) or seriously impaired, then in your eyes I shall cease to be my 'old' self.

A neat reference to the sequence of symbolic interpretations involved in the interplay in later life between a 'young' and an 'old' self occurs in a conversation in Reginald Hill's crime story *Exit Lines*. Here the mother-in-law of Pascoe the police detective is describing her experience of her husband's ageing:

> Pascoe looked at her thoughtfully and said, 'How long's Archie been like this, Madge?'
>
> 'Oh a long time,' she said vaguely. 'It's getting worse slowly, and it won't get better. But it's funny what you get used to, isn't it? And most of the time, he's still his old self. Well, that's what he is, isn't it? His *old* self. Himself, but old, I mean.'
>
> (Hill 1987: 246–7)

A number of issues are of interest here. First, Archie's growing 'worse' is a gradual and fluctuating process. Most of the time Madge perceives him as 'still his old self' yet at the same time the 'old self' is not really the self to which she has become accustomed or even a complete reversion to some younger self in the past. It is a self of old age, or what we sometimes describe as a self 'in' old age. More generally, it is important to note that these permutations of selfhood are only possible because of our sophisticated linguistic resources. Archie's self (or selves) are created and interpreted in symbolic terms. I shall return to a more detailed discussion of the symbolic interactionist analysis of the relationship between the body and the self in Chapter 2.

In the textbook *Ageing in Society*, Bond *et al.* (1993) provide a helpful overview of the contribution of symbolic interactionism to gerontology and this may be briefly summarized as follows:

- Individual and group human action is motivated by meanings.
- Language is an important symbolic resource for creating and communicating personal and social meaning.
- If we wish to understand the experience of ageing we have to understand both the personal and social meanings that individuals give to ageing – to see the world through their eyes and how they define a particular situation.
- But we also have to understand how individual older persons interact

with others. Any given situation can be described in terms of two perspectives: that of each of the individuals involved and the group perspective.

• If effective cooperative action is to be achieved, personal subjective meanings have to be communicated to other people in terms of meanings they understand. The meaning is then no longer one-sided but shared. If meanings cannot be shared with others then communication will break down or at least face the risk of being misunderstood.

If the processes of interpersonal communication break down for any reason then the individual sense of selfhood can be seriously threatened, an outcome that has been dealt with imaginatively in a number of stories of ageing. I am thinking particularly of novels where confusion and loss of memory are described subjectively through the eyes of the person with dementia, in contrast to the external perceptions of family members (usually younger) who are closely involved in the situation. Because of the variety of perspectives which are possible in imaginative fiction the reader may be guided towards a deeper understanding of the person with dementia than is available to the other main characters who are often in the role of carers.

Two examples, to which I shall return in greater detail in subsequent chapters, are Francis Hegarty's *Let's Dance* and Thea Astley's *Coda*. The central characters in these stories are women who are becoming seriously confused. Although the plots (and probably the intentions of the authors) are very different, both these stories are novels with the subjective experience of confusion as a core theme. *Coda* opens with Kathleen's admission that she is losing control over her memories and that her subjective experience of herself is changing: 'she was starting to think of herself in the third person' (Astley 1995: 5). It unfolds as a confused medley of Kathleen's memories of the past, and her tense relationships with her children and their families, who she correctly perceives to be largely uncaring and manipulative.

Let's Dance gives the reader insight into the mind of Serena Burley who is writing up a journal, usually during the early hours of the morning. Serena's children, Robert and Isabel, have decided that 'Serena's erratically developing dementia' (Hegarty 1996: 2) is making it increasingly difficult for them to allow her to continue living alone in her large, isolated country house. Interwoven with the events in the story which include descriptions of Serena's eccentric behaviour and dress are excerpts from her journal allowing readers inside access to her one way of symbolically attempting to preserve the threatened self. In the following passage Serena reflects on the turmoil of her inner life:

> If she had a tape recorder . . . she would be able to say exactly what this condition was like. It was like the nightmare of an operation where the patient is merely drugged, not anaesthetized, rendered immobile and helpless in the face of hideous pain and the knowledge that the surgeon is removing the wrong leg. Or trying to push the baby back in. The image made her cry and giggle at the same time and reminded her that there was no time for crying. Crying only served to eclipse this hour into more of the bumbling confusion that filled the day, apart from those crucial

minutes, sometimes a whole thirty at a time, when she could control the clouds and make them move away from the sun.

