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GROWING TOWARDS THE LIGHT.

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A critical study on the way old age is portrayed in the novels of

Anne Tyler and Margaret Forster.

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1. INTRODUCTION.

“What is the point of keeping old people alive?” is the unspoken thought by Hannah, the teenage granddaughter in Margaret Forster’s novel, *Have the Men Had Enough?*¹ The thought is prompted by distress after watching the havoc that her confused grandmother wreaks on the family.

For the purpose of this study, I will be looking at the way old age is portrayed in the novels of Anne Tyler and Margaret Forster and in particular how these two writers depict their older characters in a family setting. I will be comparing present day society’s view of the elderly with the representation of old age in the novels of Tyler and Forster. I will show that both these writers portray their older characters as being a pivotal influence on family groups. Of interest to me is how those characters react to younger members of the family group: whether they are listened to or ignored and what has been the subsequent reaction to any input that an older character gives to a family situation.

Before embarking on this study I looked at research on ageing including an article by Professor Raymond Tallis who wrote: “For most of the population, the old, in particular the very old are *other*. The trajectory of life has flattened and this can seem like preparation for the terminal drop.”² it is this *otherness* that I will be focusing on; the viewing of old age from those who have not yet arrived at that stage and the feelings of those who have reached it.

The term *old* has acquired a negative connotation; it is an unfortunate fact that to be old is often equated with too many undesirable attributes, including dependency, rigidity of thought and the inability to learn new things. The official psychology which portrays the old in terms of deficiency

¹ Margaret Forster, *Have the Men Had Enough?* Penguin, 1989 p.141.

² Prof. Raymond Tallis, *Telegraph Magazine*, 18th Feb. 2001.

and personal deterioration is the psychology written by people who are not themselves old. Like children, the elderly are not given a voice in defining their condition. Caricatured images of old people also diminish their status. The media tends not to feature older adults living full lives and experiencing the entire gamut of emotions: love, pain and joy. The public equates all that is beautiful and active with youth. This stereotyping implies that when we become old, we can no longer be any of these, so obviously, most people dread becoming old. We emphasise youthfulness and the energy of youth. As a society we invest in youth, rather than in the retraining and education of people in later life.

The view that many of the images we use to describe ageing and elderly people are in fact negative stereotypes, is always accompanied by the warning that such stereotypes are damaging to our relationships with older people. Terms such as *senile* are openly derogatory. In *Ageing in Society*, John Bond states:

Worse is the common use of 'geriatric' as a noun to describe a frail old person instead of its correct use as the branch of medical science concerned with old people and their illnesses. We do not call a woman who has just had a hysterectomy an 'obstetric' or a sick child a 'paediatric'.³

In *Ageing and Later Life*, Julia Johnson states that:

There is a terrifying slippery slope in the process by which old people come to be regarded as less than fully human and are therefore not treated as persons deserving equal respect. This may be exacerbated by their mental frailty or by their neglected appearance (a vicious circle in this context) or by sensory deficits such as deafness.⁴

Research by Help the Aged suggests that age discrimination is endemic in Britain:

³ John Bond, *Ageing in Society* Sage Publications.1993 p.308

⁴ Julia Johnson, *Ageing & Later Life*, Sage Publications. 1993 p.145

“with older people treated as second class citizens in the NHS, at work and in education. As long as older people are viewed in this way, they’ll receive second rate care that is damaging, degrading and can have tragic consequences.”⁵

The *Daily Mail* is spearheading a *Dignity for the Elderly* campaign to highlight the ‘series of scandals over the callous treatment handed out to elderly people by the authorities in charge of their care.’⁶

Paul Cann, Help the Aged’s director of policy, has pointed out that in a recent survey of casualty departments, it was found that patients over 60 had to wait almost five hours for attention. This was compared with average waits of less than three hours for a patient under 40. The Government published its National Service Framework for Older People last year, promising that elderly people would be guaranteed equal treatment by the NHS and social services. Under plans to stamp out discrimination, it said that all NHS departments would be required to carry out an assessment of their policies regarding the treatment of the elderly to make sure that no decision was made on the basis of a person’s age.

