



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging)

## Reading ageism in “geezer and grump lit”: Responses to *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83, ¼*

Aagje Swinnen<sup>a,b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Center for Gender and Diversity, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, the Netherlands<sup>b</sup> University of Humanistic Studies, Box 797, 3500 AT Utrecht, the Netherlands

### Literary gerontology and the rise of “geezer and grump lit”

The new millennium has come with an increase in novels that tailor to book lovers who enjoy reading about greying protagonists and late-life themes, varying from new romance and adventure to end-of-life care. Since the mid 2000s, book reviewers, literary agents, and publishers have tried to come up with captivating labels for this particular trend in fiction. In 2007, Maria L. La Ganga was one of the first to introduce the term “geezer lit” to refer to literature in which older characters are agents of their own lives and still have a lot to offer. In her view, these books present an alternative to the stereotyping of aging as a gloomy period of decline and enable baby boomers to find a sense of recognition in the books that they consume. Around 2018, the label “grump lit” emerged to refer to “books about grumpy old men and women, who usually turn out to have hearts of gold” (Manning, 2018). Examples of the combined category of “geezer and grump lit” include *The 100-Year-Old-Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2009) by Jonas Jonasson, *A Man Called Ove* (2012) by Fredrik Backman, and *The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper* (2016) by Phaedra Patrick. What really seems characteristic of “geezer and grump lit” is that many examples have turned into international bestsellers that reach large audiences and are adapted to the screen. Given the success of these narratives, the question arises why literary gerontologists have paid so little attention to them.

Since its early beginnings in the 1970s, literary gerontology has emphasized the value of studying literature to understand the many different realities and experiences of aging (Wyatt-Brown, 1990). Literary scholars' expertise in hermeneutics and their keen eye for the cultural meanings of aging have made them particularly suited for exchange with cultural and humanistic gerontologists in particular (Cole & Ray, 2010; Twigg & Martin, 2015). Many literary gerontologists have argued that fiction offers us a unique insight into the lives of older characters and through its dialogic nature facilitates change in readers and the culture at large (Swinnen, Port, & Lipscomb, 2017). As Sarah Falcus puts it, “[i]t is the ability to accommodate and even thrive on contradiction, incompleteness and possibility that makes literature such a valuable area of study for gerontology” (Falcus, 2015, p. 53). The

bestsellers mentioned above seem a different type of literary practice in aesthetic form, dissemination, and consumption (Sullivan & Blanch, 2011) than the literature referred to by Falcus. This is part of the reason why “geezer and grump lit” usually falls beyond the scope of literary gerontology which agenda is largely indebted to the priority of the humanities to embrace complex stories in the margins and recognize voices that have been ignored or silenced (Farr & Perrin, 2016). Such stories and voices are not typically associated with popular fiction. Indeed, few literary gerontologists (e.g., Domínguez-Rué, 2012; Hartung, 2005) have focused on popular genres, not in the least because of their presumed conservatism and stereotypical portrayals of older characters.

The phenomenon of “geezer and grump lit” is part of middle-brow literature, a specific public-oriented literary practice, as it contains at least six of its characteristics described by Driscoll (2014). Middle-brow literature specifically addresses middle class. It is commercial in that sophisticated marketing techniques are applied to increase its accessibility and, consequently, its sales. Middle-brow literature builds on communities in which writers, publishers, and consumers participate and are co-dependent. New media formats, such as online platforms, cater to these communities. Middle-brow literature's earnest interest in social issues reflects concerns of its time. Yet, it does not aim to perplex the reader into new insights. Rather, middle-brow literature is emotional in the sense that it attempts to leave readers satisfied with their own lives. As such, it opposes an academic stance and rather presents itself as recreational. According to Erica Van Boven, the middle-brow bestseller is a rich source of norms, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and values that are deeply ingrained into society and for that reason largely remain unquestioned (Boven, 2015, p. 19). Despite the fact that middle-brow literature is status-quo oriented, literary scholars increasingly argue that examining it can improve our understanding of shifts in cultural attitudes and beliefs as well as what binds subjects to normative values (Farr & Perrin, 2016). Against this background, I will focus on a prominent Dutch example of “geezer and grump lit” that has conquered the world, namely *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83 ¼* (Groen, 2016). The aim of this article is to analyze how this example of “geezer and grump lit” resonates with readers and to demonstrate the relevance of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [a.swinnen@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:a.swinnen@maastrichtuniversity.nl).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2019.100794>

Received 5 April 2019; Received in revised form 28 June 2019; Accepted 28 June 2019

Available online 05 July 2019

0890-4065/ © 2019 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

the study of this particular middle-brow genre for literary gerontology.

### Introducing the case study and methodological approach

*The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen*, 83 ¼ (first published in 2014 and henceforth referred to as *The Secret Diary*) is a fictitious diary in which the older protagonist describes his experiences in a retirement home in Amsterdam-Noord where he founds the Old But Not Dead Club (in Dutch: *Oud-maar-niet-dood* or *Omanido*) together with six of his co-residents. It has thrice been in the top 5 of bestselling books in the Netherlands ([www.cpnb.nl](http://www.cpnb.nl)) and received the NS Audience Award ([www.nspublieksprijs.nl](http://www.nspublieksprijs.nl)), which turned it into book of the year 2016 – a success it repeated in 2018 with the novel's successor, *On the Bright Side: The New Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen*, 85 (Groen, 2018). Today, the first diary has been translated in over 35 languages, which is exceptional for a Dutch novel. Furthermore, the first television adaptation of the book in 2017 drew an audience of 2.4 million on average and won the Dutch Golden Calf Grand Prize for best TV drama series in 2018 (the series was nominated for the Prix Europa 2018 as well). Bos Theatre Productions adapted the book for the stage. The protagonist Hendrik Groen has his own Facebook page and drawn portrait which serves as a logo and is included in the entire merchandize. The clever marketing through the use of new media and the success of all of the adaptations confirm some of the features of middle-brow literature listed in the previous section and have, indeed, successfully promoted the book to potential readers.

Yet, by far the smartest way to assure the long-term investment of the audience in the book is the mystery surrounding its writer and the use of the heteronym Hendrik Groen. When *The Secret Diary* came out, it seemed as if the protagonist coincided with the author who wished to remain anonymous. For months, reviewers speculated about the identity of the author, in particular the author's writing experience, gender, and age. None of them believed that *The Secret Diary* was the literary debut of an eighty something “real” resident of a retirement home. Two years after the book's appearance, two newspapers (Jaeger & Rosenberg, 2016; Kraak, 2016) disclosed Peter de Smet, a 61-year old librarian from Amsterdam-Noord, as the author. This has never been confirmed by either author or publisher. Because the veil is never truly lifted with regard to the diary's authorship, readers still can enjoy the illusion that Hendrik Groen is the whistleblower within the retirement home who refuses to come out for reasons of safety (he is to a certain extent dependent on the care he criticizes) and privacy (he feels embarrassed about his age-related frailties). The heteronym gives the novel the appeal of authenticity that readers may need to indulge in Groen's narration of his and other older people's experiences in a residential setting.

This article offers two readings of *The Secret Diary* and, as such, is a contribution to reader-response criticism. The first one is a resistant reading within literary gerontology. Resistant reading is an approach to the interpretation of literary texts developed within feminist literary criticism (Fetterley, 1977). A resistant reader, as opposed to an assenting reader, reads a text “against itself.” Feminist literary critics especially push back against the male, white, and heteronormative point of view in literature predominant in our cultural context. Literary gerontologists, most of whom have a background in feminist literary criticism, argue that the category of “youthful” is also characteristic of this default point of view and, as such, requires scrutiny. Since middle-brow fiction, of which *The Secret Diary* is an example, is understood to disseminate conservative values, resistant reading or reading against the grain is a reading technique that serves the analysis of the workings of age ideologies and their intersections with gender and sexuality within the text well.