<div align="right">(Hegarty 1996: 22)</div>

The essence of symbolic interactionism is the conceptualization of human life as a process. The idea of process implies human experience as a kind of reflexive ebb and flow rather than an undeviating movement in one direction. Serena's confusion, in this respect like Archie's, is not a blanket condition but has emerged 'erratically'. As her journals show, she moves in and out of control of her writing and is aware of the change in her perceptions and her ability to exercise self-control. For her children she is both a problem to be dutifully resolved and the source of mixed feelings of love, embarrassment and anxiety.

Stories

As a product of the creative imagination fiction offers both writers and readers a resource for reflecting upon ageing as symbolic interaction. Mary Stuart (1998: 149) has drawn a parallel between writing and the emergence of the self as a process in everyday life:

> Writing is a process of social interaction. In writing we imagine our reader, we write *to* someone or something. . . . Imagining the reader is a vital component of being able to write. As I write this, I have some notion of who 'you' are. . . . You too will have been imagining me as you read, and I begin to see myself 'anew' as the writing develops.

Writing is therefore an interactive process in certain respects similar to the processes of interaction through which identity is created in everyday life. Just as the writer symbolically expresses the self on a page (either a version of his or her own self or the self of a fictitious character), so in everyday life the self is brought symbolically to life in interaction with other people. In this sense the lived self and the self of fiction are both narratives of stories. The interactionist Ken Plummer has detected an affinity between storytelling and the work of sociology (and, we can add, gerontology), describing human beings as '*homo narrans*' or 'narrators and story tellers' (1997: 5). We humans manipulate symbols to make sense of the world because we live in 'a vast flow of ever-changing' interactions: 'Through symbols and languages, we are able to reflect upon ourselves and others . . . we work and worry, pray and play, love and hate; and *all the time we are telling stories* about our pasts, our presents, and our futures' (Plummer 1997: 20).

For Plummer, stories can be described as 'joint actions' and storytelling can be located 'at the heart of our symbolic interactions'. Other sociologists have highlighted the importance of books as a source of information and guidance about life, especially when it becomes problematic. To borrow from Erving Goffman it can be argued that we live in a 'literally-defined world' (1968: 38) and we may well turn to fiction for information about other people who appear to share the same condition or situation as ourselves. When Barbara Pym's Letty, 'an unashamed reader of novels' retires, she goes to the library

to look for a book 'which reflected her own sort of life' although she is dis-appointed to find that 'the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction' (Pym 1994: 6–7). *Quartet in Autumn*, the novel from which I have taken this quotation, was first published in 1977, and novels about the situation of Letty are now much more common. For one, we are fortunate in having Barbara Pym's own work. Almost 20 years later Doris Lessing's Sarah Durham, at the age of 65, picks up a book of memoirs written by a society woman, a former beauty, when she had grown older:

> A strange thing, Sarah thought, that she had picked the book up. Once, she would never have opened a book by an old person: nothing to do with her, she would have felt. But what could be odder than the way that books which chime with one's condition or stage in life insinuate themselves into one's hand?
>
> (Lessing 1996: 4)

Unlike Letty, Sarah is not looking for fiction, however, the quest for affinity between the printed symbols in a book and the personal experience of every-day life is the same.

As noted in the outline of symbolic interactionism above, fiction can be a valuable asset to anyone who wishes to understand the interplay between the personal and social aspects of the ageing process. Of course it has to be remem-bered that there are significant variations in the treatment of ageing in fiction. Authorial styles vary and, as we shall see in the discussion of five variations in stories of ageing below, novels as a literary form also vary in the depth and style of treatment they give to later life. For the moment this claim may be illus-trated with reference to Penelope Lively's *Spiderweb*, published in 1998.

