

ANITA WOHLMANN, *Aged Young Adults: Age Readings of Contemporary American Novels and Films* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 280 pp.

Anita Wohlmann's insightful study on "aged young adults" brings together the concepts of age/aging and youth in a very productive way, and by so doing adds a new dimension to age studies. In five thematically clustered chapters, the author closely examines seven contemporary (2001-2011) American narratives—four novels and three films—via an approach that she terms "age readings." An age reading reveals references to age in fictional narratives to be more than simply descriptive, and examines their metaphorical function that often revolves around "norms, ideals, and expectations" (70).

*Aged Young Adults* is grounded in a solid theoretical basis of age/aging studies and profits from drawing on theories by eminent age scholars. Wohlmann's reading of her primary material combines analyses of the fictional material with approaches from cultural studies, sociology, and developmental psychology. Consequently, individual chapters follow a "dialogic organization" (76) that illustrates the reciprocal influence between fictional narratives and "the socio-cultural environment" (30). Thus, analytical observations about the fictional narratives prompt theoretical reflections, which in turn actuate further critical examinations.

Chapter one, "Age and Aging in Theory and Practice," lays out the theoretical background and basis for the age readings that follow in the next four chapters. The first analytic cluster, chapter two, entitled "Conflicts of Timing," examines Joel Zwick's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and Sam Mendes's *Away We Go* (2009). The two works are connected by their focus on the characters' age crises, as well as on the "disciplinary function of age discourses" (91). Chapter three, entitled "Living Across the Life Course," analyzes Tom Perrotta's *Little Children* (2006) and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2002). This chapter's focus lies on age as a flexible marker and the "shifting meanings of adulthood" that are presented by the works, as well as on the role of age norms and how they affect imaginaries of the life course. "Mental Health and Age," chapter four, offers an examination of the various links between mental health, consumer culture, age/aging, and entrepreneurial selves in Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*

(2005) and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003). The last analytic chapter, chapter five, entitled "Positive Age Metaphors," examines Miranda July's *The Future* (2011) and *It Chooses You* (2011), emphasizing particularly the aspects that unfold possibilities to reevaluate "notions of time, the future, [and] age or aging" (249).

As can be seen from her selection of works, the novelty of Wohlmann's approach, in the ever rapidly expanding multi-disciplinary field of age/aging studies, lies in the fact that her study focuses on chronologically young characters between the ages of 28 and 35, "who have internalized the cultural meanings of age or aging" (23). In this endeavor, she positions herself clearly as expanding on the research angle of age studies scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who has coined the phrase "aged by culture" to emphasize that the ageist culture of contemporary American society affects persons of all ages, not just the chronologically old. It is in this sense that Wohlmann speaks of "aged young adults," and traces age as a versatile and "flexible marker" (252). In chapter one, some examples of this flexibility risk creating the impression of disregarding that physical factors of aging are unlikely to allow chronologically older people the same latitude in creatively manipulating age norms as chronologically younger ones, but most effectively show the cultural, relational, and performative dimension of age which makes the topic so relevant for all ages, not just the chronologically old.

The thematic analyses presented in the work convincingly demonstrate how age is deployed in metaphorical ways in the various narratives to indicate a character's crisis, otherness or outsider status, deviations from the perceived norm (which can be positive or negative), or to mark power relations between characters. Particularly interesting in this respect are the passages where Wohlmann persuasively illustrates how narratives can effectively employ deviance from age norms to critique hegemonic societal structures or discourses. Moreover, the author demonstrates that the concepts of the *Bildungsroman* or Coming-of-Age story, which are customarily applied to analyze age in narratives with young characters, might not suffice to do justice to the contemporary narratives analyzed in *Aged Young Adults*, or, at least, foreclose other fruitful readings of these works, which the age readings lay open.

An aspect which might have received a more prominent position in the study is gender. Although often briefly mentioning gen-

der, Wohlmann largely excludes it from her in-depth analyses, justifying this by claiming that both genders are equally affected by (invisible) age norms. While the author does offer examples to back up this claim, many of her analyses (such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Away We Go*, *Indecision*, *It Chooses You*) nevertheless appear to warrant a closer look at gender, as the normative roles into which the characters (both male and female) either find their way, or against which they rebel, are largely stereotypically gendered. Nevertheless, social/identity categories are overall crucial in Wohlmann's study and *Aged Young Adults* provides rich insights into the connections of age markers to the topics of class, economics, and mental health.

The work makes a substantial contribution to the field of aging studies by expanding its

core focus on a chronologically older group of persons/characters to include substantially younger persons/characters. While this might appear counter-intuitive, given for example that physical realities of aging bodies are unlikely to apply to this younger group, Wohlmann's detailed study of narrative representations does not negate the impact discourses of aging and ageist behavior have on chronologically old persons/characters. Instead, the different analyses reveal how deeply engrained age metaphors are in North American culture in general, how they serve as narrative strategies in particular, and, probably most importantly, how easily they pass as descriptive devices, when in fact, they carry a rich variety of figurative meanings.

Frankfurt am Main

Linda Hess