We know that *The Secret Diary* has been consumed by many readers. But what does this actually say about their interpretation of the novel and the extent to which it resonates with them? To begin answering this question, my resistant reading will be combined with an examination of

**Table 1**  
Participants.

Alias <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Age in 2017	Occupation
Winterfall	Male	61	Many jobs that required manual rather than intellectual labor
Elsbe	Female	68	Manager city district
Cunera	Female	Almost 69	Housewife (and art and cultural history teacher for a brief period of time)
Vlam	Female	69	Librarian
Simone	Female	69	Organizational psychologist, director of a commercial training agency
Vosje	Female	74	Language teacher, poet
Aspirant	Male	77	Factory director, writer
Nono	Female	82	Psychologist/psychotherapist

<sup>a</sup> Aliases were chosen by the participants themselves.

the reading experiences of *The Secret Diary* by a reading and writing club of people over 60 that ran throughout 2017. It involved eight participants (Table 1) recruited through the Vlam, a local literary association. For this particular approach, I was inspired by the “Fiction and Cultural Mediation of Ageing” project (Brunel University) that aimed to “explore fiction's capacity to catalyze individual and collective reflection on the changing dynamics of contemporary age culture” (Morrison, 2013, p. 6). The project showed that participants revisited the categories of the third and fourth age by giving accounts of “‘good’ ageing that incorporate infirmity and indicate how the richness of life may persist into fourth age” (Hubble & Tew, 2013, Kindle loc 1524). My data on the reading and writing club activities consist of questionnaires that the participants filled in at the beginning and end of the collaboration, reading diaries, focus group interviews (that replaced the usually unstructured book club meetings), and creative writing exercises. The latter included two options (yet, participants were free to write whatever they wanted): 1. Imagine being a member of the Old But Not Dead Club. What trip would you organize and why? 2. Suppose that you, as one of Groen's co-residents, are excluded from the activities organized by the Old But Not Dead Club. Ventilate your feelings and thoughts. Prior to each focus group interview, participants were instructed that compromise or agreement were not the aim of the meeting, to avoid the consensus effect (Clarke & Nolan, 2014, p. 129). I did not participate as a reader in the focus group interview but asked open questions (e.g., who is the main character of the novel and what do you make of the ending?) and moderated the discussion. For the analysis of the range of data, I combined a thematic and a close reading approach.

### The dynamics of ageism and its intersections with other identity categories

To examine the hidden workings of age ideologies in *The Secret Diary*, it is important to acknowledge the body of literature that has investigated age-based exclusionary practices. This section on ageism will serve as a theoretical framework for an interpretation of *The Secret Diary* “against itself” and of the reception of the novel by the reading and writing club.

In 1969, Robert Butler coined the term “ageism” to refer to “a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin color and gender” (Butler, 1995, pp. 22–3). Since then, the concept has been developed and fine-tuned continuously. The comparison between ageism, racism, and sexism in Butler's definition still makes sense when trying to understand the power mechanisms that underlie the “othering” of persons on the basis of their chronological age. The unceasingly stereotyping of older people as lonely, depressed, incompetent, disengaged, asexual, sick, senile, etc. perpetuates a hierarchical young/old binary. Since the resources and opportunities of the privileged age class of the young depend on the discrimination of “the

older other,” ageism is to be understood relationally (Bytheway & Johnson, 1990; Calasanti & King, 2015). This is not to say that discrimination against younger persons does not exist. Scholars have argued that there is a parallel between the stereotyping and oppression of children and older people (Bytheway & Johnson, 1990; Loretto, Duncan, & White, 2000).

There is one way in which the comparison between ageism, sexism, and racism, falls short: age is a moveable marker, which implies that most people will experience ageism in their lives (Cruikshank, 2013, pp. 138–9). Changing sex or (controversially) race is clearly of a different order than transitioning from younger to older. Moreover, many older people distance themselves from old age and prefer to mimic behavior and values that we associate with youth. When simply asked about their experiences of aging, internalized ageism may prevent older people from recognizing discrimination that is based on age and may affect them personally. It turns out to be more productive to ask them to elaborate on mundane and familiar practices in contexts such as a beauty parlor, a supermarket, or a sports facility, than to invite them to put concrete instances of flagrant ageism into words (Ojala, Pietilä, & Nikander, 2016; Ward & Holland, 2011). Inspired by Philomena Essed’s (1984) study of everyday discrimination related to race, Bill Bytheway et al. developed a definition of ageism that highlights recurring experiences at the interpersonal level in such everyday situations and settings:

Everyday ageism does not exist as single events but as a complex of cumulative practices.... It involves ageist practices that infiltrate everyday life and are part of what is popularly seen as “normal”. Analogous to everyday life, everyday ageism is heterogeneous in its manifestations but, at the same time, unified by the constant repetition of particular practices. (2007, p. 94).

Again, the parallel between racism and ageism may not fully work in this translation of a concept, as the notion of everyday racism presumes that black people build expertise in recognizing patterns in the interactions with white people based on the long-lasting observation of the latter’s behavior (Essed, 2018, p. 280). This expertise is often overlooked by white people and labelled as “subjective” (p. 282). It seems that older people’s commitment to staying and feeling as young as possible may hinder them from building such expertise and from finding a voice to object to ageism. Nonetheless, time and again research has shown that internalized ageism has serious consequences for the health and wellbeing of older people (Levy, 2009; Nelson, 2016).

Furthermore, a contemporary secularized version of what Tom Cole originally coined as “bipolar ageism” (1992, p. 230) can be summarized as “age as decline” versus “age defiance” (Laceulle & Baars, 2014). Age defiance is better known as the paradigm of successful aging that emphasizes the individual responsibility of the older person to manage his or her health and independence through smart consumerist lifestyle choices (McHugh, 2003). Although presented as a positive alternative to aging as decline, successful aging is just another side of the same coin, as it promotes the ideal of youth rather than ascribing meaning to the later stages of life (Andrews, 1999). As such, it is an ideal that is hard to uphold when people are confronted with vulnerabilities across the life span or do not have the financial means to indulge in so-called “third age” lifestyles (Lamb, Robbins-Ruszkowski, & Corwin, 2017). Gilleard and Higgs’ (2010) application of the concept of abjection to aging helps to explain the affective response of fear and disgust to people in the category of the “fourth age” who seem to embody the stigma of old age as decline. What instills this disdain for this fearful “other” is – even more than perceived physical and cognitive vulnerabilities – “the evident failure of social intent, the inattention that betrays ‘self control’ and ‘self direction’” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, p. 139). Sustaining practices of successful aging enables older persons in the “third age” to distance themselves from persons in the “fourth age” and, thereby, from their dependent and frailer future selves. This is how bipolar and internalized ageism are linked. The real problem lies in the

inability of people to see older people “as an extension of their future (or even present) selves” (Andrews, 2000, pp. 302–3).

Another important contribution to the theorizing of ageism comes from gender and diversity studies. An intersectional perspective helps us understand that differences in ageism may be experienced according to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class (Calasanti & King, 2015). Most scholarship focuses on the intersections of gender and age. Older mainly heterosexual women are often confronted with a “double standard” of aging (Sontag, 1972): the predominance of the male and “youthful structure of the look” (Woodward, 2006, p. 164) makes it almost unthinkable to consider older women in terms of physical attractiveness and sexual desirability. Women have developed strategies, though, ranging from altering their appearance and behavior to avoiding certain settings, to fight the social invisibility that comes with aging and to negotiate gendered ageism (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Although these strategies do reflect women’s agency, it is always worth questioning whether they are accommodating or resisting discrimination. Beauty work that is meant to make bodily markers of aging invisible, for instance, sustains the lookism mentioned above and is inevitably complicit in a denial of age (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016).