The title *Spiderweb* clearly suggests a delicate network connecting the person at the centre of the web, who is called Stella Brentwood, to the past, the present and the future. Stella has recently retired to a cottage in Somerset but the differ-ence between Stella and other professional unmarried women of her social class is her former occupation: she has spent her entire working life as an anthropologist studying village communities in the Nile Delta, Malta, Orkney and the inner city. She consciously draws, therefore, on her professional lan-guage to define her own situation and to make plans for the future:

> She was sixty-five, apparently. This totemic number had landed her here. Having spent much time noting and interpreting complex rites of passage in alien societies, she now found herself subject to one of the implacable rules of her own: stop working, get old.
>
> In other societies the likes of her would be variously seen as valuable repositories of knowledge, as objects of pity and respect, or as economic encumbrances ripe for disposal. Exempt from such extremes, she could define her own position. She could be as she wished, do as she liked.
>
> (Lively 1998: 15)

As a professional observer Stella feels free to 'define her own position' in the symbolic spiderweb of time and space. She observes around her the signs of ageing in others such as her friend Richard and carefully, as an anthropologist,

gathers data concerning the new environment in which she has chosen to spend her later life. As she settles into her cottage she rereads her research notebooks and is reminded of her former self and the ways her relationships with other people have changed over the years. Looking back to her field trip to Orkney when she was young, she recalls Alan Scarth, whose offer of marriage she refused. In memory he has not changed:

> When Stella thought now of those months, they had still that sense of a continuous present. And Alan Scarth was frozen in her head as he was then – that fiery, potent giant of a man in the prime of his life. Herself she could not see, because that Stella was eclipsed entirely by subsequent Stellas and above all by the Stella of today, who confronted her from the mirror, features distorted by age, body softened and sagging. Very occasionally, she would be shocked to think that he also, if he was out there still, must now be thus.
>
> <div align="right">(Lively 1998: 193)</div>

In this story of ageing, Stella is aware of herself as having lived a number of selves in her spiderweb of life. The novel is an in-depth description and analysis of one person's efforts to come to terms with retirement and her future life. This is achieved through allowing the reader access to Stella's subjective world where she compares her self with those around her in the process of deciding how to live. In this sense it is a novel of an age-consciousness which derives its meaning from the imaginative realization of changing places, cultures and relationships. In comparison, the character of Gran, the cowed mother of the domineering Karen Hiscox who lives down the road, serves as an almost stereotypical image of an abused, neglected and confused old age. The reader knows that whatever happens in the future, Stella will not end up in this situation. The distance separating these two images of ageing could hardly be greater. 'All novels', suggests Alison Light, 'whether they mean to or not, give us a medley of different voices, languages and positions . . . novels not only speak from their cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems. . . .' (1991: 2).

Five variations on a theme

The stories I have used in writing this book have been grouped in this section, not as watertight and definitive categories, but as five variations. These are provisional and inevitably artificial because there is often, as is to be expected, some overlap. Inevitably certain titles can be included under more than one heading. The overall principles of selection are, first, the degree of centrality of ageing to the story (the role of ageing in the narrative), and second, the interpretation of the ageing process. My basic aim is simply to highlight the value of fiction as an aid to understanding the interactional variations in the experience of ageing: namely, the interplay between body and self, self and others, objects, places and spaces, and some of the risks to which these are exposed in later life.

Differences in emphasis and interpretation reflected in the five variations come together in a number of ways to form the cultural resources from which

the subjective meaning of ageing as a process is configured. In stories of ageing, themes and variations differ in emphasis and structure according to the particular kind of story that is written and the intentions of the author. Novels which follow the lives of the central characters through from early life to old age (for example, Pat Barker's *The Century's Daughter*) or which trace the biographical connections between events in the past and the quality of life in the present (examples include Barbara Ewing's *The Actresses* and Angela Huth's *Land Girls*) obviously offer a more intensely focused interpretation of ageing than those where the older characters are simply incidental figures in a landscape, or where ageing is an incidental point of reference in a sequence of events.