However, it could be argued that a new stereotype has stepped in: the increasingly popular visual images of the old picturing them on safari, running marathons, mastering Swahili. Images of Joan Collins and Jane Fonda seem to totally redefine the life span; at the age when our own mothers were visibly sagging, these two women are always shown to be lithe and vital. But this new stereotype isn’t right - this new way of valuing older people serves only to highlight their youthfulness. These older people were being applauded for looking and behaving like youngsters. Does this suggest then that ageing has become a social crime?

⁵ Daily Telegraph, 6th March, 2001.

⁶ Daily Mail 8th November, 2002.

A recent film, *Mrs. Caldicot's Cabbage War*, starring Pauline Collins has been shelved - it was thought that nobody would want to see it - it concerned the elderly. Ian Sharp, the film's director, commented:

the film is not just for the old - it exposes a really important social issue about growing old. But the money men don't like the old.⁷

The brutal fact is that this film was shelved because its subject matter, the residents of a home for the elderly, was simply not marketable. It was thought that the film would not appeal to a wide audience. Negative attitudes like this one can only perpetuate ageism.

My submission for the MPhil includes a novel that has, at its heart, an elderly man coming to terms with old age and its accompanying frailties. In conjunction with my research I have also undertaken revision for my novel, *Missing Nancy*. In places the work has merged and it is my aim to discuss relevant sections from the novel in this Critical Paper. As well as the novel, my submission includes a collection of short stories, *Across the Downs*; the central themes of the stories are growing older and facing up to change. Relevant sections from the stories will be included.

The idea for this study originated from a reading of *Precious Lives*, Margaret Forster's biography of her father. Once I'd read this book I was able to recognise the fact that she'd positioned her father in a lot of her novels. With great candour she admits that although she admired his tenacity, his need for order and ritual in his life, she felt no love for him. Within the narrative of my novel, I have tried to instil a sense of compassion and understanding for the central character as he battles with the double-edged sword of old age and infirmity.

There is also a personal dimension underlying my reasons for focusing on this topic. As my own father and mother are now 88 and 82 respectively, at times I have found that a great deal of my parents' lives has filtered its way through to my novel and I have recorded this *filtering* in my

⁷ *Daily Telegraph* July 21st, 2001.

Journal. In the case of my father, some of his phrases and certainly his irritation with growing older, have all helped me to mould the character of the grandfather in my novel.

With Forster's father, and particularly my parents, there is a driving wish not to be classified as old - it would seem that ageism has also reached the elderly. For my parents, the stereotypical myths of ageing are degrading images which may apply to some of their age group but which they unhesitatingly, often indignantly, reject for themselves. "I don't feel old," is something my mother says frequently. Her cry is mirrored in *I Don't Feel Old* by Paul Thomson:

The myths of ageing which we are fed in youth and middle age, simply do not fit the typical experience of older men and women. 'I don't feel old,' is a cry of protest against a myth which causes both pain and fear; a call for the recognition of human individuality and resourcefulness at any age.⁸

⁸ Paul Thomson, *I Don't Feel Old*, OUP 1990, p.250.

2.1 Growing Towards the Light.

The title of this Critical Study has been taken from a quotation by May Sarton, "Old age isn't an illness, it is a timeless ascent. As power diminishes, we grow towards the light." For the purpose of this study, I have assumed that the "light" is the light of experience, of wisdom.

In his book, *The Summer of a Dormouse*, John Mortimer adopts a mock horror approach to his advancing age:

Dying is a matter of slapstick and prat falls. The ageing process is not gradual or gentle. It rushes up, pushes you over and runs off laughing. No one should grow old who isn't ready to appear ridiculous.⁹

Alan Bleasdale also complains, albeit tongue in cheek, about the ageing process, "I think when the full horror of being fifty hits you, you should stay at home and have a good cry."¹⁰ Both Mortimer and Bleasdale adopt a jocular attitude and one that a lot of us take refuge in, but the prospect of growing older, losing mental faculties and becoming increasingly frail is one that can cause real fear. It is the fear of losing dignity, the fear of not being able to do things that have given us pride in our achievements. So many elderly people take enormous pride in the fact that they can still manage small tasks. May Sarton writing about elderly men in a residential home said:

Among all the other deprivations here, we are deprived of expression. The old men slowly atrophy because no one asks them what they feel or why. Most of the others here have worked with their hands. Deprived of work they have no resources at all.¹¹

Forster's father took immense pride in the fact that at, almost 90, he was still able to work in the

⁹ John Mortimer *The Summer of a Dormouse*, Penguin 2000 p.1.