Because older men (especially affluent ones) are still considered more attractive and even sexy compared to older women, it may seem as if they are immune to ageism. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that gendered ageism is not exclusive to women (Ojala et al., 2016; Thompson, 2006). Older men’s often self-declared immunity to ageism is connected to their ability to maintain hegemonic masculinity, an ideal that emphasizes class status and physical capability (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2016). Toni Calasanti and Neal King (Calasanti & King, 2005) use the phrasing “playing hard and staying hard” to illustrate how the “really” masculine older man has to engage in physical and sexual activity to resist potential losses of aging. They link the emphasis on the erect penis as an “index” of successful aging for men to the arrival and promotion of Viagra (see also Marshall & Katz, 2005). Men who perform masculinity successfully in later life may fail to acknowledge the ageism that other men and women experience (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2016). The study of gendered ageism focuses mostly on white and heterosexual men and women. There is evidence that other groups of people have different experiences that need to be taken into account (Calasanti & King, 2015; Heywood et al., 2017). Because of the focus on *The Secret Diary* in the remainder of this article, I will not elaborate on these particular intersections.

### A literary gerontologist reads *The Secret Diary*

*Bending genre and mode expectations: what is it that Hendrik Groen rebels against and writes for?*

*The Secret Diary* is an example of “geezer and grump lit” novel in diary mode (Abbott, 1984; I follow his argumentation that diaries are a mode rather than a genre). Both genres and modes come with certain expectations and this case study has a particular way of playing with them.

In the decades before “geezer and grump lit”’s rise, the nursing home functioned as a literary chronotope (or time-space) of its own by having the end of life of the protagonist coincide with the end of the novel (Swinnen, 2007). The Dutch novel *The Big Ward* (1953) by Jacoba van Velde, also an international bestseller in its time, is a prominent example of such a particular care home story in which the setting enables the narrator to discuss existential questions, in particular with regard to the uncertainties that come with the experience of aging and end-of-life care (Chivers & Kriebner, 2017). When a “geezer and grump lit” novel is set in a nursing home, chances are that the plot starts with the main character’s escape from the institutional context and its dehumanization. *The Secret Diary*, however, does not stage an escape similar to, for instance, the one at the beginning of *The 100-Year-Old-Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*. However, it does

build on the idea of rebellion against nursing home culture. The setting of the book is a retirement home which no longer exists in the Netherlands since institutional living requires a serious indication of care dependency now. Hendrik Groen is the self-declared “whistle-blower” (Groen, 2016, p. 165) of this home. Although he uncritically endorses the idea that population aging is a threat to the welfare state, he believes that budget cuts in elder care are unworthy of a civilized country like the Netherlands. He disagrees with the way in which the retirement home is run by Mrs. Stelwagen whom he accuses of careerism, power play, and a lack of genuine interest in her older residents. In his view, Mrs. Stelwagen excels in drafting up rules to keep residents in line and curtails any initiative on their part. She relies on privacy legislation to keep residents in the dark about the ways in which the home is run while, simultaneously, violating their privacy when she fears a loss of control. Groen wants to inspect regulations and other administrative documents and calls upon the retired lawyer Victor Vorstenbosch to request permission from Mrs. Stelwagen and the board of the retirement home. When this request is denied, Groen instructs Vorstenbosch to start a legal procedure. Meanwhile, Groen conspires with Anja Appelboom, Mrs. Stelwagen's executive secretary, who secretly copies memoranda, policies, and minutes. Groen calls her “Our very own Wikileaks” (Groen, 2016, p. 347). Still, legal practice works slowly and the older Groen has little time in comparison. The illegally obtained pieces give no cause for legal action because their content is far from disconcerting. Moreover, Stelwagen turns out to be more sympathetic than Groen initially depicted her. As a thematic strand of the novel, rebellion against management is thus a dead end, which implies that the book is really about something else. What could this be?

*The Secret Diary* seems to balance between the pseudo versus the mock diary (Morton, 2009). On the one hand, the pseudo diary mode with dated entries, written almost from day to day over the period of a calendar year, follows the conventions of formal realism. This type of first person narration encourages the reader to believe that he/she can immerse in the life of the main character, a person in his eighties with a voice that is usually silenced. The impression of the immediacy of the writing in the midst of Groen's experiences, while his future in the retirement home is somewhat uncertain, serves the illusion of realism. On the other hand, there seems to be something peculiar about the humoristic tone of Groen as the narrator and the way he accounts for his days. According to Morton (2009), the humor that characterizes a mock diary derives from the gap between the implied reader and the narratee. The implied reader is the author's image of the ideal recipient of the text who is supposed to get most of the work's intentions while the narratee is the reader that the narrator directly addresses in the diary (e.g., “I am ill. I'll spare you the unappetizing details.” (Groen, 2016, p. 140; my emphasis)). As opposed to the narratee or the “ever-sympathetic ear into which the diarist speaks” (Morton, 2009, n.p.), the implied reader of a mock diary is supposed to understand that the narrator is somewhat delusional and, as such, unreliable. Several aspects of my case study point to affinities with the mock diary mode. The full title of the book, *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83 ¼*, is already a gentle nod to Sue Townsend's famous Adrian Mole mock diary series, the first volume of which is titled *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 ¾* (1982). Groen's writings remain highly anecdotal, as is characteristic of a mock diary, and when he does go into painful experiences of humiliation and fear, it is his specific way of telling about them that prevents the reader from feeling their impact. Here is an example of such a narration of a painful event when Groen is spat in the face when failing to make way with his mobility scooter for a younger biker:

The biker, twenty years old or so, shot me a dirty look. ‘Out of the way, you old git!’ ‘Mr Old Git to you. A little respect, please. Isn't that what you young people are always going on about: respect?’ I bumped my fist to my chest and drawled, ‘No disrespectin’, man.’

‘Back off, old git!’

I backed up to make room to let him through. Leaning close, he spat square in my face, then revved his engine and tore off. I drove home seething with impotent fury.

(Groen, 2016, p. 480).

Being spat in the face is far from funny and even shocking. Still, this diary entry is also rather comical or even ironic, and I would argue that Groen's fury is not transferred onto the reader. There seems, indeed, to be a gap between the narratee who may buy into Groen's self-satisfied presentation of his verbal exchange with the biker in which the protagonist appropriates gesture and speech that he associates with a certain younger subculture and the implied reader who may be more skeptical about the way he self-represents (cf. trying to come across as younger and “cool,” which I have called “age bending” elsewhere; Swinnen, 2016a). It is, however, difficult to assess whether the ideal reader, as shaped by the author, would identify Groen as a slightly unreliable narrator given the rather ageist societal context in which this book could become an international bestseller. The fact that reviewers recognized that the narrator does not correspond with the author yet assume that Groen is a highly likable older character, does not point in this direction. I, as a resistant reader with a background in aging studies, cannot take Groen's account at face-value nor can I simply indulge in the humoristic tone that is quintessential to this diary mode.

As a matter of fact, there is something deeply troublesome about the humor in *The Secret Diary*. The very first diary entry is already illuminating in this respect: “Another year, and I still don't like old people. Their Zimmer frame shuffle, their unreasonable impatience, their endless complaints, their tea and biscuits, their bellyaching. Me? I am 83 years old” (Groen, 2016, p. 4). Because of the diary mode, readers are stuck with Groen as single narrator and focalizer who recognizes that his chronological age is advanced yet he continuously – and ironically – distances himself from the category of “the old.” In endless rants of “age blaming and shaming” (Gendron, Inker, & Welleford, 2018), he accuses his co-residents of stinginess, rigidity, suspicion, fear, jealousy, childishness, self-pity, homophobia, stupidity, nostalgia, impatience, lack of hygiene, pettiness, stubbornness, disinterest in world politics, and gullibility. Older women are even worse off than older men in Groen's writings; they are gossipers, tattletales, bullies, and schemers who talk nonsense, have no taste, stink, and are ugly and fat (often with a pear-like shape). The following is just one of the many examples of the ways in which ageism and sexism intersect in his diary entries and older women's presumed diminishing attractiveness is emphasized:

Friday is ‘Feel Good Fitness’ day. That's when you see the old biddies scurrying down the halls on their way to the ‘gym’ in the most remarkable exercise outfits. The ladies are truly past the point of shame, and it is not a pretty sight. Pink leggings hugging skinny, bony knees or fat, jigging thighs, form-fitting T-shirts pulled tight across what was once a pair of breasts. The physical decline on proud display. At my age, it is not conducive to feeling good. (...) Most of them still consider themselves ‘quite attractive.’ Self-knowledge tends to decrease drastically with age.