I have therefore grouped the stories I have drawn from to make this book as five variations on the main theme of symbolic interaction between body, self and society. I use the term 'theme' to suggest that these are not definitive nor exclusive categories of fiction but are listed experimentally in order to display some of the key variations in the ways in which the experience of ageing is shaped in the human imagination. Indeed I hope readers will not feel bound by these themes but encouraged to compile their own versions. Variations 1 to 5 below are suggestive rather than prescriptive and are listed simply as a guide to the range of stories I have used to illustrate a processual or interactionist approach to ageing. As previously noted, the range reflects variations in the space taken up by ageing as a theme in each novel (ranging from central in Variation 1 to peripheral in Variation 5) and the intensity of interest in subjective experience and social interaction between characters in various age groups. Clearly a novel where the age identity of the main character is the central theme, such as Doris Lessing's *Love Again*, will offer a much more sustained description and interpretation of the experience of ageing than one where older characters are more incidental to the narrative. An example of the latter is Reginald Hill's murder mystery *On Beulah Height*. Yet even when older characters are comparatively incidental figures or used basically as a device to add momentum to the plot or social background to the narrative they may have something significant to reveal about the meanings which are culturally ascribed to ageing and the implications of these symbolic constructions for the subjective experience of growing older. Very often such figures are simply routine stereotypical representations of ageing but they have been included because stereotypes have been shown to play a significant part in the shaping of collective and subjective age consciousness (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993; Bytheway 1995). In other words, stereotypes work precisely *because* they reflect and confirm taken-for-granted ideas about ageing and older people.

The variations are as follows:

Variation 1

The interest of the writer is in *one central character, often the narrator, who is ageing*. Age identity or a subjective age consciousness is central in such novels which often involve an extensive life review.

Examples include Thea Astley's *Coda*, Anita Brookner's *A Private View*, Eva Figes' *Ghosts*, Anthony Gilbert's *The Spinster's Secret*, Doris Lessing's *Love Again*, Penelope Lively's *Spiderweb*, James Long's *Ferney*, Julian Rathbone's *Blame*

Hitler, Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*, Jane Smiley's *At Paradise Gate*, and Henry Sutton's *Gorleston*.

Variation 2

The writer's attention is focused on a *small group of older characters*. Such a collection of older people may, for example be living in retirement at the seaside as in Henry Sutton's *Gorleston* or Stanley Middleton's *Necessary Ends*; or they may be gathered together in a particular building such as a private hotel, or some form of residential accommodation. In stories of life in a residential group (for instance Elizabeth Taylor's *Mrs Palfrey At The Claremont* or Paul Bailey's *At The Jerusalem*) the age identity of one particular character may be central but there is the additional interest of networks of interpersonal relationships, tensions and conflicts within the group and also with people living in the outside world.

Examples range from Kingsley Amis' *Ending Up*, Roy Clarke's *Gala Week*, Marika Cobbold's *Guppies for Tea*, Kathleen Conlon's *Face Values*, Christopher Hope's *Serenity House* and Alan Isler's *The Prince of West End Avenue*.

Variation 3

The emphasis here is on *family interaction*. In particular the intense and highly emotive forms of interpersonal interaction that take place between different generations of members of a particular family and the influence of these relationships on the ageing process.

Examples include Thea Astley's *Coda*, Nina Bawden's *Family Money*, Pat Barker's *The Century's Daughter*, Robert Barnard's *Posthumous Papers*, Nicci French's *The Memory Game*, Margaret Forster's *Have The Men Had Enough?* and *The Seduction of Mrs Pendlebury*, Frances Hegarty's *Let's Dance*, Penelope Lively's *The Road to Lichfield* and *Passing On*, Francois Mauriac's *The Knot of Vipers*, Deborah Moggach's *Close Relations*, David Renwick's *One Foot in The Grave* and Joanna Trollope's *The Men and the Girls*.

Variation 4

The stories in this variation are, like those in Variation 3, concerned with age-related interpersonal interaction. The main difference is that these stories are less concerned with close relationships between family members and are more interested in *age-related relationships outside the family situation* between friends, and, on a more formal social level, with strangers.

Examples include Celia Dale's *A Helping Hand* and *Sheep's Clothing*, Barbara Ewing's *The Actresses*, Angela Huth's *Land Girls*, Stanley Middleton's *Beginning to End* and Julian Rathbone's *Intimacy*.

Variation 5

Here, the interest of the story is not so directly focused on the qualities of interpersonal interaction among younger/older people but on *descriptions of older characters and of the ageing process*.

Examples include Philip Caveney's *Skin Flicks*, Agatha Christie's *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* and *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, Marika Cobbold's *A Rival Creation*, Colin Dexter's *The Wench is Dead*, John Harvey's *Easy Meat*, James Herriot's *If Only They Could Talk*, Reginald Hill's *Exit Lines* and *Recalled to Life*, Laurie Lee's *Cider With Rosie*, Ruth Rendell's *Simisola* and Kathleen Rowntree's *Mr Brightly's Evening Off*.

