

Open Learning Programme - PSP Certificate
Learning Connect: Key Issues of our Time (Unit 4)

PUTTING YEARS ON US: CONSIDERING AGEING – CHALLENGES AND LIBERATIONS (A) IMAGES OF AGEING

Professor Tess Maginess



Queen's University Belfast & University
of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature:
Global South and Global North
Perspectives"

VIEWS ON AGEING

- Over the centuries and across cultures, there have been **contrasting views about ageing**.
- Some have been very negative – like Jonathan Swift’s **grim depiction** of the old people who can never die, the Struldbruggs in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), to the **celebration of the liberation** of old age in Seamus Heaney’s poem, ‘A Kite for Aibhin’ (2010).
- Most of you will be old one day, so consider how you would like to be treated.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY: ATTITUDES TO OLDER AND YOUNGER PEOPLE

- Projects focusing on **intergenerational solidarity and empowerment of marginalised older and younger people** are especially timely as they address a key issue of our own time and for the future.
- All the statistics point to a **growing older population internationally**. Globally, the percentage of people aged 60 or over will rise to 22% of the total population in the next four decades, a jump from 800 million to 2 billion (Beard *et al.*, 2011).
- The **younger population is also growing**, especially in the developing world; according to the United Nations (2015), predicted to rise from 1.2 billion to 1.3 billion.



A SNAPSHOT OF RESEARCH

- Despite international policies which recognise the potential of older people in terms of their contribution to society (Gray and Dowds, 2010; United Nations Madrid Plan on Ageing, 2002), it must be acknowledged that, **the prospect of a growing older population is almost always presented as a problem or even a crisis**. Zeilig (2014) incisively deconstructs the current 'social constructions' of dementia as the most baleful apogee of negative constructions of ageing.
- **Young people are, correspondingly, frequently portrayed as burdensome and non-productive** (Leach, 2011; Mitchell *et al.*, 2009; Devlin, 2006). Intergenerational warfare, pitching young and old against each other in a rhetoric of scarce resources (Segal, 2013) is also challenged by this project in its building of intergenerational solidarity.
- Our project chimes with and advances cutting edge **literature which counter the negative stereotyping of older people** (Maginess, 2016; Field, 2012; Boulton-Lewis, 2012; Jarvis, 2010) as well as taking forward the work of the many international Centres of Ageing and Charities such as Age UK; Dementia UK and The Beth Johnson Foundation which has funded pioneering work benefiting both older and younger people.



- Research demonstrates that **engagement in dynamic lifelong learning** brings clear benefits to older and younger people and builds social capital and citizenship (Steptoe, Deaton and Stone, 2015; Brennan and Barnett, 2009; Brennan, Barnett and Lesmeister, 2007; Benson *et al.*, 2007).



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YOUR FUTURE AS AN OLDER PERSON

- Most of you will be old one day, so consider **how you would like to be treated**.
- Do you want to be pitted in a false **war** against young people or should we be creating **solidarity** between the generations?

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POSITIVE IMAGES OF OLDER PEOPLE

- We have some **fantastic examples of older people** – still practising their art – like the painters Matisse and Picasso, of film actors like Clint Eastwood.
- In the current Covid crisis, the **resilience and generous spirit of older people** is symbolised in figures like Captain Sir Tom Moore, who, in the run-up to his 100th birthday, raised almost £40 million for Health Service charities.

VISUAL IMAGES OF OLDER PEOPLE



Rembrandt, Self-Portrait at the Age of 63 (1669, the year he died) at National Gallery in London.

A LONG JOURNEY



SONGS ABOUT AGEING

- Jody Rosen, 'The Pensioner's Playlist, The 25 greatest songs about aging and mortality', 11 September, 2008.

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2008/09/the-25-greatest-songs-about-aging-and-mortality.html>

