

Narrative Development Later in Life: A Novel Perspective

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Prevailing paradigms in gerontology tend to eclipse the creative side of aging, implicitly perceiving it in terms of a narrative of decline. Building on insights from the field of narrative gerontology, this paper proposes an explicitly literary metaphor for understanding the subjective experience of aging, one in which our lives themselves are conceived in textual terms: As novels we are continually composing—as author, narrator, protagonist, and reader more or less at once. Drawing on literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the paper argues the merits of the metaphor of life-as-novel, notes the entailments it carries with it, and enlists it to deepen our understanding of narrative development in later life, with special emphasis on the challenges such development can face. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of a “novel perspective” for the practice of narrative care with older adults and for future research into the poetics of growing old.

There is little of greater importance to each of us than gaining a perspective on our own life story, to find, clarify, and deepen meaning in the accumulated experience of a lifetime. (Birren and Deutchman 1)

AGING AND AESTHETICS

Veteran gerontologist Jim Birren has described aging as “one of the most complex subjects facing modern science” (459). An early proponent of what is known now as “narrative gerontology” (de Medeiros, *Narrative*), Birren would be pleased, we trust, with how narrative approaches are shedding light on the intricate inside of aging, or on biographical aging (Birren et al.) and the complexities of “storying later life” (Kenyon et al.). Inspired by thinking in the field of narrative psychology (among others), narrative gerontology encompasses a range of perspectives on the subjective experience of aging and on practice with aging adults, both of which take as their starting point that humans are hermeneutical

beings. We are makers of meaning, and our main means of making it is through language, metaphor, and narrative: through telling and internalizing stories, big or small, about our lives and our worlds.

From this same starting point, our aim in what follows is to contribute to growing interest in the arts and aging (Hanna et al.), and in so-called creative aging, by playing with the idea of lives themselves as aesthetic entities: specifically, as flesh and blood novels we are continually composing, novels of which we are author, narrator, protagonist, editor, and reader more or less at once. We propose, in effect, the adoption of an explicitly novelistic framework for understanding the internal complexity of the aging self.

As we shall be considering in what follows, such a “novel perspective” can access aspects of aging that are otherwise overlooked by the biomedical model to which gerontology too often defaults. Within that model, the focus falls on the challenging conditions that later life brings with it (arthritis, diabetes, dementia, etc.) and on practical matters like medication management, caregiver burnout, and the prevention of falls. Though these matters are important, aging *per se* gets tacitly cast in terms of a narrative of “decline” (Gullette 13) and not, for example, as “a time of rich intensity and opportunities for spiritual growth” (Waxman 175). As we hope to show, however, a novel perspective can complement the biomedical one by opening a conceptual space where a more soulful science of aging can come into view—what psychologist Mark Freeman speaks of as “poetic science” (“Toward” 389). Within such a space, the positive possibilities that can come with later life, such as the development of meaning, maturity, and wisdom, are easier to envision, and aging as a whole emerges as a process of deepening and not just declining, of actively growing old and not just passively getting old.

The space in question is one where narrative gerontology meets narrative psychology, literary gerontology (Wyatt-Brown), and critical gerontology (Zeilig). At the risk of oversimplification, literary gerontology

seeks to understand how aging and older adults are portrayed in poems, plays, and novels, as well as the impact of aging on the themes and styles that mark an author's work over time. As an allied endeavour, however, narrative gerontology is interested in aging per se as a literary process and lives themselves as quasi-literary works in terms of how we experience them subjectively, whether or not we ever give them explicit articulation in a piece of writing.

We'll begin by outlining the link between life and narrative in general, then home in on the particular metaphor of lives as novels, with a strong nod to Mikhail Bakhtin on the nature of the novel. Drawing on the work of psychologist Dan McAdams, we argue that narrative development continues across the lifespan, though this development can be impeded or impaired in later life. We'll then consider how such impairments—which can be understood as narrative challenges—can be addressed through the practice of *narrative care*. We'll conclude by noting the implications of this whole line of thinking for research into the complexities of the aging experience.

LIFE AND NARRATIVE

As part of a research project investigating the links between older people's level of resilience and the kinds of stories that they tell about their lives, one of us (Bill) helped to organize a series of workshops a few years ago that invited participants to embark on what was advertised as “an autobiographical adventure” (Randall et al., “Narrative and Resilience”). The aim of the workshops was to determine whether participating in events of this sort affects people's quality of life, as measured (pre- and post-) with scales for resilience, well-being, meaning in life, and narrative foreclosure. As the participants filed through the door at the start of each day, Bill remembers, he felt that they were practically bursting with their stories, impatient for things to get under way so they could try out different strategies for writing about their lives and share the results with others at their tables.

Interest in life-story work of this kind has been growing at a steady pace, a trend that reflects not merely the enduring appeal that stories have always had for us but, what is more, how much story and life are intertwined. As the so-called “narrative turn” across the human sciences is making us aware, we are storied beings through and through; our brains themselves, it seems, are hardwired to experience—and talk about—our life’s events in storied form, and to make sense of our existence by means of what is variously referred to as “narrative knowing” (Polkinghorne 1), “narrative intelligence” (Randall, “Narrative Intelligence” 11), or “narrative thought” (Bruner 691). Moreover, as gerontologist Gene Cohen maintains, improved cooperation between left-brain and right-brain operations enhances our capacity for “post-formal thought” (36-38) and intensifies the “inner push” (40) to engage in “autobiographical expression” (22). This entails stepping back from the countless “small stories” (Bamberg 139) that we form around the events of our lives and, through some measure of “big story narrative reflection” (Spector-Mersel), pondering the overall meaning and shape of the proverbial “story of my life.” In this way, later life can be conceived as “the narrative phase par excellence” (Freeman, “Death” 394).

We’ll return to the idea of “big story narrative reflection,” but for now the point is that we are, by nature, storying beings who transform the stuff of our lives into the stories of our lives. And these stories, in turn, become integral to our identity, to our sense of who we are. We understand our identity less, that is, in terms of statistics (our height, weight, or date of birth) than of stories. Put another way, the autobiographical memories on which our identity in several respects depends are scarcely exact reproductions of our life events but the interpreted, edited, often embellished or distorted versions that we weave from those events, or at least from the comparatively few events that we manage to hold onto. At bottom, autobiographical memory has a “narrative structure” (Rubin 2; see also Bluck and Habermas). Highly selective at heart, it is far less the direct

recollection of actual facts than a dynamic amalgam of fact and fictionalization. It is a matter of *faction*.