(Groen, 2016, pp. 40–1).

The persistent ageist and sexist remarks on Groen's behalf are hyperbolic and the kind of laughter they produce seems more affirmative than subversive. *The Secret Diary* taps constantly into the rich repertoire of clichés about aging that circulate in our culture and, as such, the book is rather conservative in value, as was to be expected from a middle-brow bestseller. To a literary gerontological resistant reader, Groen's diary testifies to his self-deception and gendered internalized ageism that, in the long run, cannot but turn against himself.

This brings me back to the question what Groen's rebellion or opposition really is about. I would argue that, throughout the book, it becomes evident that the protagonist suffers from meaninglessness. *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen* is all about the main character's attempt to escape the categorization and abjection of “the old” in an

institutionalized setting rather than the escape from institutionalization, which is an interesting twist. Fundamentally, Groen is looking for ways to reclaim his status as an older man in the setting of a retirement home. As Groen is not really into the inward scrutiny and in-depth self-reflection that we associate with the diary mode, he needs to find other ways to come to terms with his own assumptions and his particular location, which I address in the next section. Unsurprisingly, Groen, as unreliable narrator, does claim writing is therapeutic one third into his narrative:

One of the goals of this diary was to emerge as a minor but notorious whistle-blower after I'm gone. That idea has faded into the background a bit. I do notice that writing is having a therapeutic effect on me: I am feeling more relaxed, and less frustrated.

(Groen, 2016, p. 165).

#### *The Old But Not Dead Club and its flirtation with the successful aging paradigm*

*The Secret Diary* puts forward several ways to escape from the categorization and abjection of “the old.” The most prominent way is the connectivity brought about by the establishment of The Old But Not Dead Club. This selected club consists mainly of befriended residents who take control by alternately organizing bi-monthly activities outside the retirement home to brighten their lives. Its organized activities vary from the rather stereotypical jeu-de-boule play and Keukenhof Holland visit with its seven million tulips to the more creative workshops in Tai Chi and portrait painting. All activities largely follow the dictate of the successful aging paradigm: to remain independent and active through consuming goods and services. On the other hand, their organization requires a certain form of creativity and invites the members to learn new skills, such as looking up information on the computer (googling). The club activities have an immediate effect on the sense of self-awareness of its members and this does not go unnoticed by others. Mrs. Stelwagen who has difficulties with such overt display of entrepreneurial spirit on the part of her residents keeps a firm eye on them. The other residents of the home, who are excluded from the activities and feel poorly treated, treat the club members with a mixture of jealousy, admiration, and aversion in return. When the club leaves the home to re-enter public space, the outside world reacts pleasantly surprised because its members do not conform to the stereotypical script of the older person who is passive, disengaged, and alone. The next excerpt describes a trip to the casino:

The Connexion minibus arrived punctually at one, and drove us straight to the Holland Casino on Leidseplein. There we were greeted, with some surprise but great politeness, by a handsome young chap. ‘I see that the average age here is more advanced than we are used to; I would therefore expect above-average sagacity from you as well.’ Elegantly put, coming from such a young whippersnapper. (...) and when an hour and a half later we emptied our pockets at the bar, it transpired that there was a total of €286 in the Old But Not Dead pot. Everyone was jubilant, even the people working there. Apparently we were a refreshing change from all the strutting young show-offs and inscrutable Chinese. ‘A round on the house for the team from Avondrood Hall!’ shouted the bartender. (...) At five-fifteen the manager personally came to inform us that the minibus was out front. There were already two other elderly passengers on the bus; they stared at our rowdy group with undisguised disdain. Graeme handed them each one euro. Which they did grudgingly accept nonetheless.

(Groen, 2016, pp. 167–70).

Groen's account illustrates that the members of the Old But Not Dead Club succeed in distinguishing themselves from both “young show-offs” and “other elderly passengers” (I am leaving the problematic reference to the Chinese aside...) just by becoming visible as avid

consumers in the public sphere. Also, Groen takes pleasure in the “young whippersnapper's” reversed ageist assumption of “above-average sagacity” in older persons. Yet, without his friends, Groen immediately becomes more vulnerable again to discriminatory practices based on his advanced age and decreased mobility, as in the earlier example with the biker.

The Old But Not Dead Club propagates initiative and libertinage (as in breaking the routine of the home by drinking and snacking) in a mild form of what Calasanti and King called “playing hard.” The link with masculinity becomes apparent because of Groen's preoccupation with his continuous struggle for more bladder control (cf. “the leaky nether parts aren't going to stop dripping” (Groen, 2016, p. 15) as opposed to the erect penis as a measure for success). He turns to his general practitioner and geriatric for advice on how to handle the changes and challenges that come with aging. Since aging is not a disease and his complaints cannot be helped medically, there is little for Groen to be found in a medical context. Instead, two mirror characters, Evert and Eefje, support Hendrik Groen in reclaiming masculinity in older age. Evert is the son-of-a-bitch type of older man. He suffers from diabetes but refuses to adapt his lifestyle to this condition so that he ultimately loses part of his leg. Evert instructs Groen to “man up” when he feels tired of life or becomes emotional. He also encourages him to pursue his love interest Eefje, a humorous and confident older woman who is not easily impressed. Hendrik and Eefje enjoy each other's company, go out for fine dining, or stay in to watch a romantic movie in a less aggressive variant of “staying hard.”

The Old But Not Dead Club is all about taking control of one's life while sticking close to the successful aging paradigm. It is, of course, more interesting how Groen responds to vulnerabilities that come with aging as well as the finitude of life that one is particularly confronted with in a retirement home setting. Surprisingly, Groen's partially re-installed masculinity through mild practices of “playing and staying hard” comes with his development as a devoted caregiver – a quality often associated with femininity. Especially when Eefje becomes bedridden because of a stroke, Groen presents himself as a dutiful partner. He reads to her, buys her an iPod with her favorite music so she will not be disturbed by the mumbling and snoring of other patients in the room. Even when doubtful about her awareness of his presence, Groen holds Eefje's hand and caresses her cheeks. He stays with and supports her to the very end. Moreover, when Grietje, another woman from the Old But Not Dead Club, is confronted with memory loss and is eventually diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he assists her in finding ways to cope with her symptoms and her anxieties. The story line of Grietje is an adaptation of the successful aging paradigm to dementia as she tries to curb her symptoms through rationality and control, which cannot but fail in the end. Nonetheless, the more uplifting parts of *The Secret Diary* are when Groen portrays what he calls his “daily rounds (...) from amputated Evert to demented Grietje to vegetative Eefje” (Groen, 2016, p. 479).

Although care is a powerful antidote to the logic of the successful aging paradigm and abjection of older people, this storyline is not entirely convincing. Firstly, Groen's caring attitude is very selective. The compassion and empathy that he shows for the members of the Old But Not Dead Club does not translate or extend to other residents who remain stock characters. As such, Groen's practice of care does not disrupt the “othering” of residents that the club members rely on to rehabilitate themselves socially and psychologically. Also, Groen's behavior towards Eefje is in sharp contrast with the way he treats his wife – only briefly referred to in the book – who lives in a psychiatric care home after the death of their little girl and only receives a visit by her husband once a year. Secondly, it is slightly disturbing that, in the narrative, the powerful older women's voices (Eefje and Grietje) become silenced through a debilitating illness – Eefje dies at the end of the first diary and Grietje lives in a psychogeriatric care unit in the second diary where she is only sporadically visited by Groen. By contrast, Groen's chatter continues and he holds on to Evert's advice to be a “real” man and not to whine

and worry (“Don't whine; do something.” (Groen, 2016, p. 517)). Not whining is also one of the mottos of the Old But Not Dead Club. Suppressing and controlling feelings, however, is what prevents Groen from truly engaging in self-reflection and self-evaluation and from coming to terms with the finitude of his own life. It also jeopardizes his chances to exchange painful life experiences and discuss existential concerns with the club members. This would generate a different type of connectivity than the group now represents and would set an entirely different tone, possibly paving the way for a more convincing alternative to the master narrative of successful aging.