Discussion

In Variations 1 to 4 the ageing of a main character, a family group, a small group of characters or a group brought together in a distinctive place is the central theme of the narrative. These are stories which are directly focused on specific qualities of the experience of ageing as such. In Variation 5 ageing is not usually the main theme of the story, but older characters make an interesting contribution to the flow of the narrative or a noteworthy reference to ageing appears. This treatment can range from the incidental, where older people are introduced, usually stereotypically as background figures, to the author's use of an older character as a peg on which to hang a narrative.

Ageing can be also introduced to maintain continuity between one novel and another in a series, or within a particular novel to add to the credibility of the characters and to give the impression of the chronological flow of 'real life'. A good example of this practice can be found in some of the crime fiction of Reginald Hill. In *Recalled to Life* a background theme to this murder mystery is the difficulty Inspector Peter Pascoe's wife Ellie is having with her ageing parents. Earlier in this chapter I quoted a conversation from one of Hill's previous novels in his Dalziel and Pascoe series, *Exit Lines*, where Pascoe's mother-in-law tells him about her anxiety over her husband's erratic behaviour. But time has passed (*Recalled to Life*) and Ellie's father Archie has been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's and 'is in a Home now' (Hill 1993: 211) Ellie's worries over her father's state of mind have been replaced by anxiety about her mother who is herself afraid she is becoming confused like her husband. Over the phone Ellie explains to Peter:

> after what she went through with Dad, she doesn't want to know, so she hides it from herself by hiding it from me. I noticed she was going to bed later, and later and when I nagged her into talking about it, it came out that often when she wakes up in the morning, she doesn't know where she is or even who she is, and that's making her scared to go to sleep.
>
> (Hill 1993: 271–2)

After a consultation with a specialist it is discovered that although she is suffering from high blood pressure and arthritis, 'Ninety per cent of her forgetfulness is probably caused by medication, and the other ten per cent by worry' (Hill 1993: 376–7).

The ageing of Ellie's parents is not a contributory factor to any of the murders Dalziel and Pascoe have to solve, but it provides a line of continuity in the domestic life of Pascoe, adding a recognizably mundane dimension to his character and sustaining the illusion that he is a 'real' human being with many of the worries that afflict at least some of the readers.

Examples of the background stereotyping of older people in fiction are numberless. As I mentioned above, this device is often used in stories in Variation 1 where an in-depth treatment of an ageing individual is the main concern. Stereotypes may be used in such novels as contrasting figures to point up the individuality or unusual qualities of the main character, as is the case in Barbara Vine's *The Brimstone Wedding* where Jenny, a young carer in a private home for the wealthy, perceives Stella to be quite different from the other residents who are seen in contrast to be decrepit and inarticulate. A close relationship develops between Stella and Jenny during the course of which Stella emerges as a highly complex character with a convoluted personal story. The interaction between the two characters develops the identities of both.

In Christopher Hope's *Serenity House*, the central character Max, who we shall meet again later, is regarded by the owner of the home as a cut above the rest. A man who despite his years, and the evidence of decline in his appearance, still displays vestiges of the 'gentleman'.

Lastly, in an incident from Marika Cobbold's *Guppies For Tea*, Amelia Lindsey has taken her grandmother, Selma, on a taxi ride. Selma is becoming more and more confused but readers are aware by page 111 that her confusion is a fluctuating condition and she has a close relationship with Amelia whom she helped to raise. Selma is therefore a rounded character whose ageing is in this novel highly individualized:

> When the car stopped at a red light, an old woman, her thick legs disappearing inside dumpy suede boots, a plastic rain cover tied round her whispy grey hair, hastened across.
>
> 'Goodness me, some people are hideous,' Selma remarked cheerfully. She sat there, whiskery-chinned, and missing her teeth, her cardigan spotted with stains, and yet she looked at the woman at the crossing with gleeful disapproval. Selma had been beautiful. Thank God, Amelia thought, that in her mind she still is.
>
> (Cobbold 1993: 111)

As readers of this story, we are invited to see Selma through Amelia's eyes and to sympathize with Amelia's determined efforts to ensure her grandmother comes to a dignified end, even though the staff of the expensive private home to which she is admitted at the beginning of the story soon find her very difficult to handle and request her removal. The figure of the old woman on the crossing also allows us an insight into Selma's inability to identify with the social category 'old age' and the persistence in her own mind of the image of a former self. Fortunately for Selma, Amelia shares her awareness of this former self and can continue to confirm it in symbolic interaction.