As the older adults in the workshops demonstrated, it can come rather naturally, then, to see our lives as vast, meandering stories that we've been steadily composing across the years, replete with chapters, subplots, turning-points, and themes. By the same token, sensing links between the stories we experience through movies and novels and those that we ourselves are living can come naturally as well. When reading works of fiction, for example, we make sense of the literary texts through, and not despite, our own lived texts, just as the literary text, for its part, reads us, illuminating vagaries of our emotions and relationships that might otherwise remain at the edges of our awareness (Lesser, *Nothing Remains*). The line between literature and life is thus exceedingly fine, and the "life-literature connection" cannot be ignored (Gold, *The Story Species*). As put by one philosopher, commenting on Sartre's concept of the "fundamental project" in which each of us is engaged throughout our lives, the "structure of a person's life resembles a literary text in some important way" (Charmé 51). The question is: What genre of text are we talking about?

LIVES AS NOVELS IN THE MAKING

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue for the central role of metaphor in our experience of the world. If the metaphor that tacitly informs us, for instance, is that life is basically a battle, then we're likely to interpret (and talk about) the vicissitudes of our existence in terms of winners and losers, advances and retreats, targets to aim for and foes to defeat. A metaphor such as life as journey, on the other hand, suggests a somewhat different set of attitudes and expectations, plus different terminology for interpreting the challenges we face (Randall and Kenyon 87-118). In the same vein, so does the metaphor of life as story, a metaphor that not only narrative gerontologists find appealing but so do many older adults themselves, as the very process of aging pushes them to view their lives in narrative terms.

The deeper one ventures into the study of aging from a narrative perspective, however, the more the metaphor of life as story invites us to extend it to that of *life as novel*, as has been suggested in previous works by Randall and others (see, e.g., Randall, *Stories We Are*; Randall and Kenyon, *Ordinary Wisdom*; Randall and McKim, *Reading Our Lives*). One may argue that a novel is the most intensive, most sophisticated mode of narrative that has evolved to date for storying the wideness of the world, the mystery of the self, and the complexities of our relationships and motivations. A novel—properly so-called, and not simply a book-length narrative that runs along formulaic lines, like a thriller or whodunit—is arguably “the one grand literary form,” as Bakhtin expresses it, that is “capable of a kind of justice to the inherent polyphonies of life” (qtd. in Lodge 137). Admittedly, we are siding with such claims not as experts on the history of the novel (like Ian Watt, for instance) or on theories of the novel as a literary form, according to which, in some circles, the novel is deemed passé (Mancing 398). Rather, we side with them as, at base, students of the phenomenon of aging who are curious about the implications of a narrative perspective for our understanding of the aging journey. Moreover, as the narrative turn is showing, such a perspective has spread well beyond literary theory per se, evidence for which we’ll be citing shortly. Before that we need to sketch how we are defining the terms “story,” “narrative,” and “novel” in the context of our argument here.

While story may be understood as the “mere sequence of events in time,” narrative provides the overarching mechanism that fashions the story into a “systematic formal construction” (Abrams 173). In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Gerard Genette offers this distinction between the two: “[I] use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content, [...] the term *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse, or the narrative text itself” (27; author’s italics). Thus, while story operates on the level of events, narrative introduces layers of richness and complexity into the story through multiple formal devices, including the

type of narrator or narrator persona that is used, the time of narration, the narrative voice, the implicit or explicit audience of the narrative, and so forth. Proceeding with these distinctions, it may be posited, then, that the novel as a literary genre incorporates both story and narrative within its scope, and includes an additional dimension that makes it more than bare story or formal narrative. In this scheme of things, if “story,” “narrative,” and “novel” are to be located in a hierarchy, the novel stands at its apex, for it is the receptacle in which both story and narrative coalesce into a pattern, allowing multiple levels of sophistication in novelistic composition. Within this scheme, the metaphor of life as novel opens up imaginative vistas that are not fully realizable with either life as story or life as narrative, for the novel encapsulates vast multiplicities and brings a host of new possibilities within it. In this context, a summary of Bakhtin’s ideas on the form of the novel, particularly his notions of dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia, will help to illustrate why the novel, we believe, is the genre best allied with “life,” and how this metaphoric link unlocks possibilities for envisioning creative aging in later life.

In his essay entitled “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” Bakhtin contrasts the antiquated, fixed form of the epic with the “plastic possibilities” afforded by that of the novel (3). The novel, he says, is a “genre-in-making,” which is “free and flexible” and has the “potential to renew itself” by incorporating multiple voices, genres, and forms into its fold (7). According to him, the novel was “born and nourished in a new era of world history” and offers “a zone of contact with the present in all its openendedness” (7). He argues that “novelistic layers of literary language” become dialogized and permeated with “laughter, irony, humor, [and] self-parody,” lending the novel semantic “indeterminacy (7),” “the ability to criticize itself (6),” and a “living contact with an unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality” (7). In proposing our metaphor of life as novel, we are very much drawn to this Bakhtinian conception of the novel as an open-ended, all-encompassing,

and evolving genre. When life is likened to a novel, that is, it acquires potentials for similar resilience and enlargement. If we surrender imaginatively to the metaphor of life as novel, we can liberate our formulation of life (particularly in its later stages) from its associations with a foreclosed, hermetically—and hermeneutically—sealed finality. The metaphoric parallels with the novel allow “life” to be untangled from perceived limitations and constraints, and to be seen afresh with new possibilities for advancement and renewal. In Bakhtinian terms, because the novel is developing itself, it can best capture the developments taking place in reality, and best reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making. The novel, in sum, opens up a zone of intersection with life in its lived essence, with all its profuseness and complexity and potential for growth. Conceived within such an open-ended framework, a life is afforded substantially more imaginative space for growth, optimism, and fulfillment than when conceived in terms of story or narrative alone.

Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony and dialogism also brings the novel in closer proximity to life as an actuality that is brimming with multiple levels of experience. The idea of polyphony frees the novel from a single axis, from the controlling jurisdiction of a single author-figure, allowing it to take in multiple perspectives, voices, genres, and points of view. In Bakhtinian terms, the novel has the capacity to embrace and coalesce different genres within its formal arc, including modes of “moral confession, philosophical tract, political manifesto,” the “raw spirituality of confession,” and extra-literary genres like “letters, diaries, genres of everyday life,” all of which become “novelized—transposed to the novelistic zone of contact,” establishing the novel’s essentially polyphonic character (11).

