

Nancy A. Pachana, *Ageing A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, London, UK, 2016, 152pp., pbk £7.99., ISBN 9780198725329.

The inescapable presence of ageing is a subject that many of us may shy away from, perhaps in a bid to prolong youth, a wistful idea that confronts us visually in much of our media avenues today. Yet at some point we are likely to be faced with the fact that age is not a fad or fashion that will fade away. It is with this in mind that Pachana in her short introduction to ageing, endeavours to tackle the meanings and perceptions of ageing, along with the individual, cultural and societal implications of our assertions. In six concise chapters, Pachana takes her reader on a whirlwind tour of the history of ageing; the biological, psychological and interpersonal aspects of ageing; successful ageing and some well-considered reflections on where the nature of ageing will take us.

Chapter one establishes the backdrop of ageing, briefly discussing the historical pontifications of Sophocles, Plato, Socrates, Plutarch and Galen. These insights encourage the reader to reflect on the distinctions drawn between those who perceive age as an inevitable illness or disease, and those who perceive it as a process of nature which requires embracement. Readers will be provoked to consider the extent to which we can control the ageing process and to what we might owe the ability to enjoy our later years in good health. It is perhaps these more philosophical questions that underpin the negative connotations of what it means to age, which Pachana demonstrates by drawing on poetic literature to articulate the assortment of feelings attached to reflections about ageing. Thus, by page ten we are well and truly immersed in the quandary of ageing. Pachana rapidly propels her readers through the 17th and 18th century musings into modern day dilemmas; migration, conflict and the rapidity of growth that we are now faced with in terms of older proportions of global populations. This is a disconcerting reality expressed subtly but well supported with facts and figures.

Over the next few chapters Pachana gently rocks the boat of conventional assertions about ageing by suggesting that, despite having some inevitability, ageing need not be seen as an homogenous and predictable continuum of decline but may provide individuals with unique and embodied experiences. Chapter two features a neutral presentation of some major biological theories as well as providing jargon-free text which may help in establishing a basic understanding of ageing concepts to new readers, as well as jog the memories of more familiar readers. Pachana is careful to make clear that dementia in particular is not a consequence of old age but is, “characterized by distinct changes in the brain” (p.35),

highlighting here that potential new insights into diseases in later life could come from developing global research agendas.

Chapter three is somewhat disappointing, being slightly too general. In reflecting that older adults “appear to have quite complex emotional experiences” (p. 59) diminishes consideration that perhaps experience has created an ability to identify and articulate a greater range of emotions compared to early years. Additionally, by suggesting that longevity is linked to personality traits has the potential to undermine the importance of healthy lifestyle choices for positive ageing, expressed earlier in the book. Although not explicitly stated in chapter three, learning from communities that are successful in providing avenues for social support as people age, and the psychological benefits attached to this may also come from blending global perspectives. This is made more central in chapter four through particularly poignant reflections on the role grandparents play in childcare across cultures.

The notion of ageing is layered with complexity and nuances which Pachana simplifies without patronising her readers. It is evident that as a society faced with ever increasing longevity, more attention must be placed on preventing social isolation of the elderly. Bridging inter-generational gaps through mentoring or shared living spaces are just two ways discussed in this book. Multiple research avenues are presented throughout by Pachana, such as encouraging greater global understandings about ageing, exploring ageing experiences amongst indigenous people as well as social support patterns of LGBT people in later life. Furthermore it is clear that countries, cultures and communities have plenty to learn from one another about positive ways of ageing and maintaining active engagement with society.

This short introduction can be easily dipped into or read in an afternoon. The jargon free approach means that readers are not alienated but instead encouraged to reflect upon their own perceptions of ageing. Tackling the subject of ageing in less than 200 pages means that naturally some topics are not covered. Therefore readers will need to consider other sources for discussions on the influences of media on ageing, as well as for greater depth on the perceptions of death in later years. However, this is a book for all to read, given its accessible nature and relevance in today’s society.

RUTH ABRAMS, Researcher,

School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Kingston University.