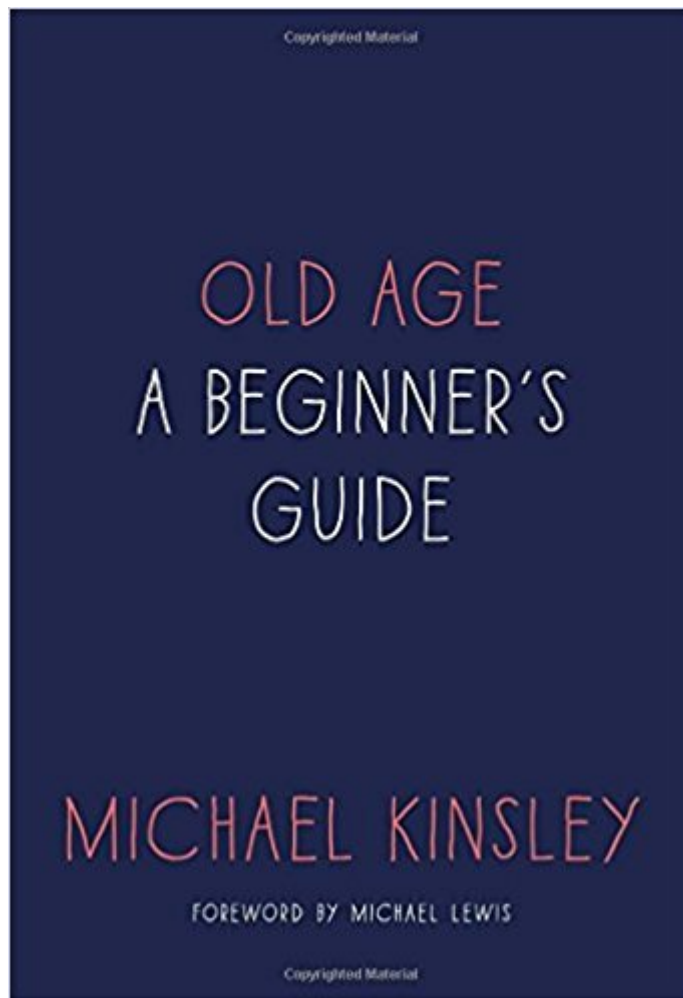


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Old Age: A Beginner's Guide



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

A New York Times Bestseller A New York Times Editors' Choice A #1 Washington Post

Bestseller "A superb new book . . . A generational cri de coeur. . . Mr. Kinsley possesses what is probably the most envied journalistic voice of his generation: skeptical, friendly, possessed of an almost Martian intelligence." Dwight Garner, The New York

Times" "Wickedly funny. . . . Especially poignant. . . . Among all the books published in recent years about old age and dying, it would be hard to find one that is more fun to read than Old Age.

• Reeve Lindbergh, The Washington Post "Kinsley brings wisdom and artfully suppressed anger, wistful humor, well-pitched prose, and the bite of the thinker against the pretenses of the world. . . . Old Age is not a little book about economics or Parkinson's disease, but it is a big little book about what happens when we begin to think beyond who has won the race.

• Peter Stothard, The Wall Street Journal "If aging is an opponent, I can't think of anyone better suited to take it on than Michael Kinsley. His prodigious wit and intellect cut straight through to the realities of growing older. By turns funny and rueful, but always real, this book is a must-read for newcomers to the world of old age.

• Michael J. Fox "Hilarious. . . . Witty. . . . If it's possible for a book about illness and death to be delightful, this one fills the bill.

• Phillip Lopate, The New York Times Book Review "Old Age is irreverent, wise, and laugh-out-loud funny about living long enough for your organs to start to betray you. Count on Michael Kinsley to write the book about life you didn't know you needed."

• Atul Gawande "Michael Kinsley, a favorite around here, has written a smart, funny, and profound little memoir.

• Pamela Paul, The New York Times Book Review "A wise and edgy guide to old age. . . . A humorous but penetrating look at the issues the baby-boomer generation should consider as it confronts life's last phase.

• The Seattle Times "A wise and funny journey that manages to make mortality itself an energizing subject.

• Money.com

Michael Kinsley is a columnist at Vanity Fair, a contributor to The New Yorker, and the founder of Slate. He has served as the editor of The New Republic and Harper's, the managing editor of The Washington Monthly, and the American editor of The Economist. He lives in Washington, DC.

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.

4 Stars according to the guide means "I liked it"--but I add here: "I didn't love it". I would have except for the last chapter in which Mr. Kinsley illogically advocates for the Boomers paying off the National Debt; "how to" is a bit muddled and fantastical, and certainly out of character with the thought provoking theme of the other chapters. Except for that chapter I understand the book is a reprint of earlier articles written by Mr. Kinsley for the many prestigious publications with which he has been associated, primarily discussing his ongoing Parkinson's Disease, a journey I am also on. So I probably found his experience and insight more interesting than most casual readers, in fact that's why I bought it, and had he ended it there with some final thoughts he would have had my undying (a pun intended) praise and maybe a "I loved it" 5 stars. Instead he goes off the rails in the last chapter, obviously written much later than the prior articles, and lacking the verve, vitality and wit, and more to the point, the insight of those writings, but perhaps illustrating the warnings about the progress of our disease. And maybe that was his unknowing purpose for crashing the train before getting to the station of an otherwise thought provoking collection of his essays. But it was inevitable, as I know, and Mr. Kinsley explains.

As one reviewer states, the book is indeed a hodge-podge of ideas, many centering around the author's suffering from Parkinson's disease, although he repeatedly claims the book isn't about that topic. I wonder if, given the book's title, Parkinson's has perhaps accelerated Mr. Kinsley's experience of aging in an ageist society - that tut-tutting one gets as our faculties drop by the wayside one by one. The author proposes the only thing we leave behind of meaning is our reputation, and throws the spaghetti at the wall on ideas of what boomers could do to be well-remembered. Let me help you cut to the chase - boomers will be remembered, and I fear not well-remembered, as the generation who coined that short-sighted and ageist phrase "Never trust anyone over 30." And we now are the ones with bite marks on our butts to prove it.

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