Returning, then, to the life as novel metaphor, when such a broad-spectrum framework becomes available to older adults as they think about their lives, it has potential to empower them. It can equip them with a range of linguistic, generic, and ideological alternatives to fashion their self-image in compellingly new ways as they come to terms

with the vastness and complexity of their stories in later life. Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic is premised on a similar opening out of the novel, with its gesturing towards other genres and works and its concurrence with different voices, languages, and styles, all of which exist in dynamic inter-relation. This idea likewise frees the novel and, in turn, life from an ossified, closed-in perspective, setting up multiple zones of contact, expanding outward, and affording possibilities of new and diverse ways of making meaning.

Admittedly, the notion of our lives as novels—as lengthy, multi-layered storied constructions—is itself hardly new. French author Gustave Flaubert insisted, for instance, that “everyone’s life is worth a novel” (Polster 1), while Sartre described his autobiography, *The Words*, as “a novel I believe in” (15). More recent thinkers have also exploited the life-as-novel analogy. In *The Story of Your Life: Becoming Author of Your Own Experience*, psychotherapist Mandi Aftel maintains that “we are all ad hoc novelists . . . both the heroes of our own plots and their creators” (16). Then there is philosopher Jonathan Glover’s observation that “self-creation tends to make a life like a novel by a single author” (152). For her part, child psychologist Alyssa McCabe describes children as “emerging novelists, assembling their life stories from the emotional incidents in their daily lives” (140). Yet thinking of selves as novelists and lives as novels carries with it, as all metaphors do, a unique set of entailments.

As with novels, our lives may be said to contain all sorts of intertwining subplots—about our careers, our marriages, our health, and the like. And they contain a myriad of characters as well: Not only the different people we’ve been connected with across the years (parents, partners, colleagues, friends) but the different sides of our own selves—the different social roles we go back and forth among in daily life (me-as-spouse, as-employee, as-consumer, as-child, and so on). Some days, in some roles, we may see ourselves as the central character in our lives, while on other days, in other roles, a more minor one instead. Some days we feel we’re the hero; other days, the victim or the fool. As autobiography

scholar Paul John Eakin reminds us, expressing a decidedly postmodern perspective, “there are many stories of Self to tell and many selves to tell them” (xi). Plus, our many selves are continually chattering away inside us. In writing about “the dialogical self,” psychologist Hubert Hermans refers, for instance, to “a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind,” which amount in effect to different “interacting characters” (147). In all, and as Bakhtin’s thinking supports, it is this element of multiplicity—multiple plotlines, multiple characters, multiple narrators, not to mention the multiple meanings that our life events can hold for us (more on this later)—that constitutes a key point of continuity between novels and lives.

As novels, our lives can also be thought of as divisible into multiple chapters: growing up, raising children, being retired; or first marriage, first career, first time facing cancer. What is more, they can be seen as having multiple themes running through them. By this we mean not just the broad, universal themes that Birren has made central to his program of “guided autobiography” (Birren and Deutchman 1), such as family, finances, health, or career. We mean specific “life themes” (Sherman 141-72), as in recurring issues or questions peculiar to us alone and to our relationships and endeavors—themes that may only surface clearly in counselling or in some other mode of “big story” reflection.

In a similar vein, our lives as novels possess—as all novels do—a certain atmosphere, what McAdams calls “narrative tone” (“Narrating” 136). They reflect a distinct genre, whether tragedy or satire, romance or adventure—or given the subplots and chapters our life stories inevitably contain and the several characters that we play within them, some combination thereof. Overall, as novels, our lives reflect a distinctive “storying style” (Randall, *Stories We Are* 308-27). Each of us lives in our own little world: our own “storyworld” (Herman 569), with its own unique structure and dynamic. The storyworld each of us inhabits is thus as distinct in form and feel from that of the person next to us as a novel by Steinbeck is from by one by Hemingway or Drabble. “Each person’s

life,” writes psychotherapist William Bridges, “is a story that is telling itself in the living,” a key consequence of which being, he proposes, that “each of us resists change because a story is a self-coherent world with its own kind of immune system” (71). That our storyworlds might mediate their own “truth value” is a possibility worth noting here as well (Coleman 138).

Despite what Freeman calls the “deep continuity” between them (“Life” 236), lived novels differ from literary ones, of course, in the sense that we are ultimately inside of them: “We stand outside the narratives we read but not the lives we live” (Morson 20). Plus, we are “continually having to revise the plot,” says psychologist Donald Polkinghorne, “as new events are added to our lives” (150). The novels we are living (in) are thus improvisatory works at best. They are analogous to what Gary Morson, in his analysis of novels by Dostoyevsky and Dickens—works first published in serial form with “no possibility of altering earlier parts to make them fit with later ones”—describes as “processual” fiction (277). We never have the finished product in front of us with “all loose ends ... tied together” (8). Rather, we are forever “in the midst” (Kermode 8), moving back and forth in consciousness between a sense of our beginning and our ending and making it up as we go, a creative endeavour par excellence: What Catherine Bateson, in her thoughtful book *Composing A Life*, calls “an improvisatory art” (3). To the extent that our lives are analogous to novels, then, and to echo Bakhtin’s contention, they are novels-in-the-making. There is always material in our lives—things that happen to us, things we do—that it takes time, often a long time, to make sense of, to find meaning in, and to integrate into our identity overall. And even then, more meaning or different meaning can always be found, for the novels we are living can be “variously versioned and endlessly re-storied” (Randall, *Stories We Are* 280). They are notoriously “messy texts” (Denzin 225).

In his reflections on “the self and the coherence of life,” philosopher David Carr speaks to this quality of messiness and of being in-the-making

with his observation that “the unity of self . . . is not a pregiven condition but an achievement. Some of us,” he says, “succeed . . . better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it” (97). “Life,” he maintains, “is a constant effort, even a struggle, to maintain or restore narrative coherence” (91). What is more, it is an effort that we carry out in specific contexts. We do not compose the novels we are living in a vacuum but in an ever-changing web of larger stories still, those of the marriages and families, communities and institutions, cultures and creeds in which our stories are set. Within such settings, each of which will have its own “narrative environment” (Randall and McKim 50-57) and “forms of self-narrative” (Bruner 696), we never author our lives entirely by ourselves but amid an intricate assortment of co-authoring relationships—with parents, partners, colleagues, friends. Within these relationships, the boundaries between “my story” and “your story” are thus fuzzy at best, for our life-novels are always interwoven and our storyworlds continually intersect.