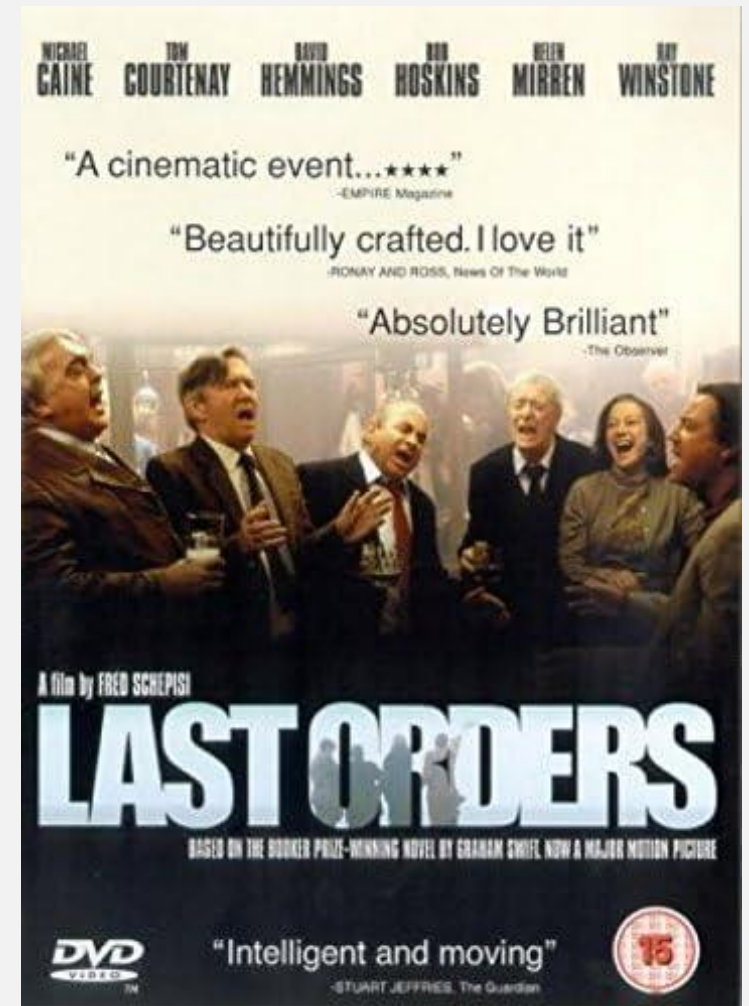
- This site references a number of songs.
- Some are very **compassionate** about ageing – like Elvis Costello's 'Veronica' (1989) and 'When I'm 64', by The Beatles: 'Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64' (1967).
- Others are more **humorous** like Toby Keith's 'As Good as I Once Was' (2005), extolling the virtues of Viagra, or Jay-Z's '30-Something' (2006) offering the older age consolations of 'black cards, good credit and such'.
- And other songs **connect generations**, like Pulp's 'Help the Aged' (1998) reminding young people that older people were once young too, indulging in 'risky' behaviours like smoking cigs, drinking and sniffing glue.

SONGS ABOUT AGEING

- [FLOURISHANYWAY](#), '70 Songs About Aging and Growing Older'
- *Spinditty*, May 2020:
<https://spinditty.com/playlists/Songs-About-Aging-and-Getting-Older>
- '7 Years' by Lukas Graham (2015)
- 'Thinking Out Loud' by Ed Sheeran (2014)
- 'Wasn't Expecting That' by Jamie Lawson (2011)
- 'Grow Old With Me' by Tom Odell
- 'Glory Days' by Bruce Springsteen (1985)
- 'Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is A Season)' by The Byrds (1965)

FILMS ABOUT AGEING

- *Last Orders* (2001), based on Graham Swift's fine novel, the film chart the epic journey of a group of east Londoners charged with scattering the ashes of their friend.
- The film features great performances from Michael Caine, Tom Courtenay, Helen Mirren, Ray Winstone, Bob Hoskins, and David Hemmings.



FILMS ABOUT AGEING

- In the last 20 year, there has been a **new focus on films about older people**; might this be a sign that negative stereotypes of older people are being challenged?
- As we see more older people on the screen, across different cultures, do you understand older people better?
- Do you think about what it will be like to be an older person?

FILMS ABOUT AGEING

Many films involve **fantastic ‘ensemble’ performances:**

Quartet (2012) about four older musicians in a retirement home and featuring many actual retired musicians.



FILMS ABOUT AGEING

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011) about a set of retirees struggling to rebuild their lives in India. We may note the Western perspective – India being an exotic backdrop without any real engagement with the people there.