#### A 60plus reading and writing club responds to *The Secret Diary*

Now that my resistant reading of *The Secret Diary* has shed light on the book's values and beliefs surrounding age, I turn to the reading responses of the 60plus reading and writing club. Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the reading diaries, the focus group interview, and the creative writing exercises: a discussion of genre and style, a discovery of ageism and its effects, and an assessment of the Old But Not Dead Club. Quotes from the participants were translated into English by the author.

*“A kind of documentary (...) with a soap-like sauce”: discussing genre and style*

Literary studies' interest in reading groups is often presented as a concern with “ordinary” readers as opposed to academic readers. However, participating in a reading club already positions readers as unusually cultured and literate (Allington, 2011, p. 134). The older people who joined my reading and writing club, moreover, were recruited through the Vlam, a local organization specialized in literary events. Two of them are published authors. As such, it is hardly surprising that a greater part of the discussions in both the reading diaries and the group meeting revolved around the genre and style of *The Secret Diary*.

Most of these readers agree that the book is not really a novel as announced on its cover. In her reading diary, Cunera argues that, in order for the book to become a novel, the characters should develop from types into more complex figures that change in accordance with the events that they are part of. Also, she adds, the book is currently too fragmentary. During the focus group interview, other participants noted that *The Secret Diary* is more of a collection of columns than a novel. Aspirant, for instance, called it a collection of “bite-sized chunks.” He understands the success of this “clever technique” because it enables readers to read very short pieces before falling asleep at night without losing the common thread. Nono concurred that the author found “a specific literary form and exploited it to the fullest.” She calls the book “a kind of documentary on the condition of retirement homes in the Netherlands in 2013” but with a “soap-like sauce.” Cunera suggested that the author could be a journalist who lived in a retirement home as an intern. Vosje insinuated whimsically that the writer could also be a convicted person who had to perform community service.

Furthermore, two readers were rather suspicious about Groen's credibility. Cunera identified the instances in which the narrator criticizes himself as a “stylistic mannerism” that seems “false.” Nono suggested that Groen is not a very reliable narrator (without using this specific concept) and claimed to have taken Groen's entries “with a grain of salt.” In reference to the excerpt about older women in pink leggings, she said: “I think, he saw a single pink legging and turned it into a dozen.” In addition, in her reading diary, Nono explicitly questions whether the event in which Groen was spat in the face really happened. In her creative writing exercise, she elaborates her point of view by taking the position of a female co-resident who reveals that Groen is not speaking the truth:

You must not believe everything that Hendrik Groen says in his

book, his diary of the year 2013. I was there, and I know. I am not mentioned in his diary. I didn't stand out. I wasn't too crazy, stupid, fat, thin or ugly, nor was I attractive enough to be favored by him. Mr. Groen did not like me in all respects and I did not like him either. It was clear from day one that he felt much better than all the other residents of our retirement home. I was watching him, but he didn't notice. When his book came out, I immediately read it. Full of boastfulness and untruths.

Nono's alternative female narrator explains that Groen bought friends by paying for the outings with the Old But Not Dead Club. Even Eefje, who fell for him after a “sad marriage,” laughed at Groen behind his back. This narrator also contradicts Groen's self-portrayal as Eefje's sole dedicated caregiver by pointing out that more people were involved in her end-of-life-care, including the female narrator herself.

Aspirant was quick to point out the superficiality of the book that he relates to the author's intention: “It remained very on the surface. But it reads well, indisputably, and there is a market for that and I feel that it was written with this in mind (...) And, I think the editors of Meulenhoff must have thought that too.” In Aspirant's opinion, *The Secret Diary* was solely written for commercial reasons and has nothing to do with literature. Elsbe, on the other hand, was not interested in the question whether the book is literature or not. She enjoyed reading it and loves the narrator whom she characterizes as “a very pleasant man, someone who hardly complains.” Nono, by contrast, called Groen a “complainer, someone who makes fun of everyone, and, who is, yes, disagreeable in his performance.” On multiple occasions, she expressed her aversion to the book. Differences in appreciation of the book drove a little wedge in the reading and writing club. Some readers distanced themselves from the popularity of the novel as a middle-brow product (again, without using the term) and, in doing so, tried to distinguish themselves as “more advanced” readers compared to others (cf. distinction thesis in Allington, 2011). This forced readers who were more enthusiastic about the novel to defend their positive reading experiences.

*“What do others see about me?”: Discovering ageism and its effects*

Both in her reading diary and the focus group interview, Vosje said that it is hard to read Groen's harsh judgements of older people without relating them to herself. To her fellow participants, she explained:

I started to look at myself through his eyes. How do others see me now? For instance, when I walk somewhere. Are you still capable of walking these stairs? And so on [laughs uncomfortably]. You become more aware of your own aging, since we all age, of course. We can't do anything about it. But that you are confronted with it in such a nasty way and then have to resist it.

This quote clearly illustrates the “lookism” that underlies ageism. Vosje then asked Nono how she felt while reading about the older characters in the book (Nono turned 83 – Groen's age – two weeks after this particular meeting). Nono replied that, to her, “the others are old, not her.” Therefore, she did not relate to the book personally. This reaction is comparable to Groen's in his first diary entry. Yet, Nono was very critical of the narrator and the way he talks about others and distances himself from them: “I just think it is an evil man. I don't like him. The way he looks at people is terrible. He only sees things his way and exaggerates terribly.” In short, Nono could dissociate herself from being older while simultaneously being critical of how Groen presents older people.

Nono's use of the word “old” (in Dutch: *oudje* – the translation is not entirely literal but represents the gist of her choice) in the quote above generated a discussion on the appropriateness of the term. Cunera believed that the word is denigrating, which Nono, who is not a native speaker of Dutch, immediately accepted. Simone characterized “old” as a “paternalistic” expression. Elsbe placed the critical assessment of this

particular word in the context of the development of more sensitivity to the connotations of certain phrasings as well as the introduction of new words, such as senior citizen, that – in the Dutch context, I would like to add – are less stigmatizing. Aspirant illustrated this development by referring to the rise of the term “non-western immigrant” (in Dutch: *niet-Westerse allochtoon*). Winterfall connected the discussion with the topic of – in his words – “hidden racism” (in Dutch: *verborgen racisme*):

But such words, aren't they hidden deep within us? Not long ago, there was the item “hidden racism” in the media. People who, without even knowing it, buried all kinds of fascist ideas and words deep inside their heads that you, with the right incentives [laughs], also can bring out again (...)

Simone added that this not only applies to racism but to sexism as well. When I enquired if the participants were familiar with the term ageism, the answer was negative. Since a discussion on ageism is nearly absent from Dutch public debate, it is hardly surprising that the participants were unfamiliar with the term and could only make intuitive connections with other forms of discrimination. When discussing the entry in which Groen mocks older women in pink leggings, Winterfall called the excerpt sexist. Elsbe believed that Groen could have written the same about men and advocated dressing according to one's age: “Dress for your body, for God's sake, and not for how you want to dress or to what is modern.” Simone found such claims highly normative and wondered why people should hide curves, wrinkles, and bat wings. She admitted she knew many women who adapt their clothing style to physical changes because they find it inappropriate to show how “it all starts hanging.” Winterfall suggested that there is a link between this practice and what he called “commerce”: “We have to stay young, everyone has to stay ‘forever young’ (he uses the English phrase). It is almost forced upon you.” It is clear that the participants vaguely hinted at possible differences in how aging in men and women are approached but a more profound understanding of the intersection between age and gender was missing.