Considering the full scope of continuities and discontinuities between literature and life requires more space, of course, than is available to us here. In the meantime, surely the metaphor of lives as novels in the making is at least sufficiently alluring for us not to be surprised at how often novels serve as sources of insight and inspiration, to say nothing of movies, many of which have their beginnings in novels. In effect, they serve as “simulations” (Oatley 112) that assist us in making sense of our experiences in so-called real life. And those experiences themselves, separately and as a whole, assume a narrative shape (see Crites), a shape that is changing all the while—which is the point we need to look at now.

NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

For McAdams, life stories constitute the third and most significant level of personality, of what makes us uniquely us (*The Person* 3). The first level consists of the peculiar blend of inherited, more or less hard-wired traits (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion, openness, etc.) that make up the basic structure—the skeleton, if you will—of our personality. The

second level consists of our characteristic adaptation of these traits as we respond to the circumstances and relationships that are our lot over time, adaptations that comprise the flesh on the bones. Third is what could be considered the soul of our personality, namely the unique set of meanings that we make (and re-make) amid these circumstances and relationships, meanings we experience and express primarily by narrative means. In sum, personality is never a matter of traits alone but of the stories by which we understand our identity through time.

Building on the work of Erik Erikson, McAdams takes Erikson's concept of "identity" and insists bluntly that "*identity is a life story*" (*The Person* 643; author's emphasis). He defines a life story as "an internalized and evolving personal myth that functions to provide life with unity and purpose" (McAdams, "Narrating" 132). Of relevance for our thinking here, however, is McAdams's view of how this personal myth evolves in three broad stages. Before outlining these briefly, it needs noting though that McAdams is employing the term myth not in the sense of something made up or untrue but in the sense assumed by thinkers like Joseph Campbell or Rollo May, namely a "deep story" that "animate[s] our life and imbue[s] it with meaning" (Rigney 159).

First is the "pre-mythic" stage. This runs from infancy to late childhood and is a time when we are unwittingly "gathering material" (McAdams, "Narrating" 136-38) for what will eventually be drafted into our sense of identity as we grow in self-awareness. Second is the "mythic" stage. This begins in earnest in adolescence but continues through our mid-life years. During it, McAdams says, we are steadily "expanding the story" (140-43), the trajectory of which often hinges on key scenes or "branching points" (Birren and Deutchman 67-69), or on what McAdams calls "nuclear episodes" ("Narrating" 140) and others call "signature stories" (Kenyon and Randall, *Restorying* 46-49) or "self-defining memories" (Singer and Blagov 117). Third is the "post-mythic" stage. This coincides with late adulthood and brings with it "the subtle but inexorable need to redefine one's self, or more precisely, one's identity" (McAdams, "Narrating"

105), a need one writer refers to as the “philosophic homework” of later life (Schacter-Shalomi and Miller 124). It is in this post-mythic stage that the inner push to discern the shape and substance of our life story as a whole, to engage in big story narrative reflection, becomes most compelling, and it is here that the metaphor of life as novel becomes of crucial value. In sum, our movement through these stages renders our stories steadily more unique with age. It renders them more novel. As McAdams explains in an article with colleague Karen Hooker, aging “provides the clearest palette on which to understand personality, as lives become more divergent from one another over long periods of time” (Hooker and McAdams 64).

That McAdams’ “evolving personal myth” provides a sense of unity is important to stress in relation to the metaphor of lives as novels, or what could be called the *novelty* of our lives (Randall, *Stories We Are* 257-80). For this is what a novel is: a weaving together of subplots and storylines into a single, over-arching storyworld; a cohesion or a unity in the midst of multiplicity. It is a cohesion, we would add, that makes life as novel (albeit in the making) more apt an analogy, not just than life as story but than, say, life as anthology—anthology of short stories, for instance—even if the stories are all by the same author. While true that memories that figure in our sense of identity can sometimes seem like isolated incidents, scattered across time and space, what links them is the enduring, if ever-changing, sense of “I-ness” we experience at their heart. Moreover, it is the same cohesion we experience, or expect to experience, in reading a novel: the sense that the many episodes it consists of hang together, that this leads to that, and that “that” is just not one damned thing after another but a “cumulative structure of meaning” (Charmé 2); not mere sequence, but con-sequence. Granted, identifying evidence for this consequence can some days be a struggle, as Carr has reminded us, but it is a task—“the task of reconciliation” (Coleman 133)—to which later life beckons us in earnest. For now, though, it is on the idea of “evolving” that we want to focus, for with life stories, “things can always change” (McAdams, *Stories* 278).

As novels in the making, our lives are in no way static. “Re-storying” (Kenyon and Randall *Restorying Our Lives*), even “re-gene-ation” (Randall and McKim 234), is possible at any stage, for they are works-in-progress, messy as can be, that we are forever in the middle of, forever (if only slightly) revising the plot. Certainly, as McAdams has suggested, the plot tends to thicken throughout our adult years. More involvements and events, more attachments and achievements, more difficulties and discoveries, mean more episodes and subplots, more chapters and themes, more sides to our character(s) and more layers to our soul. By viewing our lives as novels we are inside of, then, we come to see that biographical aging is every bit as intricate as biological aging: That aspect of aging on which gerontologists have so far been disproportionately focussed, thereby obscuring elements of later life that are, arguably, of greatest interest to older adults themselves.

One key difference between the two types of aging is that, despite our efforts to extend *quantity* of life—through better diet and drugs, improved mental and physical fitness, and the like—there remains a limit (ca. 120 years) to how long we can keep living on the biological front. In terms of biographical development, however, or the *quality* of our life narrative, no such limit exists. While there is a maximum to how old we can get, there is none whatsoever to how old we can grow, regardless of (perhaps because of) the challenges life places in our path. Again, grounds for such a claim lie in the experience of reading fiction. Though we reach the end of the story, there is no end of meanings to be gleaned from it, no end of insights to keep pondering once the reading is completed. Meaning in literature, our sense of which typically intensifies as the end draws near, is ultimately indeterminate in nature. As novels in the making, our lives, too, are eminently open works, rife with “semantic indeterminacy” (Bakhtin 7). In Freeman’s phrase, they are “richly ambiguous texts to be interpreted and understood . . . whose meanings are inexhaustible . . . whose readings cannot ever yield a final closure” (*Rewriting* 184).

This idea of “reading” our lives, which we have looked into elsewhere in greater detail (Randall and McKim), is rooted in the conviction that the developmental tasks of later life are in many ways narrative tasks, inasmuch as they have to do with making meaning, narrative being our principal means of making it. Alluding to the “identity crisis” that, for Erikson, faces us in adolescence, but also to the identity-work that continues into the post-mythic stage, one source proposes that “the crisis of old age” is ultimately “a crisis of meaning” (Missine 113). Put another way, it is a crisis of (narrative) coherence: *Who am I and what is the meaning of my life, now that I’m retired, dependent, or alone?* Wrestling with such questions entails a brand of philosophic homework we have called “storywork” (Randall, “Storywork”).