FILMS ABOUT AGEING

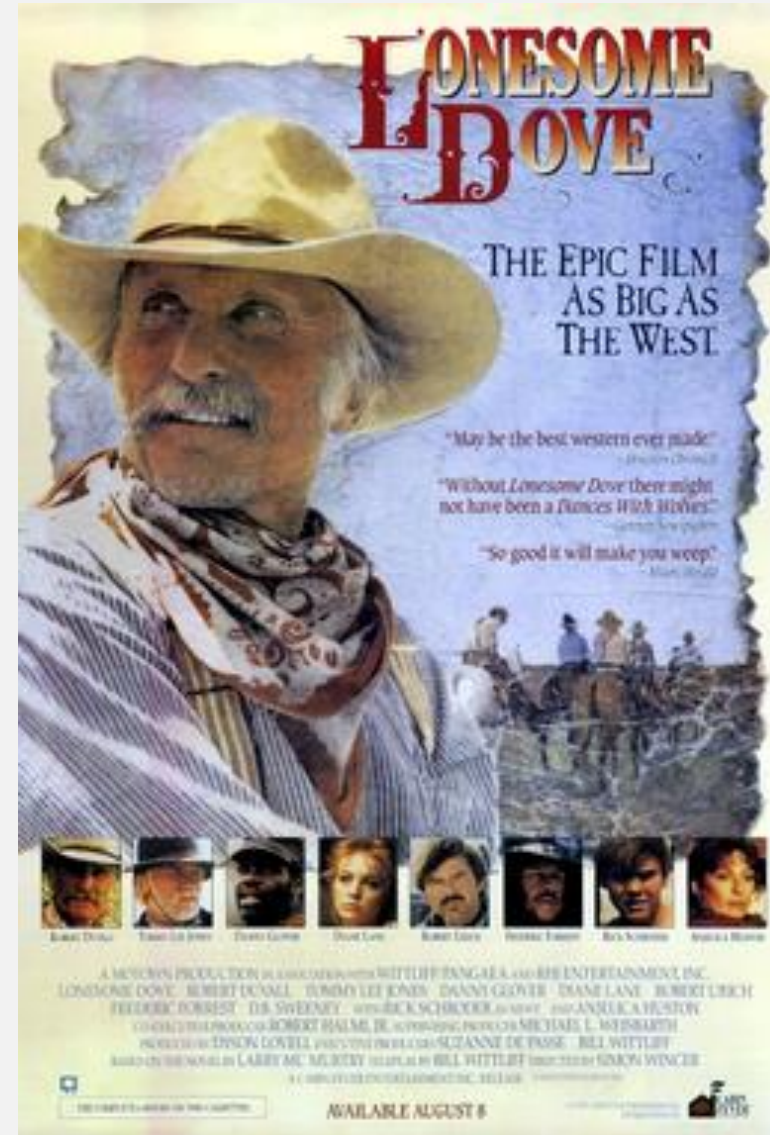
Based on Cormac McCarthy's searing novel, the title comes from a poem by the elder Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium'.

McCarthy blends terror and tenderness. He is 87 and still writing.

The film (2007) delivers great performances from Tommy Lee Jones, Javier Bardem and Josh Brolin.