Cunera compared the book with stand-up comedy that forces you to laugh on command, which Aspirant characterized as the “laugh-or-I-shoot” principle. The question arose which type of laughter the book really evokes. In Vosje's view, it is the use of stereotypes, for instance in the way the older residents or Mrs. Stelwagen are portrayed, that results in laughter. This type of laughter confirms stereotypes: “Yes, it just confirms what... and you laugh actually, yes, we laugh, but we are not really laughing, is it? It is a specific kind of laughter: ridicule.” Nono replied that it is certainly no empathic laughter and Aspirant introduced the word “grinning” (in Dutch: *grimlachen*). Elsbe, on the other hand, firmly stated that she did not grin but had thoroughly enjoyed the book and its combination of sadness and comic relief. She found the book very recognizable. As such, there is a difference between readers who take the book at face value and go along with the narrator who makes fun of other characters – almost coinciding with the narratee or “ever-sympathetic ear” – and readers who are keener to look for hidden meanings and the possible negative impact of recurring stereotypes of aging and care. Nono wondered why Groen as narrator has to rely on so much sarcasm and cynicism in the portrayal of his life in the nursing home. In line with her training and practice as a psychotherapist, she tried to analyze and diagnose Groen on several occasions. In the end, she assumed that the main character is depressed and lonely because he never came to terms with the death of his daughter and the effect it had on his marriage. It is surprising that Nono, who deeply dislikes Groen, claims to identify with Evert – the son-of-a-bitch type of older man – and to adore Evert's sense of humor. This suggests that she differentiates between a kind of malicious laughter that characterizes Groen's narration versus a less harmful laughter that the character of Evert evokes. Nono did not experience Evert as a problematic character nor did the other readers.

“We human beings desperately need other people”: assessing the Old But Not Dead Club

All readers agreed that the Old But Not Dead Club is one of the highlights of *The Secret Diary*. The discussion evolving around the activities and friendships of the club is illuminating in terms of the values of the participants. There was a consensus that taking initiative rather than sitting and waiting until others entertain you, works to secure one's dignity in later life. All agreed that staying active, making plans and, as such, staying future-oriented, pushing boundaries, and remaining independent within given limits is the preferred life strategy. As such, the members of the reading and writing club seemingly endorse the successful aging paradigm that the Old But Not Dead Club partially represents. Simone, however, asked the pertinent question whether this attitude to life is connected to age or rather to personality: “Yes, would that be so different in this nursing home compared to the rest of society? After all, the majority of people is rather passive and just waits till something happens. Not everyone is curious, looks around, discovers, and asks ‘what has life to offer me?’” Aspirant concurred that some people want to stay in control while others easily relinquish control. In order to discuss the extent to which the establishment of an Old But Not Dead Club is a realistic scenario in a nursing home setting, the participants compared the story world of *The Secret Diary* with their everyday lives and experiences. Cunera is familiar with anthroposophical nursing homes where residents organize activities themselves. The character of Mrs. Stelwagen who wants to stop these initiatives is perceived as a caricature. Elsbe recently heard stories about a local nursing home that made her believe that Mrs. Stelwagen is not too bad in comparison to real-life managers.

When developing alternative activities for the Old But Not Dead Club in their creative writing exercises, the majority of participants decided to choose an activity that fully endorses the idea of going out, being active, possibly trying something new, and whining and dining. Most of these suggestions add something to the activities already proposed by the novel. Simone, for instance, called her friend whose 97-year old mother lives in a nursing home to find out what the latter is missing. She learned that all kinds of activities were actually already on offer in the nursing home context but that the space to discuss politics was hardly there. For this reason, Simone invented a trip to the House of Representatives where residents could meet Henk Krol, the chairman of political party 50Plus, and Lilian Marijnissen of the socialist party who is committed to improving health care policies. Similarly, Cunera developed a quartet card game with categories such as “life endings” (cards: “cremated,” “buried,” “euthanized,” and “jumped in front of a train”), “prostheses” (cards: “kidney,” “retina,” “heart valve,” and “liquor”) and “wealth” (cards: “attention,” “space,” “your smile,” and “your bank account number”) in the hope that the game would lead to discussions amongst older people about values in life. These two examples of creative writing exercises point to a desire to move beyond leisure, hedonism, and consumerism and, instead, to engage in activities that ask one to engage in self-reflection and social critique. Both Simone's and Cunera's activities enable the residents to claim their voices as older citizens.

Following from this, it may not come as a surprise that the reading and writing club opposes Groen's idea that people peak in their forties after which everything goes downhill (the classic decline narrative). Even Elsbe, whose response to the novel is very positive in general, had to oppose Groen in this respect:

Physically do you mean, hey? Because I disagree with him if he means mentally. But physically, it is true. Take the case of women. You see that around forty/fifty five, they are transitioning into menopause and then you are no longer fertile. Then, actually, the physical, yes, “decline” is too big of a word, starts, I think. Then [around forty/fifty five], you are at your strongest. But I only see that physically and not mentally. Because you can grow enormously

mentally, even after your 40th birthday, and maybe even after your 80th birthday, I can't judge that yet, but that is just how it is, that you can develop mentally.

Simone doubted whether people can actually learn something new when they get older. Elsbe recollected how her uncles learned to work with a computer and camera when they were in their seventies. In her view, where there is a will, there is a way. Winterfall tried to reconcile both points of view by bringing learning and developing together: "(...) the combination of insights and experiences can also be a way of learning new things and I believe that is certainly possible when growing older." Aspirant connected wisdom with older age, which Cunera and Vosje immediately put into perspective by humorously pointing out that it is always older people themselves who refer to the "wisdom of the old." Cunera not only wanted to put the notion of decline into perspective but the idea of peaking as well:

Perhaps, we should formulate "peak" differently. I think that it is also different for each individual, because I have had peaks with my children, but also peaks without them. (...) Maybe, someone who is not learning anything new anymore and who is not doing anything anymore and who is sitting outside on a bench, maybe that person has a great time [experiences a peak], that is very well possible.

This is the closest the reading and writing group got to acknowledging that meaning may be found in life beyond activity and "business."

Another aspect of *The Secret Diary* that the reading and writing club frequently referred to and agreed on, is the way the friendship between Hendrik and Evert and the relation between Hendrik and Eefje unfolds. They welcome the kindness with which Groen takes on the role of caregiver for the two most important people in his life. In her reading diary, Cunera writes: "What touched me: compassion in addition to venom, gentleness and genuine concern for the ups and downs of Eefje and Evert. These are beautiful friendships." In a similar vein, Nono says: "Omanido – human substance. So important. We humans desperately need other people. Even when we are old. (...) Yes, helping others makes you happy. Better late than never for the first-person narrator." Yet, Nono, Vosje, and Simone felt that especially the story of Groen's palliative care of Eefje may be too good to be true. They did not explain why. The appreciation of the connectivity that the Old But Not Dead Club brings, indicates that the 60plus reading and writing club values intersubjectivity in life and the importance of investing in good relations.

This brings me to the topic of the "othering" of the residents that are not part of the Old But Not Dead Club. Nono pointed out that the exclusion of the other residents from the activities is rather mean and hurtful. In their creative writing exercises, Vlam and Vosje indirectly second Nono's view because both explicitly state that their activities would be set in the nursing home and open to all. Vlam plans to organize a reading club with "room for new members." Vosje comes with an activity that even caters to the most vulnerable residents. Her activity consists of a poetry reading on memory, entitled "Scent of heaven." This is actually a real program that she developed with other poets and implemented in care homes. Vosje tried to explain to the other participants what poetry does:

I notice that, it does something to people, it touches them. What Eliot says, "poetry can communicate before it is understood," before it is comprehended. So, that is what I experienced in the times that we performed, and (...) I would not exclude those others, (...) I wouldn't let them down (...) those are poems about the poets' memories and then you see that all sorts of people, who otherwise never respond, who already have lost a little bit of everything, actually start telling all sorts of things.