¹⁰ Dorothy Rowe, *Time on Our Side*, Harper Collins, 1994 p. 15.

¹¹ May Sarton, *As We Are Now*, Women's Press, 1987 p. 17.

garden, planting his vegetables, mowing the lawn. He wrote in his calendar every day - it was a reminder that he was still capable, still active. Equally, it could be argued that marking each day, whether in a calendar or a diary, can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the swift passage of time.

From *Summer of a Dormouse*, John Mortimer writes:

It's a law of script writing that scenes get shorter and the action speeds up towards the end. In childhood the afternoons spread out for years. For the old, the years flicker past like the briefest of afternoons.¹²

The work ethic for a lot of older people, is still strong. Idleness, whether listening to the radio or reading a book, is something to be abhorred. As I have noted in my Journal, this is particularly true of my father. Arthritis has tugged him down into a chair and he says that he feels as if chains are holding him down. He doesn't just mean the arthritis, but the chains of sitting still. In my Journal, I've written of the time when a neighbour asked him to repair an old lawnmower; my father was delighted and he telephoned me to say, "Not on the scrap heap yet." The ritual of working, being active is still very strong in my own father. In my novel, Frank too is driven by ritual, by the tasks that he sets himself every day.

Forster believed that her father's rituals actually kept him alive:

He had no intention of giving up. The harder it became to manage, the harder he tried. And he was as obsessed with time as ever, keeping a close eye on his two clocks and his wristwatch and writing up each day in his calendars. Time was never going to pass him by, certainly not.¹³

Forster says of her father that he viewed life as a battle - "and the point was he was still

¹² John Mortimer, *The Summer of a Dormouse*. Viking 2001 p.1

¹³ Margaret Forster, *Precious Lives* Vintage, 1999 p.85.

winning."¹⁴ I would argue that, for my father, perhaps Forster's too, it's not actually about the battle with life, it's about being a player, continuing to take a part even at an advanced age.

¹⁴ Ibid.p.50

2.2. The Novels of Anne Tyler.

The interrelated themes of time, old age and death run through all Tyler's novels. In *Patchwork Planet*, she has centred her protagonist in a world peopled by the elderly. The novel is written in first person narrative and Tyler's character, Barnaby Gaitlin, works for *Rentaback*, a company that helps elderly people with heavy chores. Barnaby describes himself as a "juvenile delinquent,"¹⁵ As a teenager he broke into other people's houses; he says he had a "real thing about photo albums."¹⁶

The other kids who broke in along with me, they'd be hunting car keys and cigarettes and booze. They'd be tearing through closets and cabinets all around me, while I sat on the sofa poring over somebody's wedding pictures. And even when I took stuff, it was always personal stuff. This little snow globe once from a nightstand in a girl's bedroom.¹⁷

Barnaby understands this to be an unusual thing to do:

I'm not proud of this. I'd sooner confess to jewel theft than to pocketing six letters tied up with satin ribbon which is what I did when we jimmed the lock at the Emprey's place one night. But there you are.¹⁸

Barnaby's parents believe his job to be a poor career choice and wish him to join his father in the family business. Barnaby's relationship with his customers is always unfailingly polite and caring, whilst the relationship with his own family is fraught. Barnaby has more of a sense of family from his elderly charges; he understands their disappointment in their own families as, in a lot of instances, it mirrors his own. His views on his elderly clients are, in turn, affectionate, direct and graphic. Old ladies are "cheerful and determined...a tiny, gnat of a woman, tidy little head and a deep, low-set pouch of a bosom."¹⁹

¹⁵ Anne Tyler, *Patchwork Planet*, Vintage, 1998. P.9.

¹⁶ Ibid.p.9.

¹⁷ Ibid.p.9.

¹⁸ Ibid.p.9/10

¹⁹ Anne Tyler, *Patchwork Planet*, Vintage, p. 42.

In turn, he defends his charges, defends their idiosyncrasies, he sees beyond their age, their appearance. But it is not simply their appearance that is benign: the elderly have qualities that are lacking in Barnaby's immediate family. Their homes smell of: "steam heat and brothy foods."²⁰ With his own family he's defensive, prickly and he's never sure that that they understand that he's happy doing what he does. He feels more at home with his elderly customers than he does with his parents. He simply doesn't see the "terrifying slippery slope" referred to by Julia Johnson earlier in this study.

