

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley reflects on ageing and dying.**

**T**he subject of death and dying is hardly a cheerful one and is, consequently, often avoided in contemporary society. It remains 'the elephant in the room'. Yet it is the one certain fact about our life: namely that it will come to an end, at least in its present form. Unlike taxation, which, if you are rich enough, is avoidable, death waits for all of us. It is also true that in a geriatric society, which is what most Western societies are rapidly becoming, the end of the day looms ever more in the public consciousness, however much it may be repressed.

## **Memento Mori**

On re-reading Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, I re-discovered what a sharply observant writer she was. The novel starts with a phone call to the ageing Dame Lettie, reminding her, '*Remember you must die*'. The tale unfolds, revealing a network of ageing gentlefolk and their servants. All are woven together in a fabric of family ties, former liaisons and love affairs, money and marriage, going back to the early years of the 20th century. Among the decaying gentry we meet, in addition to Lettie, Charmain, the once-famous novelist, now losing her memory, and Godfrey, her husband – both serially unfaithful to each other; their

bloodsucking son, Eric, a very nasty parasite; Guy Leet, literary critic and renowned philanderer; Percy Mannering, a violently choleric poet; and Alec Warner, whose lifework as a gerontologist is documenting the life and habits of old people. Among the servants, there is Nanny Taylor, languishing in a geriatric ward, and the exploitative, blackmailing and overbearing Mrs Pettigrew. Eventually, all of them receive the sinister telephone message, and by the end all have succumbed to the truth of it. Will we discover who the caller is? Or is he simply a figment of their collective imagination? Along the way, Spark treats us to some hilariously funny dialogue and perceptive observations about ageing. Her humour is relentlessly savage at times, yet unflinchingly honest, too. There is not much human kindness in this novel. It is too starkly realistic for that. If there is a God, I doubt whether he would be altogether comfortable having Spark on his (or her) side.

## **The View in Winter**

On returning to Ronald Blythe's *The View in Winter*, I was surprised at just how 'modern' it still was. Published over 40 years ago, when the 'grey generation' was much less in evidence, it is uncannily accurate and perceptive in its

observations. Essentially, this is a series of monologues from or about old people, culled from interviews they gave to Blythe. It is divided into nine chapters, and the contributors include old people in a Suffolk village, sixth-form students talking about the elderly, old soldiers reminiscing about the First World War, Welsh people from a former mining town in the Rhondda, former schoolteachers, ex-professionals talking about how it feels to have lost one's useful role in

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society, and monks, priests and a spiritualist reflecting on life and death. Each section includes either an introduction or comments from Blythe. There is also an astute 35-page introduction, which is well worth reading for its own sake. In it, Blythe reminds us that old people are not a race apart; they continue to have the same feelings (including sexual desire) as everyone else. They are simply older than the rest

of us. I found the book interesting for its insights into both old age and what it is like to be old, and a past era we have almost no way of apprehending, where material goods were in desperately short supply, and life was often brutishly and unforgettingly hard.

## The Art of Dying

*The Art of Dying* by Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick is an investigation of end-of-life experiences (ELEs). These include psychic phenomena, such as deathbed visions, deathbed coincidences, telepathy, prophetic dreams, hallucinations involving after-death communication, visions of light, out-of-body experiences and the near (or temporary) death experiences of, for example, patients who suffer cardiac arrest and are subsequently resuscitated. Much of the book deals with anecdotal evidence from 'sane and sensible people' and includes some experimental evidence, too, to support the existence of such phenomena. The authors argue that there is simply too much evidence to ignore, and suggest that science will have to come to terms with the concept of the 'extended mind', which transcends individual brain functions. The book is certainly thought-provoking. The last two chapters, *Dying a Good Death* and *The Journey to Elsewhere: Coming to Terms with Death*, are particularly comforting for those of us who empathise with the terminally ill patient in Marie de Hennezel's excellent book *Intimate Death*, who says, 'I am not a believer but I am curious to know what comes next'. Whatever the precise nature of such phenomena, they seem to reduce the fear of death among those who experience them.

