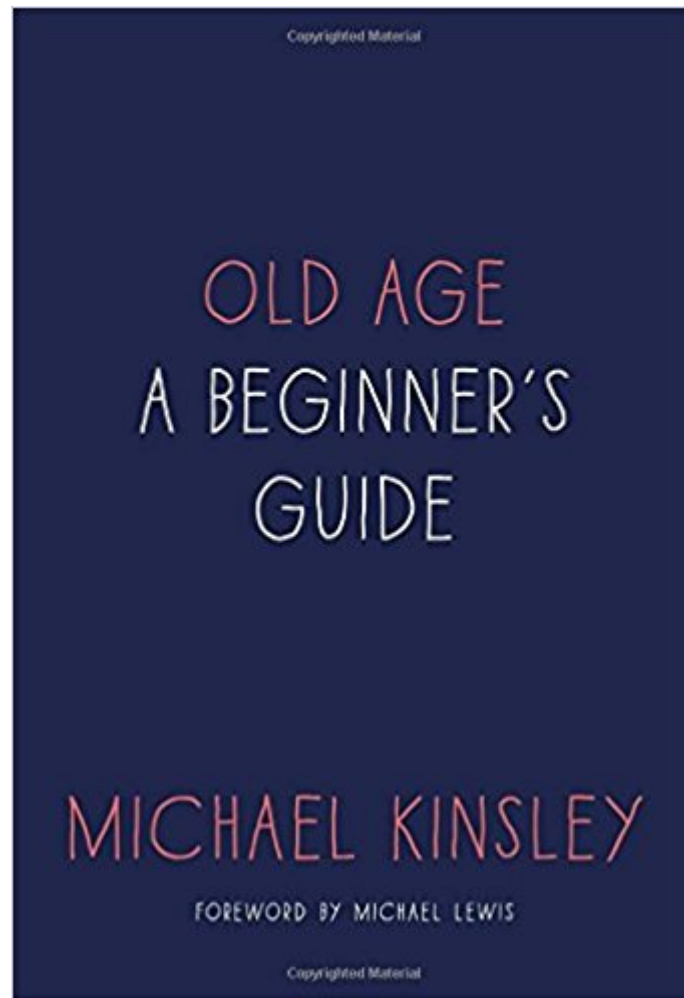


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Old Age: A Beginner's Guide



Synopsis

Vanity Fair columnist Michael Kinsley escorts his fellow Boomers through the door marked "Exit." The notorious baby boomers "the largest age cohort in history" are approaching the end and starting to plan their final moves in the game of life. Now they are asking: What was that all about? Was it about acquiring things or changing the world? Was it about keeping all your marbles? Or is the only thing that counts after you're gone the reputation you leave behind? In this series of essays, Michael Kinsley uses his own battle with Parkinson's disease to unearth answers to questions we are all at some time forced to confront. "Sometimes," he writes, "I feel like a scout from my generation, sent out ahead to experience in my fifties what even the healthiest Boomers are going to experience in their sixties, seventies, or eighties." This surprisingly cheerful book is at once a fresh assessment of a generation and a frequently funny account of one man's journey toward the finish line. "The least misfortune can do to make up for itself is to be interesting," he writes. "Parkinson's disease has fulfilled that obligation."

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Customer Reviews

If you form any ideas about this book's content based on the title (or even the description), put them firmly to one side, now. At least half of this well-written and interesting book is purely personal, as the author -- a veteran journalist -- contemplates his own diagnosis of Parkinson's disease in his 40s, which forces him to embark on his personal journey toward age and the inevitable recognition of mortality many years before the rest of his fellow baby boomers will have to (reluctantly) follow

suit. It's not that this personal content is uninteresting -- Kinsley recounts his experience with tests to measure his cognitive abilities, as he discourses on the importance of progressing through old age while hanging onto one's marbles (i.e. that longevity alone isn't the measure of a "good" old age), discourses on what it's like to live with Parkinson's, and to endure brain surgery that has helped to stall the progress of many symptoms. It's just that this wasn't what the book seemed to promise or what I had anticipated. Sure, from time to time, Kinsley backs off from the personal to make more general observations -- most particularly in the final segment, when he discourses on the question of building up a reputation that will endure post mortem -- but those segments also tend to be shorter and to feel more perfunctory. Ultimately, I came away from these feeling unmoved and unenlightened. There's nothing terribly fresh here, and while Kinsley's writing is crisp and vivid, without insights that make me sit up and take notice, I ended up shrugging my shoulders. There's an odd and quirky proposal to solve the country's fiscal problems bolted on to the end that comes out of nowhere, but aside from that....If you're looking for something to read about mortality, for my money you're better off reading "Nothing to Be Frightened Of" by Julian Barnes. Beautiful prose, and real thought has gone into the ideas it contains. This is obviously equally personal, but far more disjointed.

Kinsley is a well known journalist. I recall hearing something about him being ill, but I wasn't aware of which illness. His is Parkinson's, but he has had it for several years. This book is not necessarily about growing old with Parkinson's, but it does include much discussion on this disorder. Kinsley is very open and forthright about his degenerating condition. He doesn't present himself or the disorder as something that he will somehow conquer. This is not a book where the reader is left with mixed feelings of admiration, but doubting the writer's lack of reality testing. I hate to put it this way, but in a usually light-hearted manner, this book is Kinsley's "up-yours" to the disorder. As in, "You might cripple me in my final years, but I look at how well I can still communicate and evoke laughter." In this understated manner, Kinsley is inspiring in his courage. The book is small in size and short in pages. It's a "pocket book" in a very real sense. As I recall, it is about 8 chapters, or essays including a final one of 1 page. They need not be read chronologically. My favorite was #5 where he provided interesting information about the cognitive difficulties of the disorder. I hadn't realized it harmed the executive functioning of the brain along with the brain's muscular control areas. As he points out, many people are not aware of this aspect of the disorder. Obviously this is a book that deals with the subject matter of Parkinson's, dementia, aging and death in a sensitive fashion. I would certainly recommend it for those who are seeing degeneration in their loved ones. I

think there is also great value in it for those facing these problems too. I can imagine that it would be a comfort for all such persons.

I am about to turn 60. Us Boomers are all getting old....fast. Michael Kinsley, in his book, succinctly expounds on the troubles and feelings of the later part of the lives of the biggest demographic group of humans in history. However, there is a string attached. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease (PD) when he was in his 50s. So he writes that he has a few years getting to know "what it's like" to be old. Kinsley, an excellent writer, will make you laugh out loud at PD and death, which is one of his lessons of the book. Can't get away from death. And the odds....well...that part may make you feel good. Or not. Because, well, we all die. "He who dies with the most toys wins" is proven to be one very dumb "truth". Why would you want toys? You are dead. That's the tone of the book. The book is a fast read. Kinsley's style is easy and natural, conversational writing that I prefer. His observations about himself and his battle with PD while making you laugh out loud is excellent. From him finding out that once you have PD, you are no longer in the "healthy" category and are treated differently for the rest of your life, to his brain surgery, he finds the truth in living with the incurable but long living disease. Kinsley towards the end of the book gets into what the Boomer did and can do, some interesting and very good suggestions for our generation to give back to the future. Using statistics, anecdotes and personal stories, along with some reality that is sharp and to the point, Kinsley has written an excellent primer for facing the realities with logic and humor. One of those books that us Boomers will want to share with our friends.

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