On the occasion of his 30th birthday when his parents have invited him to a celebratory party, he laments:

...that somebody was missing from our family table...it was such a pitiful showing.
We didn't make enough noise; we didn't seem busy enough, embroiled enough...
I'd come to realise that we would never be the kind of family I'd envisioned.²¹

It could be argued here that Tyler is suggesting that Barnaby's earlier obsession with stealing minutiae of family life, the photos, the snow globe, simply mean that he was searching for the fabric that builds up family life - the fabric that he finds within the homes of his elderly clients.

...the possessions choking the basements and clogging the attics, lovingly squirreled away for grown children. The children say, "We don't have room. We'll never have room!" But the parents refuse to believe that the trappings of a lifetime could have so little value."²²

Throughout this novel Tyler never under-estimates the physical trauma of ageing:

the sags and droops, splotchy humps, bulging stomachs, knobbly fingers, thinning hair, freckled scalp. You're supposed to say old age is beautiful, that's one of

²⁰ Ibid.p.28.

²¹ Ibid.p.75.

²² Ibid.p.235.

those lines intended to shame whoever disagrees.²³

Yet, not once, does the narrative mock the physical reality of growing old. Barnaby sees and understands the challenges faced by the elderly: memory loss and hearing problems, abandonment by family. Barnaby simply accepts all the “knobby fingers, thinning hair” as a small part of his customers’ lives. Tyler prefixes statements with: “I should mention,” to introduce the description of an elderly person’s appearance. That gives the reader the impression that it is of no consequence, hardly worth mentioning. It’s simply an older person’s charm, their quirkiness. We must take no heed of the fact that Barnaby’s grandmother wears a “tight tank top and baggy green army shorts.”²⁴ By contrast the description of the clothes that Barnaby’s mother wears - “brisk black wool pantsuit, all spiny-backed and indignant -”²⁵ gives the reader an entirely different picture as we get an image of something sharp, hard. Tyler uses this technique to present the older generation as being softer, pliant, altogether more comfortable. When Barnaby’s mother is introduced into the narrative, he asks her to stop dyeing her hair black: “it made her look white-faced and witchy.”²⁶ This can be interpreted as suggesting that Barnaby might have been able to relate better to his mother if she at least looked older, perhaps more in keeping with his customers.

Although I will return to it later, I will draw attention here to the use of a calendar in this novel. The calendar serves two purposes for the older characters: with decreasing memory a calendar acts as a reminder of the events in their lives and, secondly, it could keep them in touch with what’s happening outside their front door. Tyler uses a calendar when she wants to focus the reader on the shrinking world of the elderly. Their appointments are invariably connected to their health, their age: Barnaby removes a calendar from an old woman’s house and looks at the entries marked:

“doctor this, doctor that, mammogram, podiatrist. Anything to do with her family had an

²³ Ibid. p. 231.

²⁴ Ibid. p.126.

²⁵ Ibid. p.105.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 69.

exclamation mark after it."²⁷

Throughout the narrative, Barnaby feels only warmth and affection for the older characters - the message from Tyler seems to be that the elderly are not judgmental. Her older characters, perhaps by virtue of having reached old age, simply accept people as Barnaby is accepted by them, although he recognises that, whilst treating the elderly clients as his friends, "clients could up and die on you."²⁸ Barnaby eventually understands that tending elderly people has given him a different perspective on money and possessions: something that neither of his parents has understood. In Paul Bail's *Critical Companion to Anne Tyler*, he states:

Barnaby sees that true value lies in relationships, not objects. He meets couples who have been married for fifty or sixty years, caring for each other in illness, dealing with the challenges of money and failing memories, the crises of their children and grandchildren.²⁹

My second choice of novel by Anne Tyler is her latest publication: *Back When We Were Grownups*. This one has an elderly man at the centre of a large family. The protagonist, Rebecca, has inherited a 99 year-old uncle when her husband died.