With his research on the narrative complexity of identity development across adult years, McAdams has contributed to our understanding of how such storywork is carried out. Building on Erikson’s seventh and eighth stages in particular—generativity vs stagnation and ego integrity vs despair—he suggests that the development of our identity “should ideally move in the direction of *increasingly good narrative form*” (*The Person* 663; author’s emphasis). He defines such form in terms of six criteria. The first, not surprisingly, is *coherence*. In brief, this means that our story of ourselves should essentially hang together. Second is *credibility*: it may be fiction but it is not pure fantasy; it is rooted in and accountable to the actual facts of our existence. Third is *differentiation*: it has multiple subplots and levels, multiple “identity projects” and “possible selves” (Staudinger et al. 818). Fourth is *openness*: it is not static or closed but goes somewhere; it reaches out. Fifth is *generative integration*, which means it connects to and contributes to the larger stories of family, community, and society and in that way points beyond itself. Last is the criterion of *reconciliation*: it takes in the negatives as well as the positives of our lives, the downs along with the ups.

In relation to reconciliation, gerontologist Peter Coleman argues in an article entitled “Creating a Life Story: The Task of Reconciliation” that

integrative reminiscence—reminiscence in which remembering is aimed at assembling the pieces of our past (if you will, at pulling ourselves together)—is pivotal to adaptation in general in later life, and to identity development in particular. As Carr reminds us, though, the task is never complete. The drive to make sense is precisely that: a drive. It is no once and for all accomplishment, just as ego integrity is not an attainment in any total sort of way but an ongoing process—*integration*—that, ideally, we keep at. Freeman points out the paradoxical nature of this process, though, which is that development in a forward direction—including moral development—is dependent upon our looking backward over events that, at the time, we lacked the opportunity or detachment to contemplate sufficiently. It depends on hindsight, on “narrative reflection” (*Hindsight* 90). It depends on reading the texts that life has laid down inside of us, i.e., the texts of memory, not merely for the facts that underlie them but for the meanings and the learnings they convey. The key, to quote memoirist Patricia Hampl, is that “we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us” (33). As we engage in such listening, we stand to find “new meanings for old tales” (Chandler and Ray 76), meanings which can open us to fresh ways of experiencing ourselves and our world.

Just as we can harvest new insights from re-reading novels that moved us deeply in our younger years (see Lesser), so we can return to poignant or problematic episodes in our past and re-read the texts that we’ve composed around them in memory and imagination through the composite lens of the episodes we’ve experienced since, and the selves we’ve since become. In so doing, we can re-genre-ate the original experience from, for example, the horror it seemed at the time to a strange misadventure instead, or at least to something that, somehow, we needed to experience to prepare us for wider, wiser ways of being in the world. As put by Harry Berman, who advocates a “hermeneutical gerontology” (xxiv) and sees “self-stories [as] text-like entities” that are, “in effect, works of fiction” (173), “perhaps we thought our life was a

tragedy and all along, unbeknownst to us, it was a romance. Or perhaps we thought our life was almost over, at least in terms of the future holding anything new, and it turns out there was a lot more to it” (180).

If individual episodes in our lives can be re-storied in this manner, then so too can others, in which case we stand to experience “the thrill of narrative freedom” (Gullette 158). Like the best of literary novels, the novels we are living are thus eminently re-interpretable and immensely meaning-filled, their storyworlds deliciously open-ended: a quality that may well be a hallmark of wisdom. Based on her research with life-writing groups of older adults, Ruth Ray ventures, for example, that “a person is truly wise when she is able to see life as an evolving story and to create some distance between self and story by reflecting on it from multiple perspectives” (29). Armed with a brand of irony to which the process of aging itself may naturally incline us (see Randall, “Importance”), “wise people,” Ray adds, “watch themselves tell life stories, learn from others’ stories, and intervene in their own narrative processes to allow for change by admitting new stories and interpretations into their repertoire” (29).

That said, just as “it is not uncommon for large parts of a novel to go virtually unread” (Kermode 84), so too can much of the novel we are living go, if not unread altogether, then vastly under-read, one result being that the wisdom that it mediates goes unappreciated and unexpressed, leaving the lives of others and ourselves to that extent impoverished (see Randall and Kenyon, *Ordinary Wisdom*). What comes to mind is the author who commits years and years to working on a novel only for it to languish (if published at all) upon the bookstore shelf, unbought and unread. In short, the novels we are living are vulnerable to real challenges as we age, as outlined in what follows.

NARRATIVE CHALLENGES

In his book *Making Selves: How Our Lives Become Stories*, autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin, proposes that “identity disorders” are in several respects “narrative disorders” (124). Given the air of pathology

surrounding the word “disorders,” we prefer the term “challenges” instead—challenges, that is, to our story-making activity whereby the novels of our lives become stunted or stuck. Such an insight resonates with “narrative therapy” (White and Epston), an approach to counselling in which the problems for which people seek assistance are construed not as problems with the person per se but rather with the problem-saturated narratives through which the person is perceiving, and living, his or her life. As such, we see five broad challenges that, narratively speaking, later life can bring: narrative foreclosure, narrative loss, narrative impoverishment, narrative domination, and narrative dispossession. Though these challenges can be intertwined and though others can be cited, too—narrative disruption (Randall and McKim 194-96) and narrative entanglement (Hydén) as cases in point—we’ll shift in the section that ensues to how such challenges can be countered through the practice of narrative care.

Narrative foreclosure, as defined by Freeman, is “the premature conviction that one’s life story has effectively ended” (“When the Story’s Over” 83). No new chapters are deemed apt to open up and no new adventures or themes are likely to emerge. One’s life-novel lacks openness; its ending is a foregone conclusion. A person can fall prey to narrative foreclosure at any stage, of course. When you are sixteen and a love affair goes sour, it can feel like the end of the world; what is the point of going on? When you are diagnosed with cancer, however, or your activities of daily living are restricted by heart disease or arthritis, or you have over-identified with a particular role from which you are now retired, the feeling, at base, can be the same. Later life in general, that is, can make us vulnerable to the view that, though our life itself continues on, the *story* of our life is “almost over” (Berman 180). Accordingly, narrative foreclosure could conceivably be a factor in the mild to moderate depression that many older adults tend to suffer, whether foreclosure toward the future or toward the past, or both (Bohlmeijer et al.,

“Narrative Foreclosure”).