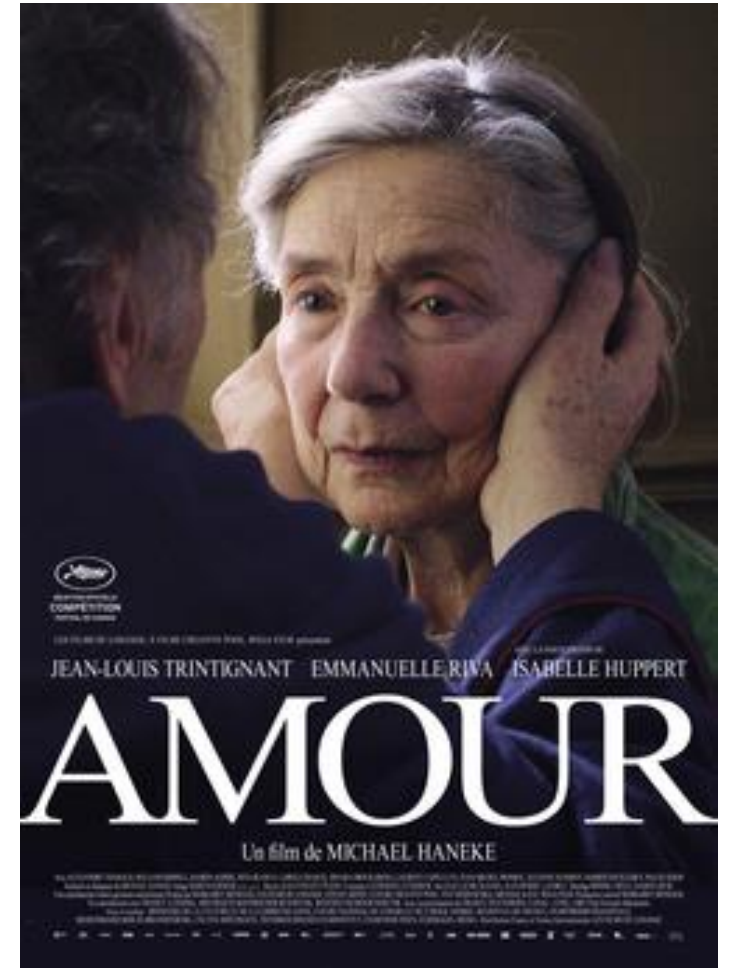


- *Lonesome Dove* was a miniseries (1989). The moving tale of two ageing Texas Rangers on their western odyssey to honour a loved one, starring Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones. Based on the excellent novel by Larry McMurtry.



FILMS ABOUT AGEING

Another well known film is *Amour* (2012), which focuses upon the love of an elderly couple after the wife suffers a serious stroke.

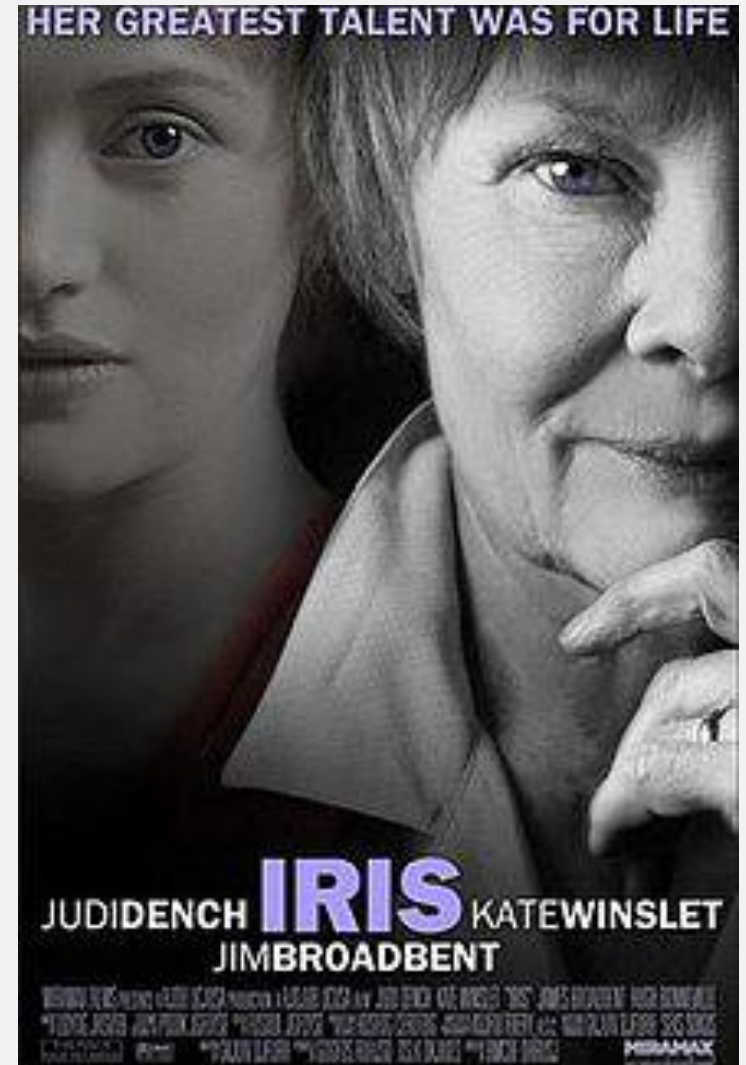


FILMS ABOUT DEMENTIA

- As we learn more about the **lived experience of dementia**, a number of fine films have been produced, including:

Iris (2001).

- This film is based on the life of the Irish writer, Iris Murdoch and told from the perspective of her husband, John Bayley. The film is based on his memoir, *An Elegy for Iris*. The film stars Judi Dench and Jim Broadbent.