It was a matter of pure happenstance that she was the one who had to listen to the state of his bowels every morning and accompany him on his exercise walk and ferry him to the doctor and the dentist and physical therapist.³⁰

The novel tells the story of Rebecca, a 55 year-old widow, running a business, caring for a 99 year-old uncle-in-law and presiding over the squabbles that regularly erupt in her family. I used the word *centred* in a previous paragraph and that seems to be an apt word for the character of Poppy - a family nickname for the elderly uncle at the heart of this novel. Again, Tyler demonstrates affection for her frail character; the description of Poppy's appearance is detailed

²⁷ Ibid. p. 180.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 113.

²⁹ Paul Bail, *Anne Tyler - A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1998 p. 193.

³⁰ Anne Tyler, *Back When We Were Grownups*, Chatto & Windus, 2001 p. 24.

demonstrates affection for her frail character; the description of Poppy's appearance is detailed and affectionate:

Bristly whiskers silvered his face and his white hair stood on end, unbrushed, raying out like sunbeams.³¹

Not only is the old man at the centre of the novel - he *centres* Rebecca. Whilst her family life at times spirals out of control, she returns to her house where each time Poppy renews his conversation about the planning of the celebrations for his forthcoming 100th birthday. The novel focuses on Rebecca's questioning of herself and members of her family; is she the same person she was when she got married thirty years ago?

The narrative moves seamlessly through various family celebrations, the petty rows, the rivalry between siblings and there is a strong sense of her increasing frustration as Rebecca realizes that, for most of her family, they feel she's merely reached some crossroads in her life. But even more than the understanding that the years are passing, Rebecca mourns the person that she used to be, before she got married. In an attempt to convey this concern to her mother, when they are both watching a news programme on television, she says:

Those men are younger than I am too; at least a lot of them are. But I look at their grey hair and I think 'old guys' as if I didn't realize that I'm getting old myself.³²

Her mother merely observes: "You don't know the half of it."³³

Rebecca begins an inner life, "an imaginary might-have-been life,"³⁴ with no outward sign that she has any anxieties at all. Her dual thinking process is grounded always by Poppy. The old man has no concept of any thought that begins with *what if?* Instead he has a calm acceptance of his age, the vagaries of declining health and, more importantly, he has confidence in Rebecca, in her

³¹ *Back When We Were Grownups*, p.251.

³² *Ibid.* p. 66.

³³ *Ibid.*p.66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*p.91.

ability to support and care for him.

Throughout the middle section of the novel, while Rebecca's hidden world spirals almost out of control, Poppy's quiet insistence that his birthday party will be correctly handled, holds Rebecca like an anchor. Whenever Poppy and Rebecca are together, Tyler foregrounds the scenes with a reminder of Poppy's great age, his appearance: "His lids were like bits of waxed paper that had been crumpled and then smoothed out."³⁵ As readers, we are reminded of his age and infirmity: "They could hear Poppy on the stairs, cane, shoe, shoe, cane, shoe, shoe."³⁶ As in *Patchwork Planet*, Tyler presents the reader with reminders of the frailties that accompany old age, in a gentle, respectful way.

When eventually, Rebecca holds the party for Poppy, there is a defining moment in the novel; the guests are assembled and Rebecca watches Poppy as he "turned so blindly in her direction that it stabbed her heart."³⁷ Rebecca finally realizes that, not just for Poppy's sake, but also for her own, she needs to retrieve normal life. The party also allows Rebecca to fully understand how Poppy feels about his age, his experiences throughout his life. This sentiment is discussed by Peter Coleman: "an essential task of old age is the preservation of a coherent, constant self in the face of loss and of threat of loss."³⁸

A calendar plays a part in this novel too. Rebecca keeps one in her kitchen, marking out dates and times for her business appointments, but also marked up there are Poppy's medical appointments. Even in her imagined life, Rebecca needs to keep abreast of the things that earn her living. It could also be argued that the medical appointments not only give Poppy a reason to live, but keep him alive.

The third and final Anne Tyler novel under review is *Breathing Lessons*, for which she was

³⁵ *Back When We Were Grownups* p.156.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.256.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 111.

³⁸ Peter Coleman, *Ageing & Reminiscence Processes*, John Wiley & Sons. 1986. P. 13.

awarded the Pulitzer Prize. This was the first novel by Tyler that I read and it was this book that triggered my interest in how we look at ageing, how we mentally face up to the challenge. It also formed part of my research when writing my novel.