Other participants did not make much of the exclusion of Groen's co-residents. Simone believed that the dynamic within the nursing home is

a typical example of group processes and the difference between "inner" and "outer groups" (she uses the English terms). In her view, the narrator consciously chooses to exclude others, which gives the book an extra layer. Cunera recognized this dynamic and made a comparison between what happens in the book and living in the neighborhood Wolder versus the city center of Maastricht. Elsbe – in line with the narrator – thought that the "others" may deserve to be excluded because they do not take initiative and prefer to complain instead. She called them "eternally grumpy" (in Dutch: *mopperklazen*). As such, there is rather little sensitivity as to why Groen distances himself from the majority of co-residents and how this could possibly be linked to ageism.

## Discussion

When bringing the two readings, the resistant reading and the responses of the 60plus reading and writing club, together, it becomes clear that many topics reappear, for instance confusion about genre, questions surrounding the authenticity of voice, types and effects of humor, and the meaning of caregiving. However, the way in which these topics are discussed differs slightly. Apart from relying on their skills as avid readers, the members of the 60plus reading and writing club are in a position to openly let their interpretations resonate with life experiences, which is almost taboo in literary scholarship. As it turns out, the oldest members present themselves as a kind of resistant readers of their own as they seem to be most sensitive to the ageism that characterizes Groen's speech, even though they hardly recognize it as such. Undoubtedly, a certain sensitivity to discrimination based on chronological age manifests itself within the reading and writing club; many parallels are drawn between the novel's representation of later life, and sexism and racism without further elaboration. We can partly explain this by the fact that a public debate on ageism is missing in the Netherlands, and, consequently, a general consensus about what is and is not acceptable when talking about older people and later life is lacking. Compared to other national contexts, such as the United States where age critic Margaret M. Gullette (2011, 2017) regularly intervenes in public debates to address the perils of ageism, most gerontologists and geriatricians that are visible in Dutch media usually promote some version of the successful aging paradigm that is ageist in itself.

Because the readers of the reading and writing club are part of a specific context that promotes successful aging, it is hardly surprising that they endorse most of the values that *The Secret Diary* promotes, ranging from activity to control, especially through the activities of the Old But Not Dead Club. Yet, the empirical data reveal that they also put into words that there is more to later life, which they define as life span development, participation in public life as full citizens, and investment in sustainable relations. This is in line with the results of the "Fiction and Cultural Mediation of Ageing" project (Hubble & Tew, 2013; Morrison, 2013) referred to in the section with my methodological approach. Reflecting on novels about aging and later life in reading diaries and creative writing exercises, in combination with discussing these novels in group, encourages older people to make their attitudes and beliefs surrounding aging more explicit. It also provides them with the opportunity to compare their own (reading and life) experiences with others'. To a certain extent, my reading and writing club turned into an intervention in the lives of the participants, as it forced them to examine and re-examine age-related topics that remained under-explored and implicit in their daily lives. In the course of the project, this dynamic created an increased sensitivity for assumptions based on age (cf. the transformative power of reading clubs in Long, 2003).

A continuing challenge for the participants, however, was to identify as older, to find meaning in life beyond youth, and to oppose Groen's malicious humor when assessing *The Secret Diary*. One could, therefore, argue that a certain degree of internalized ageism prevented them from recognizing ageism in the book. As everyday ageism is based on the accumulation of discriminatory practices, as suggested by

Bytheway, Ward, Holland, and Peace (2007), we could interpret the novel as a contribution to everyday ageism given its vast, undisputed success. In this sense, we should never be naïve about the negative consequences that a “geezer and grump lit” novel like this case study could have for older readers and beyond. Simultaneously, we also should not be naïve about the complexity of and diversity in the readers' responses and how these are possibly influenced by the context in which they were formulated. Even though I did not participate as a reader in the focus group interview, my presence as a scholar and the design of the ethnographic approach may have encouraged certain participants to immerse in critical readings of the text rather than articulate the pleasure that they found in reading the novel (cf. some readers felt that they had to defend their liking of *The Secret Diary* against the interpretation from others). Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine how older people who are unable to meet the standard of the successful aging paradigm would respond to *The Secret Diary*. The minor attempts that I undertook to figure this out, in addition to the study that this article presents, showed that none of three older persons who were living at home but with substantial support from others finished reading the book. They either said the book was boring and uninteresting or admitted that it was too confrontational to read given the fact that they were afraid of having to move to a nursing home themselves.

## Conclusion

To conclude, let me return to the question what the future of literary gerontology holds. Firstly, I would like for literary gerontology to pay more attention to the diversity in literary practices surrounding later life (cf. the developments described by Falcus, 2015) and broaden its scope from the high- to the middle-brow novel and beyond, including the many literary events and interventions in care settings that are organized by and/or for older readers (as I have argued elsewhere, Swinnen, 2016b). Extending the subject in these directions would stimulate further dialogue between literary gerontology and other critical types of gerontology. Secondly, literary aging studies could benefit from combining different methods to interpreting literary texts in their (user) contexts. Inspired by the long tradition of reader response criticism, I have included readings of older people themselves, not in the first place to arrive at a better understanding of *The Secret Diary* itself but to reveal the meanings attached to aging that the participants verbalized in relation to this particular novel. The readers of my reading and writing club were perfectly capable of separating style or form from ideological content and the latter is where my interest lies. My approach does not only include the voices of older non-professional readers in literary gerontology (where usually only voices of older literary scholars are included) but also gives a better idea of the cultural work that a novel like *The Secret Diary* does. Nonetheless, in its search for the hidden ideological meanings of a text, this article is still indebted to a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur in Felski, 2015). To better grasp the wider scale of reader responses (cf. the different uses of literature in Felski, 2008), including their affective components, so-called “post-critical” reading strategies (e.g., surface reading, Best & Marcus, 2009) in combination with “suspicious” readings could yield new insights for literary gerontology.

## Acknowledgements

This article is an elaborated academic version of my inaugural speech (entitled “Goed ouder worden en creatief lezen: het kunstje van Hendrik Groen”) as Endowed Socrates Chair in International Humanism and the Art of Living held on Nov 1st, 2017. I would like to thank the participants in my reading and writing club, Annette de Bruijn who assisted me during the fieldwork, and colleagues who commented on earlier drafts, especially Roel van den Oever, Ben de Bruyn, Anita Wohlmann, and Janna Klostermann. This project has been approved by

the Ethical Review Committee Inner City Faculties of Maastricht University.