Related to narrative foreclosure is *narrative loss* (Baldwin and Estey). With the moving away or passing on of spouses, friends, or family, our narrative environment, and with it our whole storyworld, can narrow in dramatically, with fewer in our circle who know our story, or at least are sufficiently familiar with certain versions of it to remind us who we are and thereby buttress our narrative identity. The result is what psychologists Morten Hedelund and Andreas Nikolajsen call “narrative loneliness” (1), which in the extreme could issue in *narrative atrophy*. For lack of listening the story of our life dries up and, with it, so does our sense of self. In this vein, experiences such as illness and institutionalization are potentially de-storying, and the challenge of maintaining narrative coherence can seem so daunting that we quietly give up. A variation on narrative loss is *narrative lostness*: the feeling of having forgotten where our story was headed or where we were “in” it, the same feeling that we can have, for example, when reading a novel over a protracted period. Each time we pick the book up we realize that key details escape us and we have to return to previous scenes or chapters to pick up the thread of the plot.

Narrative impoverishment refers to our life-novel being not so much closed-in or unacknowledged as uni-dimensional, as lacking in differentiation. In such a condition, of course, aging itself can easily bring inasmuch as declines in mobility and activity can cause our storyworld to narrow. But it is a condition that also arises from sticking with tried and true ways of making sense of events in our lives, what one philosopher refers to as “interpretive parsimony” (Prado 9). Narrative impoverishment—which can also be called “narrative deprivation” (Fulford 20)—may have characterized our lives for years, of course, having been shaped in narrative environments (those of a particular family or marriage, culture or creed) that offered a dearth of “narrative resources” (Freeman, “When the Story’s Over” 81) for storying our lives in rich and open ways.

Akin to narrative impoverishment is *narrative domination*. This could

include our self-storying being dominated by another: for instance, a parent or spouse for whom we care yet in whose life-novel we are, at best, a supporting character. Or our self-story can be dominated by a specific experience that we simply can't get past, can't assimilate into our story as a whole, that we keep returning to through "obsessive reminiscence" (Wong 27). It can also be dominated by the master narrative of a particular profession or religion, by a restrictive yet uncritiqued script for our life as a whole, or by one main version of pivotal events to which we keep clinging, however delusional or dysfunctional that version may be. "That's my story and I'm stickin' to it!" we basically say. Or it can be dominated by a "shadow story" (de Medeiros, "Shadow Stories") of which we are not yet conscious, or ache to articulate yet lack the vocabulary or encouragement to do so. "There is no agony," writes Maya Angelou, summing up the matter, "like bearing an untold story inside of you" (1). Where older adults are concerned, of course, it is often additionally the case that they have internalized the narrative of decline that dominates society's sense of what aging itself involves. As Gullette points out powerfully, we are "aged by culture" (1).

Narrative dispossession is what we experience when others de-story us without our consent by assuming that we lack narrative agency over our lives (Baldwin 101). Well-intentioned though they may be, they foreclose on our stories *for* us by "storyotyping" us (Randall, *Stories We Are* 57) as "old" and to that extent less valued and less valid. Most obviously, this happens with persons with dementia who cannot communicate in ways the rest of us deem normal. Because they seem to have lost the thread of the plot entirely and have access only to "narrative debris" (McKendy 473), we foreclose *on* them, treating them as if they no longer have a story at all, and to that extent a self. What can be occurring, of course, is that we are subscribing to too narrow an understanding of what makes a "good story" (Gubrium), too restricted a sense of what "narrative agency" entails (Baldwin 107), and too linear a sense of what constitutes "narrative coherence" (see Hyvarinen et al.; Hydén).

Admittedly, narrative foreclosure, narrative loss, and the like can afflict us at any stage. Besides, narrative coherence is never fully achieved. Yet during later life especially, when for numerous reasons our storyworld can narrow, the inner resources that an evolving life-novel represents are all the more essential to possess, which makes *narrative care* all the more essential to receive.

NARRATIVE CARE

In her book *Learning to be Old*, Margaret Cruickshank reminds us of the social nature of personal narrative, of how life stories are inevitably co-authored creations, and of how “a recipient is needed to make the narrative coherent” (47). Put simply, narrative coherence is contingent on narrative care. In brief, narrative care means caring about—and for—the stories people hold about their lives, and helping them to tell their stories in ways that make them stronger (see Wingard and Lester). As such, there are several things it can involve:

- empowering people to keep the novels of their lives open and evolving, despite the losses and transitions that later life entails; to resume—or as the case may be, assume—greater agency for authoring, narrating, and reading their lives;
- assisting people to achieve a healthy sense of *open* closure, as opposed to *foreclosure*, on problematic episodes in their past, to arrive at a “coherent positive resolution” of such episodes (Pals 1082), and to weave them into the unfolding novel of their lives as a whole;
- inviting people to engage in “autobiographical learning” (Randall, “Storywork”), to discover how interesting and how novel their life stories really are, and to celebrate the legacy of wisdom—even truth—that is embedded in the texts through which they understand their identity;
- helping people to thicken up memories of episodes when they have dealt successfully with challenge or adversity, thus reminding them how resilient they really are (see Randall et al.);
- listening closely for the shadow stories that lie between the lines of

what people do or say and helping them expand their self-telling in ways that coax such stories to the light, where they can be reflected on in narrative environments that are respectful and inviting;

- cultivating “wisdom environments” (Randall and McKim 242-46) in which people can examine the novels of their lives and play with the multiple versions that can be woven around them, and the multiple meanings those versions can yield;
- providing a range of interventions that stimulate autobiographical reasoning and narrative reflection, yet honoring the stories of those whose autobiographical activity differs from the norm because of, say, aphasia or dementia (Baldwin; Hydén).