We noted earlier how Barbara Pym's Letty (*Quartet in Autumn*) deplored the limited number of stories about women in her age group and situation, and we also noted an increase in such stories since that novel first appeared in 1977. Stories in Variation 1, where interest is concentrated on one central character who is ageing, appear to be on the increase (Gullette 1988, 1993). Older characters, it is argued in literary gerontology, are being moved by their authors from a marginal position in fiction to centre stage. When 'they appear

in fiction old people are now much less likely to be afforded only the passing glance or minor role that was customary in the past . . .' (Rooke 1992: 241). I have listed above a number of novels in this variation where the author focuses directly on the engagement of a character with ageing. In stories of this kind the author is usually preoccupied with the inner life and personal perspective of the central character (for example, Lessing's *Love Again*); and the experiences imagined may be conveyed in terms of positive 'progress' narratives of later life or negative 'decline narratives', or a combination of both (Gullette 1988: xvi). But in all cases the reader is invited to engage sympathetically with the subjective perspective of the main character who is directly engaging with the biographical implications of growing older.

In this respect the main character in stories in Variation 1 becomes the expert on ageing. In a lively incident in Bernice Rubens' novel *The Waiting Game* about 'The Hollyhocks', a 'Home for the Aged' (Rubens 1997: 3), the matron invites 'an expert on ageing to come to talk to her residents' (p. 200). As she correctly anticipates, the prospect of a talk on ageing turns out to be very popular. But when he arrives the expert, Mr Roberts, is 25 years old and greeted with an atmosphere of hostility and contempt. Sensing this he defuses the tension by acknowledging from the start that 'everybody in this room knows a damn sight more about ageing than I do' (p. 201). He then proceeds to inform his audience that he has interviewed hundreds of 'people like your good selves' (p. 201) and asks them to help him by sharing their opinions and wisdom. This gambit does the trick, though unfortunately only for a brief interlude following which arguments break out between the residents and personal disputes and rivalries are revealed. The talk ends in chaos: 'nobody wanted to listen to Mr Roberts any more and his twenty-odd-year-old geriatric experience. Mr Roberts was more than happy to oblige them, having decided that in future he would address his geriatric lecture to classes of sixth-formers' (p. 205).

An even more sardonic version of the 'knowing insider' can be found in Christopher Meade's comic character Betty Spital, 'Pensioner, Activist and Radical Granny', who dispenses an assortment of home truths about the ageing experience in *The Thoughts of Betty Spital*. Meade's send-up of handbooks on positive ageing includes a chapter on 'The New Gerontology' where we can read a dismissive reflection on the word 'gerontology', which is derived from:

> the Greek 'geron', meaning old, mature, wise, beyond reproach and 'ology' meaning you can write books about it, run evening classes in it, appear on TV and radio talking about it – and possibly end up as a professor of it, till death or early retirement, in some nice cosy university somewhere.
>
> (Meade 1989: 36)

Stories of ageing I have included in Variation 1 often narrate a history of the self as they explore in a form of 'life review' the route the central character has taken to arrive at her or his present situation and assume a particular identity. This is a central issue in Barbara Vine's *The Brimstone Wedding*. Stella is dying of cancer but guards a closely kept secret concerning her previous life. As mentioned above, a close rapport develops between her and

Jenny, her carer to whom she gradually discloses information about her personal history she is unwilling to share with her family. The idea that older people's past lives are not necessarily an open book to their close relations provides the mystery to hold the reader's attention and simultaneously offers a sensitive picture of a care relationship and the subjective experience of Stella in coping with residential care.