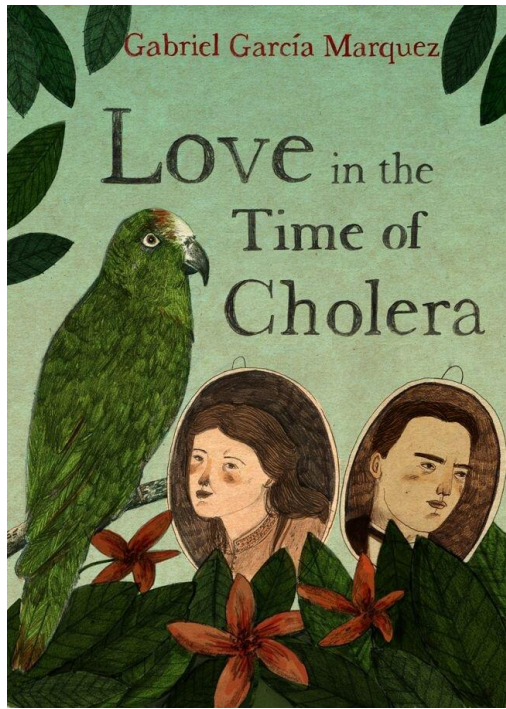
TV DRAMA

- An impressive drama based on Emma Healey's novel, *Elizabeth is Missing* was broadcast in 2019. Starring Glenda Jackson, Sophie Rundle and Liv Hill.

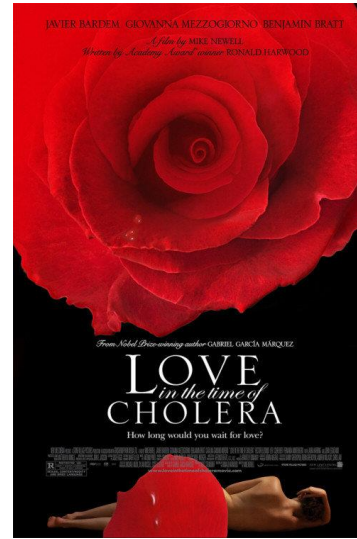


DRAMA AND FICTION

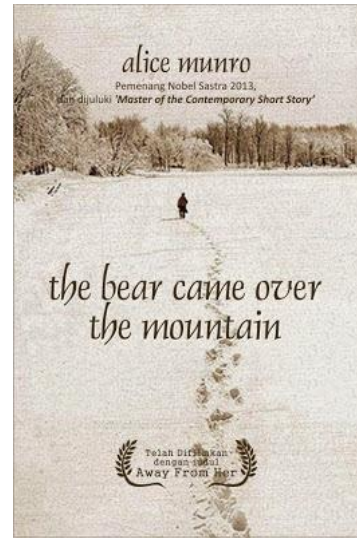
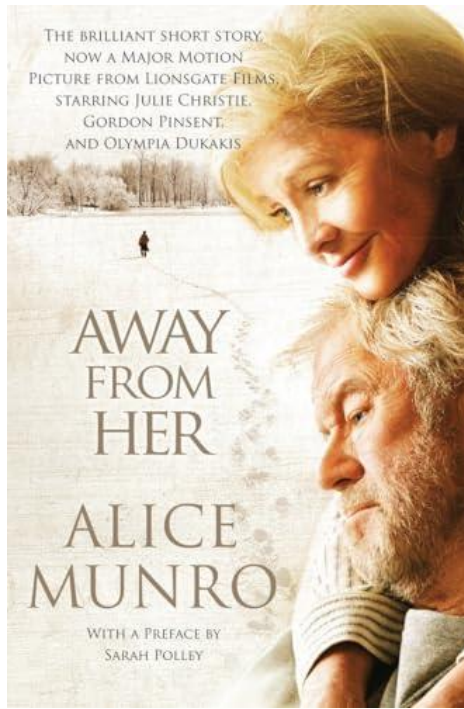
- Ageing is now a much more popular subject for writers and, as we have seen, a number of films have been produced from recent novels. However, ageing is a **perennial subject in literature**.
- The figure of the **'senex' or wise old man** in Classical literature.
- William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606).
- Ernest Hemingway's, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).
- Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953).