The array of purposes that narrative care can fill is matched by an array of narrative strategies through which it can be expressed. The concept of lives as novels offers an overarching framework for appreciating the role each strategy can play in thickening, extending, and opening our storyworlds. As touched upon already, such strategies include life review (see Steunenberg and Bohlmeijer) and integrative reminiscence (see Bohlmeijer, Kramer, Smit, Onrust, and Marwijk). Used with older adults in the grips of depression, these have been found to increase their sense of mastery and of meaning and to reduce their depressive symptoms overall. Engaging in close reading of our more self-defining memories or signature stories can be a fruitful activity too, yielding all manner of potential insights into who we are and still could be, and into how we story our lives overall, paving the way for re-genre-ation from, say, tragedy to adventure, as noted by Berman above (180). Guided autobiography needs citing here for certain, given the range of benefits (emotional, interpersonal, existential) to which participants in such programs attest: the new friendships they develop, the self-esteem they find enhanced, the renewal of energy they experience (see Birren and Deutchman). Similar benefits have been identified with “creative reminiscence” (Bohlmeijer, Valenkamp, Westerhof, Smit, and Cuijpers 302), a broad term that takes in the use of poetry, metaphor, music, and even dance (see Kivnick)—in short, the arts—to reconnect people with memories they have forgotten

or repressed but which can restore or revise their sense of who they are, aiding them in “re-remembering” their lives (Myerhoff 1). Moreover, it can awaken dimensions of themselves that they never before expressed, all in the service of enhancing their emotional well-being (see Cohen). Related to this, as de Medeiros (*Narrative Gerontology* 71-74) has convincingly shown, writing about poignant or painful episodes in our past by means of different genres (poetry, letter-writing, first person, second person) can also facilitate integrative reminiscence and open us to the several layers and meanings our memories possess. As one source has even argued, writing about such episodes can strengthen our immune system itself (see Pennebaker and Seagal).

Therapy in general—including narrative therapy, especially when tailored to older adults (see Osis and Stout)—is a powerful mode of narrative care, and thus of restorying older people’s lives. On this point, Nancy Kropf and Cindy Tandy provide an inspiring example of how the use of narrative therapy with a widow in her 80s, embedded in a problem-saturated story of herself as, essentially, a failure, helped her to shift to a more positive self-characterization as a survivor instead, thus lessening the depression she had been experiencing. An innovative initiative in Denmark by Hedelund and Nikolajsen, entitled *Fortæl for Livet* (tr. Telling Stories for Life), uses similar techniques to nudge isolated older adults out of the narrative loneliness and lostness they are otherwise experiencing and offer them a forum for sharing their stories with others, thus helping them to re-open possibly foreclosed narratives about their lives. Other effective interventions include “storytelling circles” (Pohlman 44) or simply stimulating conversation—indeed, a whole spectrum of interventions from lengthy to brief and intricate to simple that can aid us in exploring and examining the novels we are living. Included as well are things like scrapbooking and genealogy, which are ways of extending our storyworlds to take in the larger narratives of the family, clan, or culture in which we are rooted. In general, each strategy invites narrative activity that can nurture “good

strong stories” with which to understand and live our lives (Randall, “Importance of Being Ironic”).

We have three further points to make in connection with narrative care. First, the narrative challenges older adults face may be the function, in part, of narrative environments in which they have been living that are themselves impoverished or foreclosed. Alas, the narrative environments of all too many nursing homes can be depressingly thin. Estimates are that residents in some homes receive less than six minutes per day of interpersonal interaction of any sort—a recipe for narrative atrophy, if ever there were one. Yet by implementing the sorts of interventions outlined above, those environments stand to be thickened up significantly, thereby enabling residents’ narrative identities, which may have become unduly narrowed in, to be opened up and expanded.

Second, besides being effective in the different ways noted above, narrative care is not enormously expensive, compared with other treatments older adults may receive, such as tests or medications. A valuable project in this connection—one that would invite cooperation between qualitative and quantitative research paradigms—would be to measure such things as the sleep patterns, appetites, blood pressures, and overall well-being of nursing home residents before and after participating in a session of group reminiscence or receiving an hour of compassionate listening. It is our conviction that this would provide evidence that narrative interventions are not merely frills to implement “if there is time” but contribute in pivotal ways to improving residents’ emotional and physical health alike, and should be staffed and funded accordingly. Of course, many people working in the field of elder-care have been practicing narrative care instinctively all along, without needing a label to describe it. However, recognizing and formally classifying such an approach can lend legitimacy to what we may do as a matter of course, discouraging ourselves and others from trivializing it or taking it for granted, and inviting us to appreciate the attentiveness and artfulness that providing it entails.

Third, narrative care begins with *self*-care. How can we be agents of re-storying older people's lives into richer, thicker, more open narratives if we are oblivious to the richness, thickness, and openness of our own stories? For this reason, when conducting workshops on the importance of life stories with volunteers and staff who work with older adults in a range of contexts—acute care, long-term care, chaplaincy, or churches—it seems critical to engage people in reflecting on their own evolving novels as a prerequisite to appreciating the storyworlds of those they serve, as well as reflecting on actual novels themselves. Here, again, literary gerontology plays a vital role, for if it teaches us anything, it is that reading stories and novels about aging, or by aging authors, can bring us in closer touch with the emotional and existential intricacies of our own aging, too. In sum, narrative care begins at home.

CODA: FROM THEORY TO RESEARCH

What we have been proposing in this paper is that narrative development in later life be envisioned in terms of the metaphor of lives as novels in the making. Our rationale for doing so has two core components.

The first is that there seems to be something intrinsic to aging itself, certainly as argued by gerontologists like Cohen, Coleman, and Sherman, that drives us to seek coherence amid the mass of narrative material that constitutes our sense of who we are, and amid the several sides of ourselves and the several complexities and contradictions that make those selves up. While true that we can resist this drive, as many do, aging nonetheless compels us—narratively speaking—to pull ourselves together. And the concept of our lives as novels in the making, with an assortment of plotlines, characters, and themes in continual interaction, speaks to and inspires this “inner push” to integration (Cohen, *Mature Mind* 40)—again, to whatever degree we respond to it, whether we feel the need to review our lives or not (see Wink and Schiff), to engage in “big story narrative reflection” (Spector-Mersel 1) or not.

The second component is that the ways in which we age and change (auto)biographically are so subtle and so intricate that we need a theoretical framework that is subtle enough and intricate enough to accommodate them. A biomedical framework comes up short in this regard, since the inner dimensions of aging are hardly considered. The same can be said for a positivist-empiricist framework, which seeks where possible to quantify whatever phenomena are under investigation, once more sidestepping the finer nuances of human memory, emotion, and imagination. In contrast, a narrative framework, especially one that incorporates this notion of the novelty of our lives, has immense potential to thicken our understanding of the subjective side of aging, for reasons that we hope are now a little clearer. However, while the development of theoretical frameworks is certainly important, especially in a field like gerontology that has been described as “rich in data but poor in theory” (Birren and Bengston ix), research is required to determine if a given framework has merit. Having touched on the issue of practice in considering the concept of narrative care, how then might we undertake systematic research into the narrative complexity of people’s subjectivity in later life?

