

Introduction

Age(ing)¹ is a concept familiar to everyone. We all hope to age through the life-course and to ultimately grow ‘old.’² Moreover, we see age(ing) everywhere: in our friends, neighbors, parents, and in ourselves. Because of this omnipresence of age(ing) in our everyday lives, the concept itself, the way it is constructed and perceived, and the way it affects individuals as they are aging through the life-course often appear to be trivial. This is not, as I argue throughout this study, because age(ing) is insignificant to an individual’s life, but because it has been normalized through its omnipresence.³ Aging, allegedly, is just something that happens and therefore nothing to consider more closely. In order to disrupt the supposed normalcy of age(ing), this book discusses extraordinary forms of ageing, that is, examples of people whose aging processes are outside an expected aging norm and therefore make the mechanisms behind age(ing) visible.

Fictional stories, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” can provide narratives that upset the imagined normative life-course by presenting alternative models of age(ing). Fitzgerald’s short story deals with the life of a person who is born as an ‘old’ man, ages backward throughout his life-course, and finally dies as a baby. Besides criticizing the need to conform to an expected norm when it comes to the aging process—although an ‘old’ man, Benjamin Button is dressed in children’s clothing and expected to act in a way that would be expected from a child—the story presents a discourse of age(ing) at the intersection of the cultural, social, and biological.⁴ In terms of aging as a cultural process,

- 1 I use this form of notation when I am speaking about the aging process as a whole, as well as age as a construct. Age(ing) is hence a convenient short form of the expression ‘age and aging.’
- 2 I consider concepts of ‘old’ and ‘young’ to be arbitrary imaginaries and therefore use the terms in quotation marks.
- 3 The concept of age being a naturalized and therefore largely invisible concept goes back to Charyl Laz. The claim that age needs to be made visible through certain “wake-up” calls is connected to Mita Bannerjee and Norbert Paul. Both arguments and their connection to one-another, as well as to the topics of this book will be further elaborated on in chapter 1.
- 4 Throughout this book, I keep referring to the intersection of the cultural, social, and biological. I define the cultural aspect of age(ing) as the imaginaries established through language,

Fitzgerald's story shows that there are imaginaries of the life-course that are culturally constructed. Mr. Button announces that his son Benjamin should wear a blanket because "[b]abies always have blankets" (163). Apparently, he is not concerned about the actual needs of his child but about the cultural construct of what a baby should be like. Hence, these constructions lead to expectations according to the imaginaries of the life-course established in a certain culture. The narrative of Benjamin Button suggests that if these expectations are not met, the individual becomes a social outcast, thus showing that the cultural and the social are inextricably linked. Mr. Button is concerned about his reputation and about his social role when he realizes that his newborn son looks like a septuagenarian, worrying about "[w]hat will people say" (163). In the case of Benjamin Button, the social roles attached to a life stage and the cultural imaginaries that go along with them are juxtaposed with the biology of a body aging in reverse. Thereby the story indicates that while there is a biological reality to any aging process, this reality may stand in stark contrast to cultural and social aging norms.⁵ Ultimately, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" suggests that the physical aging process, concerning both body and mind, may be an important factor in the overall construct of age but that it is largely influenced by cultural images and social expectations, as well.

Connected to these cultural and social expectations, Margaret Morganroth Gullette claims in her monograph of the same title, that we are "aged by culture," meaning that more than an aging body, the cultural imaginaries that are connected to it, define the way we age. Hereby, Gullette compares the aging process to other imagined categories of difference as she argues that "[i]n age, as in gendered and racialized constructs, relations of difference depend on the dim of representations, unseen internalizations, unthinking practice, economic structures of dominance and subordination" (*Aged by Culture* 27). While age is, according to Gullette, a cultural construct, its construction does not happen consciously but is the result of internalized processes that remain mostly invisible in everyday life. This cultural imaginary, I argue, is integral in defining an individual's role within society. Fitzgerald's fictional account of the aging process works to question age(ing) and the life-course alongside the normative expectations attached to them. Consequently, the story

media representations, and the narratives discussed. The biological encompasses the physical and medical aspects of age(ing), that is, all those aspects related to the aging body. The social strictly refers to an individual's role within society. While this position is highly influenced by the cultural and the biological, I understand social roles as another factor in the construction of age. Consequently, I argue that the social role of an individual influences the way the aging process is culturally perceived as well as the effects the aging body has on the perception of a person's age. Although I refer to these concepts separately, I am aware that they are often inextricably linked and not clearly distinguishable from one-another.

