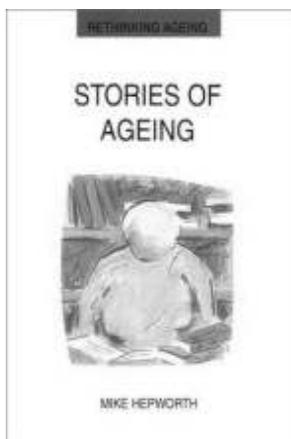


Stories of Ageing

(Open University Press, 2000, 130 pages)

by Mike Hepworth



Reviewed by Sue A. Taylor¹

Mike Hepworth's *Stories of Ageing* fills a gap in the gerontological literature in sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines concerned with the topic of growing older. The notions of using fiction to better understand ageing is an idea that is overdue. The author draws from broadly read fiction including genres ranging from mysteries to romance novels in which the older person is the main character or plays a major role in the social interactions with family, friends, or outsiders. In some selections, ageing per se may not be the primary focus; yet, significant passages depict attitudes about ageing and behaviors associated with the treatment of the aged.

Readers need not have read the book to understand the point being made. The excerpts allow the reader, not only to confront the situation within the story, but also to deal with one's own perceptions of ageing and old age. Just as the older character in the storyline confronts issues associated with old age and their own ideas of self, so does the reader.

Symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical framework for discussing concepts of self and interactions with others in the later years. This viewpoint is explained in relation to the way others see us and contributes to our sense of self. Who we are is shaped and nurtured in response to our interactions with others. Hepworth's analysis is influenced by the role symbols and images play in our concept of self. The reader is confronted with the stereotypes of ageing that bombard much of the imaging we find in everything from birthday cards and movie roles to social gerontology research. Hepworth skillfully provides a new approach through the recent outgrowth of literary gerontology that pushes one to consider the interrelationship of place, self-

¹ Howard University.

identity, and well-being within the broader theoretical orientation of symbolic interactionism.

The literary citations are grouped into a natural progression from discussions of the body and self to the self and others. The passages provide view of another's self-identity as we penetrate the innermost feelings of the ageing person that have been kept secret from others. Hepworth shows that in our interactions with others, we must decide how much to reveal to another person. It is only through the narration of fiction that this much is revealed. And, real or imagined, the stories shed light on the commonalty of ageing.

Fiction, being what it is, reinforces stereotypes in some characterizations, but in others, it allows the reader to question the tales of ageing we invoke whether real or imagined. From independent, self-sufficient older adults to meek and vulnerable elders, the stories reveal so many variations on a theme. The stories allow us to confront the stereotypes that cloud our vision of the ageing process. Hepworth cleverly selected fiction that lays it all out.

What follows is a discussion of the significance of objects, places and space in everyday life as the individual experiences ageing. While there is a body of literature about the concepts of self-identity, a sense of place, and the importance of place and space, little has been done to link concepts of place and identity with the older population. Hepworth is certainly on the right track as he includes this segment in the book. Ordinary people do experience life through a maze of events and circumstances that has meaning to them and this occurs in particular places. It is this concept and experience of place that affects a sense of identity. Furthermore, the objects one collects through life have a special meaning for elders. Beginning researchers and those that work with the aged will find this segment of the book informative.

Stories of Ageing is inventive, intelligent, and a reflexive narrative. It is not an easy book to read. It is not the fast read one would anticipate. Yet, that may be more a function of the reader's place in the life course. In that sense, Hepworth's writing inspires rethinking of the ageing self. The book makes one cognizant of their own attitudes toward growing older, the treatment that they may have imposed on elderly people and the anticipated outcome of their own later life experiences. Hepworth has captured the images of ageing that people hold of themselves as well as the ways in which others view the age group. He is able to include both positive and negative images inducing both laughter and tears in the reader. *Stories of Ageing* rouse the senses to this issue. You cannot avoid it. You are forced to deal with it through stories that put the reader in a place at a specific time. It spans time, just as in life and leads the reader to speculate about the future of ageing. Hepworth rightly anticipates that ageing futures will depend on both bio-technical innovations and inevitable cultural changes. This depiction of ageing in the future, as the

stories of ageing past and present, fall nicely into the framework of symbolic interactionism.

However, two potential problems emerged in the book. First, the fact that readers are engaged with their own interpretation of Hepworth's interpretation of dialogue which has been taken out of context even though he offers thought provoking explanations. Second, at the point of introduction, the discussion of the symbolic interactionist model detracts from the rich narrative that follows. It seems as though the author felt the need to constantly justify this excursion from academic rhetoric into the literary genre. The book does not need an elaborate theoretical and methodological discourse. On the other hand, some scholars may consider this as an insufficient treatment of theory and methodology for potential researchers.

Overall, the book is well written, intriguing and offers a tool for research that has been underutilized. The book is a major contribution to the field of gerontology and should be widely read by undergraduate and graduate students, researchers, service providers, health professionals, social workers, nursing home administrators, and ordinary people who one day, if they are lucky, will grow old.