## References

- Abbott, H. P. (1984). *Diary fiction: Writing as action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Allington, D. (2011). Distinction, intentions, and the consumption of fiction: Negotiating cultural legitimacy in a gay reading group. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(2), 129–145.
- Andrews, M. (1999). The seductiveness of agelessness. *Ageing and Society*, 19(3), 301–318.
- Barrett, A. E., & Naiman-Sessions, M. (2016). ‘It’s our turn to play’: Performance of girlhood as a collective response to gendered ageism. *Ageing and Society*, 36, 764–784.
- Best, S., & Marcus, S. (2009). Surface reading: An introduction. *Representations*, 108(1), 1–21.
- Boven, E.v. (2015). *Bestsellers in Nederland 1900–2015*. Antwerpen: Garant.
- Butler, R. N. (1995). Ageism. In G. L. Maddox (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of aging* (pp. 38–39). New York: Springer.
- Bytheway, B., & Johnson, J. (1990). On defining ageism. *Critical Social Policy*, 10(29), 27–39.
- Bytheway, B., Ward, R., Holland, C., & Peace, S. (2007). *Too old: Older persons accounts of discrimination, exclusion and rejection*. London: Help the Aged.
- Calasanti, T., & King, N. (2005). Firming the floppy penis: Age, class, and gender relations in the lives of older men. *Men and Masculinities*, 8(1), 3–23.
- Calasanti, T., & King, N. (2015). Intersectionality and age. In J. Twigg, & W. Martin (Eds.). *Routledge handbook of cultural gerontology* (pp. 193–200). New York: Routledge.
- Chivers, S., & Kribernegg, U. (2017). *Care home stories: Aging, disability, and Long-term residential care*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Clarke, R., & Nolan, M. (2014). *Book clubs and reconciliation: A pilot study on book clubs reading the fictions of reconciliation*. Vol. 56, Australian Humanities Review 121–140.
- Cole, T. R. (1992). *The journey of life: A cultural history of aging in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cole, T. R., & Ray, R. E. (2010). Introduction: The humanistic study of aging past and present, or why gerontology still needs interpretative inquiry. In T. R. Cole, R. E. Ray, & R. Kastenbaum (Eds.). *A guide to humanistic studies in aging. What does it mean to grow old* (pp. 1–29). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cruikshank, M. (2013). *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*. Lanham, MD (3rd ed.). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Domínguez-Rué, E. (2012). Mothers, daughters and midlife (self)-discoveries: Gender and aging in the Amanda Cross' Kate Fansler series. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 26(4), 428–437.
- Driscoll, B. (2014). *The new literary middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the twenty-first century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Essed, P. (2018). *Alledaags racismisme*. Amsterdam: Van Genep 1984.
- Falcus, S. (2015). Literature and ageing. In J. Twigg, & W. Martin (Eds.). *Routledge handbook of cultural gerontology* (pp. 53–60). New York: Routledge.
- Farr, C. K., & Perrin, T. (2016). Introduction: Inventing the middlebrow. *Post*, 45(7), Retrieved from [http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/07/introduction-inventing-the-middlebrow/#identifier\\_16\\_7128](http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/07/introduction-inventing-the-middlebrow/#identifier_16_7128).
- Felski, R. (2008). *The uses of literature*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Felski, R. (2015). *The limits of critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fetterley, J. (1977). *The resisting reader: A feminist approach to American fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gendron, T., Inker, J., & Welleford, E. A. (2018). A theory of relational ageism: A discourse analysis of the 2015 White house conference on aging. *The Gerontologist*, 58(2), 242–250.
- Gilleard, C., & Higgs, P. (2010). Ageing abjection and embodiment in the fourth age. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 25(2), 135–142.
- Groen, H. (2016). *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83 ¼ (Pogingen iets van het leven te maken: Het geheime dagboek van Hendrik Groen)*. London: Penguin [2014]. E-book. Translated by Hester Velmans.
- Groen, H. *On the Bright Side: The New Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 85 (in Dutch: Zolang er leven is: Het nieuwe geheime dagboek van Hendrik Groen, 85 jaar)*. (2018) [2016]. E-book. Translated by Hester Velmans. London: Penguin.
- Gullette, M. M. (2011). *Agewise: Fighting the new ageism in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gullette, M. M. (2017). *Ending ageism or how not to shoot old people*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Hartung, H. (2005). Spinster Sleuth' and 'Iron Dowager': Lebensgeschichten und alte Frauen im Detektivroman. In H. Hartung (Ed.). *Alter und Geschlecht. Repräsentationen, Geschichten und Theorien des Alter(n)s (pp. 191–2010)*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Heywood, W., Minichiello, V., Lyons, A., Fileborn, B., Hussain, R., Hinchliff, S., ... Dow, B. (2017). The impact of ageism on sexual activity and interest in later life. *Ageing and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X17001222> published online first.
- Hubble, N., & Tew, P. (2013). *Ageing, narrative and identity: New qualitative research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013.
- Hurd Clarke, L. H., & Griffin, M. (2008). Visible and invisible ageing: Beauty work as a response to ageism. *Ageing and Society*, 28(5), 653–674.
- Hurd Clarke, L. H., & Korotchenko, A. (2016). ‘I know it exists... But I haven't experienced it personally’: Older Canadian men's perceptions of ageism as a distant social problem. *Ageing and Society*, 36(8), 1757–1773.
- Jaeger, T., & Rosenberg, E. (2016, Apr 27). *Dagboek giswerk kan stoppen: Hendrik Groen heet Peter de Smet*. NRC Handelsblad.
- Kraak, H. (2016, Apr 27). *Mysterie ten einde: bejaarde bestsellerschrijver Hendrik Groen is*

- gevonden. De Volkskrant.
- La Ganga, M. L. (2007, Dec 2). Forget chick lit; what's new and hot is geezer lit. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2007/Dec/02/il/hawaii712020308.html>.
- Laceulle, H., & Baars, J. (2014). Self-realization and cultural narratives about later life. *Journal of Aging Studies, 31*(2), 34–44.
- Lamb, S., Robbins-Ruskowski, J., & Corwin, A. I. (2017). Introduction: Successful aging as a twenty-first-century obsession. In S. Lamb (Ed.), *Successful aging as a contemporary obsession: Global perspectives* (pp. 1–23). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Levy, B. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 18*(6), 332–336.
- Long, E. (2003). *Book Clubs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Loretto, W., Duncan, C., & White, P. J. (2000). Ageism and employment: Controversies, ambiguities and younger people's perceptions. *Ageing and Society, 20*(3), 279–302.
- Manning, K. (2018, May 19). 8 books that prove #grump lit is a publishing trend right now. *Get Literary*. Retrieved from <https://getliterary.com/grumplit-books-about-old-folks>.
- Marshall, B., & Katz, S. (2005). Forever functional: Sexual fitness and the aging male body. In S. Katz (Ed.), *Cultural Aging: Life Course, Lifestyle, and Senior Worlds* (pp. 161–187). Peterborough: Broadview Press.
- McHugh, K. E. (2003). Three faces of ageism: Society, image and place. *Ageing and Society, 23*(2), 165–185.
- Morrison, J. (2013). Ageing reimagined: Exploring ageing women's attitudes towards ageing through reader response. *Contemporary Women's Writing, 7*(1), 1–17.
- Morton, P. (2009). Narrative technique in *The Diary of a Nobody*. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/petermortonswebsite/home/grossmiths-diary-of-a-nobody/narrative-technique-in-the-diary>.
- Nelson, T. D. (2016). Promoting healthy aging by confronting ageism. *American Psychologist, 71*(4), 276–282.
- Ojala, H., Pietilä, I., & Nikander, P. (2016). Immune to ageism? Men's perceptions of age-based discrimination in everyday contexts. *Journal of Aging Studies, 39*, 44–53.
- Sontag, S. (1972, Sept 23). The double standard of aging. *The Saturday Review, 29–38*.
- Sullivan, M., & Blanch, S. (2011). Introduction: The middlebrow – Within or without modernism. *Modernist Cultures, 6*(1), 1–17.
- Swinnen, A. (2007). Du grand dortoir à la petite histoire: Les récits féminins et l'imagination littéraire d'un continuum d'âge. In A. Keilhauer (Ed.), *Viellir féminin et écriture autobiographique* (pp. 111–121). Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal.
- Swinnen, A. (2016a). The performativity of age: (Not) acting one's age in *Benidorm Bastards*. In M. Wynants, & G. Nuytens (Eds.), *AGE* (pp. 48–56). Brussels: Academic and Scientific Publishers.
- Swinnen, A. (2016b). Healing words: Critical inquiry of poetry interventions in dementia care. *Dementia, 15*(6), 1377–1404 published online before print Nov 27, 2014.
- Swinnen, A., Port, C., & Lipscomb, V. B. (2017). Exploring the boundaries of literary age studies. *Frame: Journal of Literary Studies, 30*(1), 19–30.
- Thompson, E. H. (2006). Images of old men's masculinity: Still a man? *Sex Roles, 55*, 633–648.
- Twigg, J., & Martin, W. (2015). The challenge of cultural gerontology. *The Gerontologist, 55*(3), 353–359.
- Ward, R., & Holland, C. (2011). 'If I look old, I will be treated old': Hair and later-life image dilemmas. *Ageing and Society, 31*, 288–307.
- Woodward, K. (2006). Performing age, performing gender. *NWSA Journal, 18*(1), 162–189.
- Wyatt-Brown, A. M. (1990). The coming of age of literary gerontology. *Journal of Aging Studies, 4*(3), 229–315.