In his essay “Life as Narrative,” widely regarded as a seminal work, the late Jerome Bruner writes that he “cannot imagine a more important psychological research project than one that addresses itself to the ‘development of autobiography’—how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of life” (694f). We concur completely with Bruner’s proposition. If we hope to grasp the range of storying styles and storyworlds that characterize older people’s lives, the process of storying and restorying their identities over time, and the ways they cope with challenges to narrative coherence, then a longitudinal study is clearly in order—a primarily qualitative study, for example, built into an existing quantitative study, possibly, in which participants are invited at, say, two-to-three year intervals to recount the story of their lives in an open-ended manner.

Several fascinating questions could guide us. For instance, how do the stories that participants recount vary from one recounting to the next? What subplots, themes, and chapters stand out within each version; what is foregrounded, what is pushed into the background? How are key life events—e.g., from childhood or adolescence—narrated and interpreted differently? What genre (tragedy, adventure) or narrative tone (pessimism, optimism) is uppermost? What personal myth seems to permeate each telling, and how do tellers characterize themselves from one stage to another—as hero, for example, or victim? Also, are later tellings thicker than earlier ones? If so, in what ways and why? Do they reflect more (or less) sophisticated forms of “autobiographical reasoning” (Habermas 1), a greater (or lesser) degree of narrative agency, or of narrative coherence? Is there a correspondence, one way or the other, in terms of measures of resilience or depression or meaning-in-life, and in terms of such variables as education level, literacy level, social network, and gender? Do women, for instance, have thicker, more nuanced life novels than men? If so, how might this contribute to their greater longevity overall? Also, bearing in mind that the act of observation inevitably affects the observed, to what extent do the periodic interviews, in and of themselves, push participants to engage in integrative reminiscence or in big-story narrative reflection, something that, otherwise, they might engage in very little, if at all?

The list of questions could go on. Among them would be what sorts of stories or movies are participants drawn to at different stages in their lives? Insofar as movies “move” us, how might such information shed light on participants’ emotional development across the lifespan, given that emotions invariably possess a narrative dimension (see Singer; Baena; Randall and Kenyon 55-58)? Also, what if we incorporated a writing component into the study; how might told versions of participants’ lives differ from written ones? If we incorporated a cross-sectional component as well, weaving in new cohorts of participants every two to three years, we could compare the self-storying styles of older participants with those

of younger ones, perhaps discovering in the process that entirely new genres of narrative identity are evident with those whose ways of making sense of themselves have been deeply shaped by a digital age. And all of this says nothing of the impact of audience on what participants recount, of how different listeners elicit different versions, and of how the listening style of the interviewer (who may differ from one interview to the next and will have their own life novel through which they filter what they hear) affects the storying style of the interviewee (see Randall, Prior, and Skarborn).

However rich the findings in which such a study could result, like any longitudinal project, it could, of course, be costly to sustain. But that should not deter us. If longitudinal studies of the quantitative kind can secure funding, then why not studies of the narratives by which we live, given the centrality of those narratives to our identities, our emotions, and our overall well-being?

This returns us to the study that we mentioned near the start, which is exploring the links between people's levels of resilience and the sorts of stories that they tell about their lives (see Randall et al.). It also explores the corollary and very practical possibility that resilience can be enhanced by some mode of narrative care, such as the life-writing workshops referred to above. Briefly described, our initial study entailed recruiting 115+ people over 65 and having them complete a standardized scale of resilience (Connor and Davidson). From these, we chose 15 participants each of the top scorers (95 to 100 out of 100), the low scorers (30 to 50 out of 100), and those in between—for a total of 45—to interview in an open-ended manner about their lives as a whole, their experiences of adversity, and their views on the future.

Though we are still analyzing our data, a trend has begun to emerge. Low scorers on the scale tend to recount comparatively thin narratives about their lives. High scorers, on the other hand, tell much thicker ones—lots of anecdotes, lots of detail and dialogue (“he said, I said”), lots of evidence of autobiographical reasoning and of the ability to

story negative events in positive ways (“I learned from that; it made me a better person”). High scorers also tend to have a healthier sense of narrative agency: the sense that, as some of them actually worded it, “I always wanted to write about my life” or “I could write a book.” Indeed, one woman—aged eighty-eight, who scored 100 out of 100 and described a life of multiple losses (first husband killed in WWII, son paralyzed in a violent crime and dead at forty-four, open heart surgery, etc.)—made this enthusiastic assertion: “I’m hoping to write a book; it would be a trilogy, plus.” Clearly, she has had abundant challenges in her life, narrative challenges included—challenges at the time, no doubt, to her sense of identity, coherence, and meaning. But her obvious pride in the story she has made of her life to date—plus her eagerness to put it into words and share it for the benefit of others (grandkids, for example)—testifies to the perspective we have been proposing in this paper. As do these words by Florida Scott-Maxwell from her book, *The Measure of My Days*, written in her eighties and hailed as “a canonical text in the literature of aging” (Waxman 261): “When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time,” Scott-Maxwell writes, “you are fierce with reality. When at last age has assembled you together, will it not be easy to let it all go, lived, balanced, over?” (42).

There is much work to be done, of course, in fleshing out a novel perspective on narrative development in later life: specifically, on the impulse to pull ourselves together and, as Scott-Maxwell puts it, to possess all that we have been and done. Carrying out that work calls for narrative gerontologists to cooperate more closely than they have so far with literary gerontologists on the one hand and critical gerontologists on the other (see Zeilig), bearing in mind the latter’s interest in the larger narratives—e.g., the narrative of decline—that often infiltrate the stories by which we experience our aging selves. Above all, that cooperation must include deeper dialog with literary theorists themselves, given the complex matters that are at issue when working with such foundational concepts as “author,” “character,” “point of view,” and “plot,” to name

just a few; or when weighing various theories of the novel other than Bakhtin's, or considering how the different I-positions we occupy toward our lives (narrator, protagonist, reader) interact and intersect. Included, for certain, should be experts in autobiographical narrative overall, whether written or oral (see Eakin; Smith and Watson); plus experts in the functions of reminiscence, especially the narrative dimensions thereof (Cappelliez and Webster; Bohlmeijer and Westerhof).

As we say, there is much ahead to think about. The view we have put forward in this paper concerning lives as novels in the making, though it may raise as many issues as it resolves, is thus intended as an introduction only. And the spirit in which we offer it is ultimately a playful one. It is the spirit of . . . let's try this on for size. Let's see what insights it stirs up, what questions it spawns, what puzzles it brings to the fore concerning "the poetics of growing old" (Randall and McKim). In the end, we are journeying in the realm of metaphor, and metaphors—the best ones anyway—are endlessly suggestive. As we entertain more literary understandings of the intricacies of aging, no end of enticing possibilities are sure to open up.

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