- Gabriel García Márquez, 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings' (1955).
- In this short story, an old man with enormous wings appears in a settlement. The family shut him up in the hen coop. There is some speculation as to whether he might be an angel. The family does not discourage this and, indeed, sees the potential for earning a little money from the old man as a spectacle. However, almost in due course, along comes the Tarantula woman and attention diverts to her. The old man still hangs about getting in the way, but the baby plays with him as if he is a dog. He falls sick. It looks as if he will die, but... lo and behold, not only does he recover, but takes himself off, borne aloft by the somewhat miraculous new 'natural' wings which have managed to grow out of him. (In *Leaf Storm and Other Stories*. London: Harper and Row, 1955)



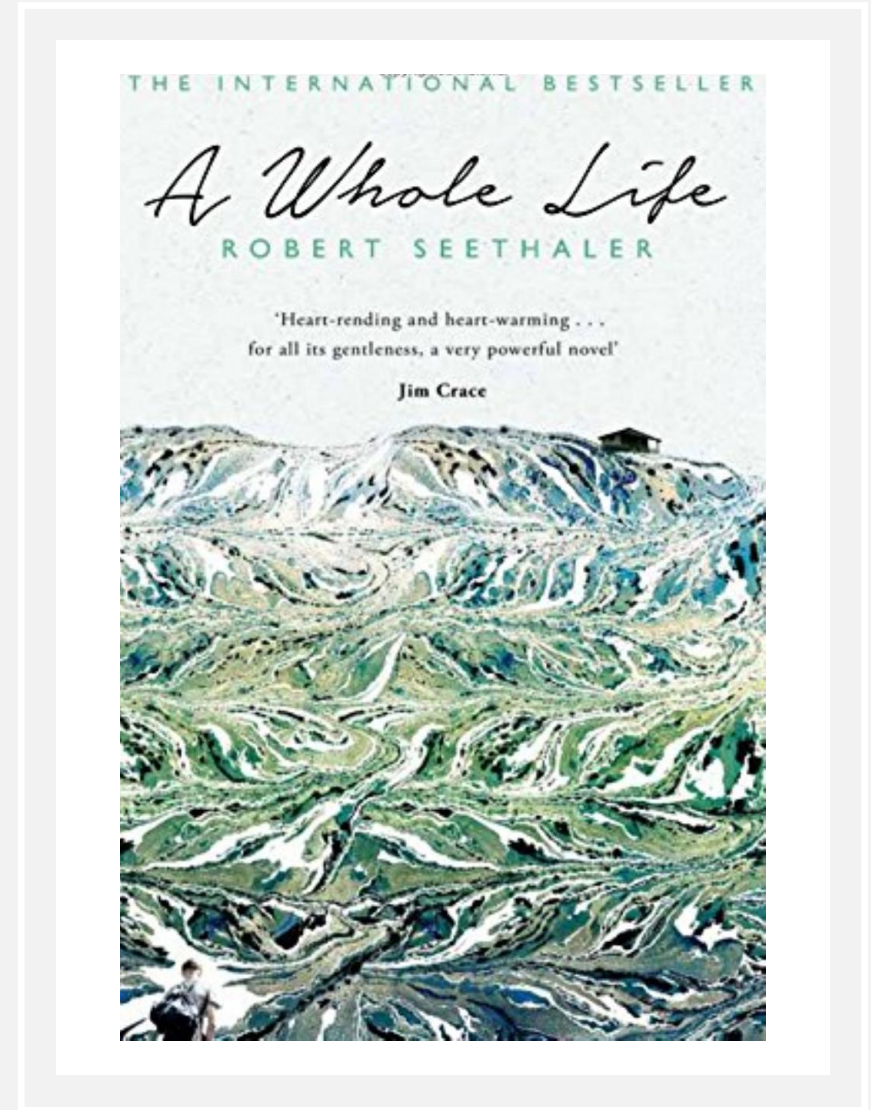
- Márquez later wrote another story, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). This is a very moving love story concerning two older people who meet after many years of separation. A film was made in 2007, starring Javier Bardem.