## Nothing to be Frightened of

Julian Barnes' *Nothing to be Frightened of* is an extended exploration of death and dying and our attitudes to them. Yet, for all that, it is remarkably light-spirited, wryly humorous and witty. There is certainly nothing morbid or morose about it. He weaves together narratives of his relationship with his brother, memories of his parents and grandparents in their old age and in their dying, with richly commented anecdotes drawn from literature and the lives of writers (especially his beloved French literature – Montaigne, Zola, Flaubert, Renard, etc).

He touches on questions of religious belief in an after-life, and whether this in fact brings comfort: '... *Rachmaninov, a man both terrified of death, and terrified there might be survival after it.*' He discusses Pascal's wager ('Put your money on God. If he exists, you're laughing. If not, it won't matter anyway.'). He rehearses the arguments of writers like Richard Dawkins: Why do we need belief? Isn't the wonder of the universe enough? If our life is like the bird in Anglo-Saxon literature, which flies out of the darkness into the banqueting hall full of light and life, then flies out into the darkness again – why should we be more frightened of the dark exit than we were of the dark before we entered? He quotes Renard on eternal life: '*Imagine life without death. Every day you'd want to kill yourself from despair.*' Yet for all his humour, and despite his attempts to pick at the scab of fear, and is terrified. Do not expect this book to offer any answers – but do enjoy having your thoughts stirred up on almost every page.

## Somewhere Towards the End

What a treasure Diana Athill is, now 92 and still going strong! In *Somewhere Towards the End*, she demonstrates on every page her sterling qualities. Her life story is scorchingly honest, frank, courageous and forthright – and almost totally positive. The chapters cover her extraordinarily varied sex life, her views on religion, on death and dying and on care for the sick and elderly. She writes of the salutary effect of learning to draw, of gardening, and her discovery that she was a writer (as well as a fabulous editor). Perhaps the best way to convey something of the quality of her style is to quote:

On religious belief: '*... surely the urgent practical necessity of trying to order it so that the cruelties are minimized and its beauties are allowed their fullest possible play is compelling enough without being seen as a duty laid out for us by a god?*'

On her brother's dying: '*... it ... was not fear ... but grief at having to say goodbye to what he could never have enough of.*'

On dying: '*... our dying will be part of it just as these children's being young is, so while we still have the equipment to see this, let us not waste time grizzling.*'

On regret: '*not sure that digging out past guilts is a useful occupation for the very old ... I have reached a stage at which one hopes to be forgiven for concentrating on how to get through the present.*'

A wonderful woman and a book full of her zest for life.



I am aware I have left many deserving books out of this account: Sogyal Rinpoche and Maurice Maeterlinck, amongst others. But I hope to have conveyed something of the richness of the literature on this most compelling of themes.

Ageing is a global issue if anything is. It has huge implications for health-care budgets and for pensions, quite apart from the human costs involved. So for teachers who see themselves as educators and not just pedagogical technicians, this is an important and rewarding topic to examine. If nothing else, perhaps it may increase the understanding among the young of what it means to grow old, a condition more and more of them will themselves experience. As I write this, the UK Health Ombudsman has issued a report on the 'callous indifference' with which the vulnerably old are often treated in hospitals ... 

Athill, D *Somewhere Towards the End* Granta 2008

Barnes, J *Nothing to be Frightened of* Vintage 2008

Blythe, R *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age* Penguin 1981

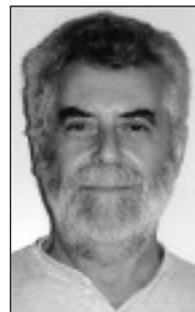
De Hennezel, M *Intimate Death* Little, Brown 1997

Fenwick, P and Fenwick, E *The Art of Dying* Continuum 2008

Maeterlinck, M *Death* Dodd, Mead and Co 1912

Sogyal Rinpoche *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* HarperCollins 1993

Spark, M *Memento Mori* Penguin 1962



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

yelamoo@yahoo.co.uk