5 For detailed elaborations on the connections of narratives and the body, cf. Banerjee *Biologische Geisteswissenschaften*.

questions the defining power this normative imaginary of age(ing) has over life itself. By breaking free from the expected life-course, the narrative presents an alternative storyline of a life lived. Thereby it disrupts the assumption that people at a specific stage in life automatically conduct themselves a certain way and instead suggests that there needs to be a more flexible understanding of the life-course. Moreover, the story illustrates that it is not only the body that has the power to determine the way we perceive age(ing), rather, accompanying social structures and cultural imaginaries are decisive as well. By disrupting the process of aging which, in its normativity, usually remains largely unnoticed, the story presents it as the main focal point for the reader. This disruption of normativity makes the aging process visible, allowing for observation beyond the expected.

While “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” invites readers to engage critically with normative assumptions of age(ing) in terms of the interplay between biological processes, cultural imaginaries, and social roles, today’s media representations, especially of ‘old’ age, appear to be much less nuanced. Especially prominent is a tension between the assumption that “aging equals decline” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 7)—painting a rather negative picture of isolation and physical decay in ‘old’ age while, at the same time, idolizing being ‘young’⁶ as good and positive. The positive connotation of being ‘young’ leads to a general desire to remain within this age category as long as possible, inspiring an imaginary of “successful aging,”⁷ a concept discussed by John Rowe and Robert Kahn in their study of the same title. The concept of successful aging considers those individuals a success who have maintained a physically fit body throughout their lives and remain active in ‘old’ age (Rowe and Kahn 38). Both representations of ‘old’ age—decline and successful aging—are, at the same time, result and cause for the cultural imaginary of the age(ing) process as a conglomerate of binary structures: ‘young’ and ‘old,’ progress and decline, successful and unsuccessful.

Fictional stories like “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” offer the unique possibility to turn normative structures of age(ing) on their head, to imagine scenarios that break with these binaries, and to negotiate alternative cultural images of the life-course. At the same time, these imagined stories fall short of capturing lived experience as they portray a speculative aging process, far away from the biological processes of the world. In that connection, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith

6 With the arbitrariness of the concept of being ‘young’ in mind, I would like to nevertheless specify the terminology. When I refer to a ‘young’ age, I refer to the time in a life that is, in western cultures, associated with beauty, fitness, economic strength, and health. Therefore, the term in itself is very broadly applicable from the time between early adulthood to early midlife, which are again concepts that are impossible to clearly define.

7 What Rowe and Kahn term successful aging is also often referred to as positive or active aging. I will use these terms synonymously.

argue that a component of ‘reality’ may give more weight to a narrative (1) and that “[t]he desire for personal stories, often telling of individualist triumph over adversity, of the ‘little person’ achieving fame, of people struggling to survive illness, catastrophe, or violence, seems insatiable in the West” (25). While criticizing the sensationalism inherent to personal stories, as well as the portrayal of individual struggle instead of broader communal issues, the scholars also advocate for the need of life narratives in addition to fictional accounts, for conveying meaningful stories that encourage the audience to change their perspective on the topics presented. Schaffer and Smith explain that narrated lives may “issue an ethical call . . . for institutions, communities, and individuals to respond to the story; to recognize the humanity of the teller and justice of the claim” (3). Live narratives, presented as ‘real’ human stories, according to Schaffer and Smith, implicitly attempt to have their audience react to the story and rethink ethical issues or issues of justice that occur within these narratives. A sense of ‘reality’ within life narrative thus leads to a pondering of the presented stories in a way that directly connects the story to the experience of the reader.