A similar process of disclosing the history of an older person's inner self unfolds in quite a different novel, May Sarton's *Mrs Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*. Hilary Stevens, a famous poet, comes to terms with herself during the course of an interview with a younger man and woman for a literary magazine. After the interview is over Hilary goes for a walk with Mar, a young man with whom she has become friendly:

> His eyes looked very blue, and for a second Hilary envied him, envied that masculine power, that youth, the *animal* in him.
>
> 'I'm an old woman,' she said heavily, and this time with disgust. 'But when I was your age, or a little younger maybe, I wanted to be a boy. Part of me just stayed back there, and you can laugh if you must – it might be appropriate! – but it was (and *is*) that boy in me who wrote the poems. So I have kept him close to me, for better or worse, and perhaps justified my way of life in the light of his immature eyes.'
>
> (Sarton 1993: 217)

In Variation 2 the centre of attention is the processes of interaction between a small number of older characters often gathered together in a particular place. The tragi-comedy of power struggles in later life is a prominent theme in fiction of this kind. The ageing body can be deployed in terms of differences of location, gender, social class and risk to create tension and human interest. Stories about a group of older people provide an opportunity to describe variations in character and the complex relationships, tensions and conflicts between a number of people living under the same roof. This was the explicit intention of Kingsley Amis when he wrote *Ending Up*.

Another dramatic value for stories of ageing is that these clusters of characters have often not come together through an entirely free personal choice. The writer can create interest by portraying individual variations between characters who may unwillingly share the common experience of old age. The author can show that the physical frailties which accompany ageing do not eliminate social hierarchies, competition for status, sexual desire or disruptive emotions such as anger, jealousy, envy and resentment. In other words, people are not transformed into a different kind of human being simply because they are chronologically and physically old and end up in residential accommodation. Nor are they necessarily transformed into nicer, kinder or more benign beings typified by the greetings-card stereotype of the cheery 'granny' or grandfather.

In Variation 3 the interest in interaction between older and younger characters often revolves around a family setting. Examples include two novels by Margaret Forster: *The Seduction of Mrs Pendlebury*, where a relationship develops between younger neighbours and an older couple, and *Have the Men Had Enough?* where the central character, 'grandma', is seen through the eyes

of the other family members for whom she is becoming increasingly a problem as she grows more physically dependent and confused.

In the case of Mrs Pendlebury, readers are admitted to Rose's confused subjective world and can empathize with her unstable vision of life on the outside in sharp contrast to the perceptions of her husband Stanley and her younger neighbour, Alice. This comparative perspective allows Rose to be rescued from anonymity or collective stereotyping. Her younger neighbours think that both Rose and her husband are 'pathetic' (Forster 1978: 199) and are determined they will not end up the same. But for readers who have become much more intimately acquainted with Stanley and Rose as individuals with personal histories, ageing is a much more complex process involving a fluctuation between positive and negative experiences and emotions.

Some of the stories in Variation 4 vary somewhat from those included in Variations 1–3 in so far as the main interest may not be directly concerned with the processes of interaction that socially construct age identities in everyday life. In this variation older characters may be used as a device for getting a story going and this can include the ploy of them as victims of murder. An example of an older victim in a murder mystery is Ann Granger's *A Word After Dying*. In another murder mystery, Marianne Macdonald's *Ghost Walk*, events are triggered off by the appearance of a scruffy old man, Tom Ashe, who seems to be a vagrant. But, as the story unfolds, information about his life accumulates and, in sharp contrast to other older figures in the background of the story, he assumes a complex identity. When, for example, he is visited in hospital by the narrator (Dido Hoare, a young bookselling private investigator) after being found unconscious in a shop doorway, Dido finds it difficult at first to separate him out from the other old men on the ward:

> In here, they were mostly old men who lay propped motionless in the white beds, staring at a shrunken world. A television set high on the wall was broadcasting a morning chat show, but the sound had been turned to an inaudible rumble, so that the faces on the screen mouthed and smiled meaninglessly. I felt a moment of panic, wondering whether I was going to recognise Ashe in this gathering of old bones.
>
> (Macdonald 1997: 12)

The interrelationship of place and the identity of older people will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, but for the moment the 'shrunken world' of the hospital mirrors the collective shrunken status of the patients who, in contrast with the individualized Ashe, are institutionalized into insignificance. Their anonymity is used to highlight Ashe who is selectively perceived as a recognizable individual and not merely another old man.

When reading any of the five variations of stories of ageing I have provisionally drawn upon, the relationship of author to text and reader to author and text is always complex and by no means certain. But what I want to stress is the role of the author's imagination in giving access to a range of perspectives on the experience of ageing which are not always possible in conventional gerontological research. In fiction the possibility exists of exploring facets of the ageing process which are often inaccessible to the external observer of everyday life, however skilled he or she may be.