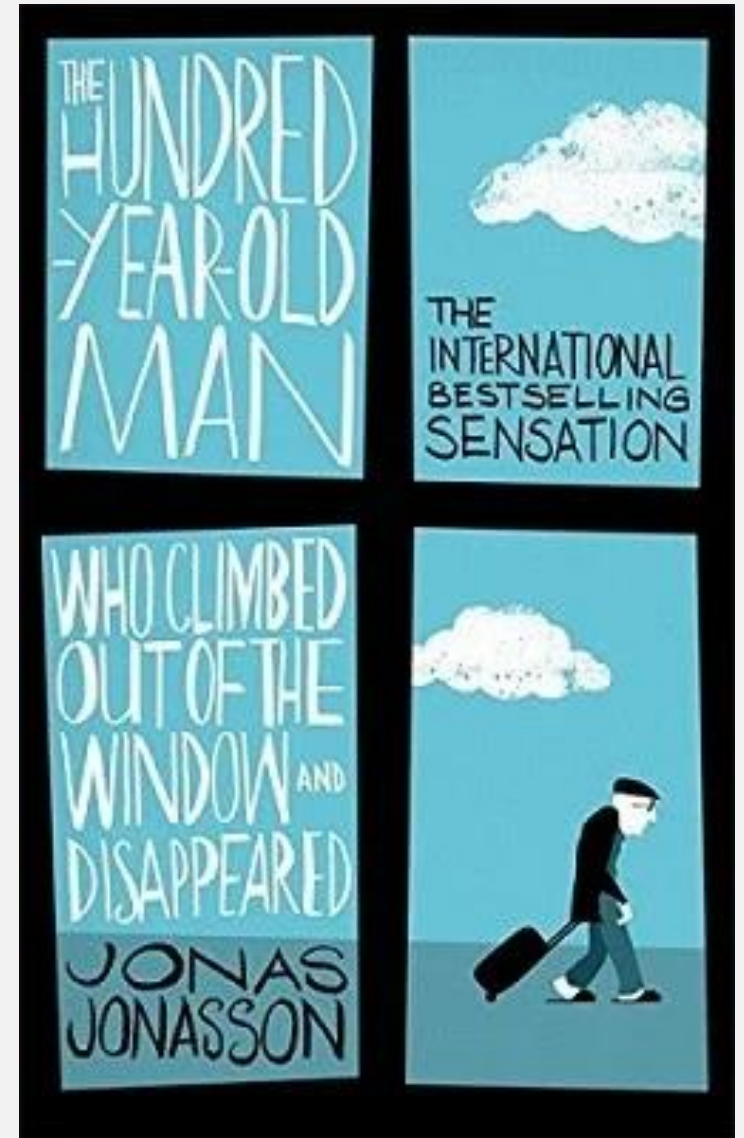
- Alice Munro, 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' [short story](1999)
- At a literal level, the story is about a couple, Grant and Fiona. Fiona appears to succumb to some form of dementia and enters a Residential Home. Her husband appears to miss her. She develops a relationship with a younger man, Aubrey. Her husband is excluded. Aubrey is taken home by his wife, Marian, mainly because she does not want to sell the house to pay for his long-term care. Fiona is disconsolate. In an attempt to restore her happiness, Grant persuades Marian to allow him to return to the Home. It is hinted that part of the bargain is that Marian and Grant have an affair, at her instigation. Aubrey returns or is returned to the Home. Or does he?
- In 2006, the story was made into a film, directed by Sarah Polley and starring Julie Christie and Gordon Pinsent. It was nominated for an Oscar.

Robert Seethaller, *A Whole Life* (2015)

The title suggests a kind of panoramic, biographical sweep and, indeed, that is what the novel delivers. But there is a kind of irony too, for in the scale of epic characters and epic events, the whole life of Egger is rather a small thing. He is not a big hero, just an ordinary man, indeed, almost like the hero of a short story, except that he is not passive. But, yet, it is through his centre of consciousness that we understand the momentous changes of the twentieth century.



- Jonas Jonasson, (Translated by Roy Bradbury.) *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* (2009).
- This fascinating story, both comic and tragic, offers a serious challenge to ageism. Though focused on an apparently insignificant and doddering old man, the reader is in for some surprises. The novel connects personal to public, explores the contrast between friends and family, the role of institutions as opposed to informal alliances between people and politics versus the personal.



- For lots more works of **fiction on ageing** see:
- <https://fivebooks.com/best-books/margaret-drabble-ageing-literature/>
- <https://blog.ioaging.org/aging/top-9-novels-aging-growing-old>



POEMS ON AGEING

- There is a **wealth of poetry on ageing**. Here are just a few of the more famous examples.
- William Butler Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928; 2000, Ware, Hertfordshire Wordsworth Editions, pp163-164).

POEMS ON AGEING

- Dylan Thomas, 'Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night' (*Collected Poems*, 1934- 1952. London: Dent, 1952, p.16).

POEMS ON AGEING

- Jenny Joseph, 'Warning' (1961, <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/warning/>)
- Joseph wrote this poem when she was a young woman!

POEMS ON AGEING

- Seamus Heaney, 'A Kite for Aibhín' (*Human Chain*, London: Faber and Faber, 2010, p.85)

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