Contrastingly, fictional stories such as “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” manage to disrupt normative assumptions about the aging process by presenting extraordinary events that cannot be ‘true.’ This disruption moves the core message away from the reader’s own experience who is aware that aging backward is highly unlikely, if not impossible. Life writing, on the other hand, is presented with the opposite problem: Life narratives are directly tied to lived experience and are therefore limited in their scope. In other words, there is no life narrative of aging backward because the phenomenon does not exist. In that connection, life narratives are bound to a code of ethics which, according to Paul Eakin includes that “[w]hen life writers fail to tell the truth, then, they do more than violate a literary convention governing nonfiction as a genre; they disobey a moral imperative” (2-3). Having to obey to the moral imperative of telling the ‘truth’—or whatever a person regards as their truth at a certain point in time—restricts life narratives from being speculative. This may lead to an inability to disrupt normative expectations of age(ing) in life writing, as age(ing) is often believed to happen automatically on the sidelines and is therefore considered normal. In that connection, Gullette calls for “critical age autobiography” (“From Life Storytelling” 103), aiming to focus on an individual’s process of being ‘aged by culture,’ a process which establishes what she calls “life-course imaginaries” (102). Gullette advocates for a more distinct reading of age(ing) within life narratives. While I aim to provide these age conscious readings throughout this study, I furthermore aim at discussing narratives that upset the age(ing) norm, making, as I will argue throughout this book, age(ing) as a process and a construct more visible to the audience. My aim is thus to bring together the power of fiction in the sense that fictional texts can tell extraordinary stories and disrupt expected norms through speculation and the power of life narratives

assuming that their negotiation of lived experience and sense of ‘reality’ present indications on age(ing), ethics, and the human life-course, speaking directly to the audience’s own ‘realities.’ I therefore look at extraordinary cases of age(ing)—cases that appear almost fictional to the audience—in life narratives, arguing that the unexpected life-courses presented have the power to disrupt ‘life-course imaginaries’ while at the same time negotiating the lived experience that goes along with this disruption.

This study sets out to investigate narratives that, on the one hand, disrupt the normative and make age(ing) visible and, on the other hand, fall into the category of life narrative and thus cater to Western society’s desire for stories of lived experience. I generally regard this ‘insatiable desire’ as highly critical, for it encourages the thirst for sensationalist stories, ultimately turning their subjects into objects of mere entertainment for the masses. Yet, an analysis of these stories offers the singular possibility of shedding light on the way society looks at certain, typically excluded topics, in this case extraordinary forms of aging. I am therefore interested in two extraordinary forms of age(ing): those individuals who live exceptionally long and those whose aging process is accelerated. In the course of this study, I will look at life narratives of centenarians and children with progeria, exploring how these stories of extraordinary age(ing), may disrupt normative assumptions, make visible cultural structures that influence age(ing) and, ultimately, how they may provide a more nuanced imaginary of life, care, and age(ing) at the intersection of the cultural, social, and biological. Besides providing narratives that counter normative expectations, both forms of age(ing) present to be extremely sellable. In that connection, this study goes beyond looking at the cultural imaginary of age(ing) within these narratives and also investigates how this imaginary is formed through the means of production, narrative structures, and the people involved in telling the stories.