In stories of ageing the experience of growing older may be imagined from a number of perspectives. Because writers are free to invent characters with identifiable bodies and selves, relationships, situations, risks and futures they can display aspects of the ageing process that may be deliberately concealed from public view or accessible to researchers only after considerable effort and expense. As I have tried to show, stories vary in the depth of their treatment of ageing but in their varying forms they are a valuable additional source of data for those who wish to understand the multi-faceted experience of growing older.

However, this is not to say that in the world of fiction anything goes. Fiction is never the unfettered reign of the imagination because, like any symbolic medium, it has to work within certain rules if the author is to communicate effectively with the audience. There is then a creative tension between the conventions of fiction – what the readership will expect and tolerate – and the imagination of the author. Readers bring their beliefs and values to the process of reading and are free within the limits of their imaginations to make their own interpretations of the meanings of stories. As Cole has noted in relation to meaning, 'no matter how carefully one defines or analyses it, there can never be an objective, predefined formula capable of externally grasping the meaning of *meaning*. As self-defining and self-interpreting animals, we humans must enter into our own webs of meaning to understand ourselves' (1992: xviii).

Because stories are products of the creative imagination they are inevitably about the ways writers and their readers imagine later life and in this respect they have a point of contact with reality. A good example from popular crime fiction is Agatha Christie's Miss Marple who is, of course, an idealized image of the genteel spinster living quietly in a stereotypical English village. I remember some years ago including a reference to Miss Marple in a talk about the sociology of ageing and a number of people came up to me at the end and said how pleased they were that I had introduced this well-known figure into a talk which consisted mainly of less familiar academic analysis. It was not, of course, that they believed that Miss Marple ever existed in reality, but that certain elements of her imagined role, her appearance, personal style, biography and social situation, have a strong appeal to the imagination and are thereby interwoven with the mundane reality of everyday life. And Agatha Christie herself suggested that some of Miss Marple's characteristics were derived from her direct observations of some of the older members of her family. Miss Marple was:

> the sort of old lady who would have been rather like some of my grandmother's Ealing cronies – old ladies whom I have met in so many villages where I have gone to stay as a girl. Miss Marple was not in any way a picture of my grandmother; she was far more fussy and spinsterish than my grandmother ever was. But the thing she did have in common with her – though a cheerful person, she always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and was, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right.

> (Christie 1978: 449–50)

The widespread appeal of the Miss Marple stories, as bestselling novels, in film and TV dramatizations, suggests that they occupy a positive place in the collective imagination. On the level of the imaginary, Miss Marple reveals the possibility of a superior role for the wisdom of the older woman in modern society. Stories of ageing do not therefore have to be factually accurate in order to shape and give meaning to everyday experience. We swim, says A.A. Berger, 'in a sea of stories and tales that we hear or read or listen to or see. . . .' (1997: 1). Stories of ageing involve an interplay between the external reality of everyday experience and our internal subjective worlds of desires, anxieties, fears, and fantasies. In our private imaginary worlds we reflect on the ideas about ageing circulating around us in the wider culture. And these reflections are intimately related to our powers of self-expression and deepest emotions; it is important to remember that novels help people to *feel* as well as think.

Because it is now accepted that there is no single 'right' way of interpreting fiction and that novels are open to a variety of interpretations, there is greater freedom for all of us, as writers and readers, to look for ways of giving symbolic form to the experience of ageing and to try to explore the connections between our own subjective experiences and those of others. To make use, in other words, of the connections between self and others which are central to symbolic interactionist analysis. Paula Crimmens, who specializes in training people who work with older people, finds Michael Ignatieff's novel *Scar Tissue* about dementia as the loss of self both 'wonderful' and misleading because she does not consider that a personality changed by illness means a loss of self: 'I have never met anyone without a self. I would not know what that looked like. And if we say this person has no sense of self with whom are we interacting and where has their sense of self gone? How is this going to affect the way we treat them?' (Crimmens 1998: 142).

Whatever variation they may adopt, stories of ageing always invite us to relate self to others; to imagine our own ageing and the implications of this mental vision for 'the way we treat' other older people. There is a sense in which stories of ageing never really stand on neutral ground and at this point I shall conclude the provisional discussion of their five variations. For the rest of the book I shall draw selectively from the literature to follow through some of the connections we imaginatively make between body, self, and society in order to make sense of the ageing of ourselves and of others.