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Representations of Ageing in Postwar British Fiction

In assessing representations of ageing in postwar fiction, this chapter focuses on a selection of narratives published from 1944 to 2009, as read by the FCMAP VRGs. Originally there were two lists of novels; an A list of nine supplemented by seven B-list fictions.† Considered chronologically below are 11 taken from the original 16 British novels, as well as a further novel, Fay Weldon’s *Chalcot Crescent* (2009), which replaced B. S. Johnson’s *House Mother Normal* (1971) on the project reading list as, according to the publisher of that latter text, there were at the time insufficient available books to supply the reading groups, and after trawling for potential second-hand (often very expensive) copies we could find only a very few additional copies which precluded its use.‡

Overall, the selection reflected variously the contemporary culture and mores of the period stretching from the latter war years up to the post-millennial period. Norah Hoult’s *There Were No Windows* (1944) – which is discussed below – is technically not a postwar novel, but it is included because, first, we regarded it as a bridge text in that it prefaces so many of the radical cultural and social changes that marked the postwar years, as well as giving a portrait of the older order based on deference and a sense of inherent superiority held by most members of the middle and upper classes, a milieu and attitudinal framework familiar to some of our older respondents. Second, Hoult’s narrative offers an incredibly powerful portrayal of dementia alongside the conflicts and frailties of age, and a series of acute descriptions concerning the demonization of the older protagonist particularly by other women. In terms of the age classification of what we here term ‘older subjects’, although the vast majority of the FCMAP respondents were over 60, we concur with Mike

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. (1)

Each of the selected texts qualified in terms of Hepworth’s categorization of ‘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. (1)

Clearly complex and extended narratives are important to Hepworth, precisely because of their potential to function ‘as an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society [...]’ (1). In addition to serving in this fashion, the FCMAP novels were selected carefully to convey variously: a range of social and historical contexts as potentially experienced during the actual life course of the respondents (and not necessarily restricted to the periods when they qualified as older subjects themselves, because all had experienced the ageing of others in prior generations, offering the opportunity for longitudinal reflections, which were often undertaken in respondent diaries); a broad sense of the experience of ageing for older British subjects in the contemporary world; and a range of attitudes from others towards older people and the ageing process. We were far less concerned with prior familiarity with texts (2) than Hepworth.

Allusion to FCMAP’s narrative methodology outlined earlier should have already contributed to our readers’ conception of how such novels of ageing belong to a complex, interconnected narrative web that is both constitutive of, and part of, a negotiable social process; a possibility referred to but not fully developed in Hepworth’s study which argues that ‘the point of entry into old age is literally, as I have already