Centenarians, considered “paragons of positive aging” (Robine and Vaupel x), seem to present a counter narrative to imaginaries of decay and decline. By framing exceptionally ‘old’ age as an achievement, narratives about and by centenarians focus on ability rather than decline, establishing centenarians as beacons of health and physical fitness. Centenarians go beyond what is culturally expected in terms of their aging process simply because they live extraordinarily long. At the same time, narratives dealing with centenarians always appear close to the pitfall of reinforcing a successful aging paradigm, as they promote an aging process that goes beyond what Rowe and Kahn call “usual aging” which is defined as being “on the borderline of disease” (53). The term and accompanying paradigm of successful aging is thus entrenched with notions of neoliberal societies that make their members responsible for their own health status. If centenarian narratives tie into this paradigm, they are also part of the establishment of a new cultural normal where healthy and independent ‘old’ age is imagined to be the imperative. And yet, living

to 100 is not considered normal at all, as, despite ever growing numbers of centenarians, most people do not reach this imaginary threshold. It is this intersection of a new normal and the extraordinary that makes looking at centenarian narratives so fruitful: How are age(ing), loss, (dis)ability, in(ter)dependence, care, and individuality portrayed at this intersection? How does deviating from a supposed norm influence the way age(ing) is negotiated socially, culturally, and biologically?

Children with progeria, at first glance, seem to present a completely different basis of negotiation. Yet, despite the initially expected fundamental divergence between the two, centenarians and children with progeria are connected by the extraordinary nature of their aging processes. Progeria is a medical condition that lets parts of the human body age about seven times faster than that of a normative ager. Ray Kreinekamp and Susana Gonzalo elaborate that progeria “does not totally recapitulate normal aging [but] it does harbor many similarities to the normal aging process, with patients also developing cardiovascular disease, alopecia, bone and joint abnormalities, and adipose changes” (1). This biological process leads to an ever-present connection between progeria and the aged body. In narratives dealing with progeria, the biological condition of the body challenges the cultural construction of age and, at the same time, questions binaries of ‘old’ and ‘young.’ While these children are considered to age according to normative expectations in terms of their minds, their bodies make their aging processes deviate from this norm. Closer inspection reveals that, although they arrive there from different roads, centenarians and children with progeria are situated at the same intersections between the biological, social, and cultural, as well as the normative and the non-normative.

As Schaffer and Smith suggest, the interest in life narratives is prominent in Western cultures in general. I assume throughout this book that there is not only a common interest in this genre amongst these cultures but that there is also a common understanding about general imaginaries of the aging process. Platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter* make it easily possible to share stories and knowledge across national borders. Popular culture is largely influenced by Hollywood and other U.S. American entertainment formats, transgressing national boundaries, broadcasting all kinds of images, including those of age(ing), into the world. Additionally, North America and Europe share certain neoliberal and meritocratic tendencies, measuring the worth of a person according to their contribution to society and therefore framing an ever-growing population of ‘old’ people as a problem for social and economic structures (Macnicol 2). These commonalities are not only apparent in media representations of age(ing) but also in the scholarship thereof, as for example fundamental U.S. American theories of cultural aging established by Gullette are applied to the aging experiences of other Western cultures. Consequently, the two major research organizations in Europe—the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS)—and North America—the North American

Network in Aging Studies (NANAS)—have traditionally organized joint conferences and research collaborations. In their mission statement ENAS promises to “facilitate[] sustainable international and multi-disciplinary collaboration among all researchers interested in the study of cultural aging” (“Mission”), thereby connecting scholars across national borders. This study echoes this aim to provide an international approach and engages with narratives from the United States, Canada, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, bearing in mind national and cultural differences but focusing on a shared development of a discourse surrounding extraordinary forms of age(ing).

This book is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the theoretical framework of the discussion of extraordinary forms of age(ing) and provides an overview of the fields of aging studies and life writing research. Furthermore, it highlights the connections between narratives of centenarians and children with progeria in order to set the analytical framework for their discussion.

The second part is dedicated to narratives of centenarians. It consists of three chapters and analyzes different forms of life narratives in terms of their representation of the age(ing) process and their portrayal of extraordinary ‘old’ age. The focus here is placed on the way cultural imaginaries of age(ing) are disrupted or reinforced within these narratives through the portrayal of exceptionally long and exceptionally healthy lives.

The third part then focuses on children with progeria. Also consisting of three narratives, this part explores how the imaginary of age(ing) is disrupted through the premature aging disease and by the juxtaposition of the biological with social expectations and cultural imaginaries.