Breathing Lessons deals with one day in the life of Maggie Moran which may appear to be an overly confined canvas to paint a portrait of Maggie's life. However, this single day is a microcosm of the whole of Maggie's span of years. The characters in *Breathing Lessons* confront all three of Tyler's themes: failure, old age and the inevitability of death. Paul Bail states:

All one's constructed meanings are threatened by the central fact of existence - the inevitability of death. Most of us try to dull the awareness of death because of a sense of dread.³⁹

The marriage of Maggie and Ira Moran is at the heart of this novel and how they face up to approaching old age. Maggie is 48 years old and works as a nursing assistant at the Silver Threads Nursing Home where, like Barnaby Gaitlin in *Patchwork Planet*, she gains a strong sense of personal identity by helping the elderly. Unlike Barnaby, however, Maggie understands more about ageing and the inevitability of death. In this novel, Tyler has focused clearly on the issue of time as an abstraction and the impact of its passing on individual lives. Even in her teens, Maggie thought about the passing of time:

It was her first inkling that her generation was part of the stream of time. Just like the others ahead of them, they would grow up and grow old and die.

Already there was a younger generation prodding them from behind.⁴⁰

Unlike the previous novels, Tyler does not soften the appearance of ageing although as before, her description is always detailed and interested and certainly, not without affection. A resident of the Silver Threads Nursing Home has "arthritic, club-like hands."⁴¹ At a funeral that Maggie and

³⁹ Paul Bail, *Anne Tyler - A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1998 p. 151.

⁴⁰ Anne Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, Chatto & Windus 1989 p. 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 39.

Ira attend, twin sisters that Maggie knew at school still wear their hair in the same style, but she can see that the "backs of their necks were scrawny as chicken necks."⁴²

There is no calendar in this novel but, in its place, Tyler has placed a picture that Maggie's grandmother had in her parlour:

It showed this old couple sitting by the fireplace in their rocking chairs and the title was etched across the bottom of the frame: *Old Folks at Home*. But they were so extremely old! They had those withered apple faces and potato sack bodies; they were people you would classify instantly and dismiss. I never imagined I would be an Old Folk at Home.⁴³

From Tyler's use of flashbacks, the reader understands the complexities of the Moran's marriage, the worry of bringing up two children and the fear of ageing that both Ira and Maggie have. In one scene at the funeral, the mourners congratulate each other on the fact that they all look so much younger than their parents did at the same age. For Maggie, the funeral represents the feeling that time is out of control - it is accelerating - years have slipped by without her understanding that they've gone. Tyler appears to be arguing that life and time are best seen not as a continuum with the past faded or lost, but as a series of layers. At the end of the novel, Maggie has learnt the lessons of the title: how to cope with marriage, time and life itself. She has learnt to understand the inevitability of old age: she learns too that by placing marriage, time and the inescapability of death into perspective, she will be able to continue down a not always smooth road.

⁴² Ibid.p. 66.

⁴³ Ibid. p.132.

2.3 The Novels of Margaret Forster.

Unlike Tyler, Forster approaches the subject of ageing in a much brisker fashion. *Have the Men Had Enough?* is the first novel under review and it describes the effect that an elderly grandmother has on a family and how they cope with keeping her in her own home.

Although, like Tyler, Forster manages to convey an understanding of the ageing process with its frailties and attendant problems, her style is altogether more direct, it has a journalistic, almost documentary realism:

Her feet are like deserted battlegrounds. They are covered in discoloured lumps and bumps, the flesh stretched over them, scaly and blue. Her toes are huge and twisted into strange shapes.⁴⁴

Forster has written this novel from two perspectives: that of Jenny, the middle-aged daughter-in-law and of Hannah, the teenage granddaughter. In my novel, I've also used two points of view: an elderly grandfather and that of his 12 year old grandson. I will discuss this in greater detail in the Conclusion.

Throughout *Have the Men Had Enough?* the central character is referred to as *Grandma*. She lives in a specially converted flat and is looked after by family members and a team of paid carers. It is the struggle that the family has in looking after Grandma and keeping her in her own home that lies at the heart of this novel. In her essay, *Intimate Relationships*, Dorothy Jerrome calls this set-up, " a reservoir, which exists to support the old person."⁴⁵

By adopting two voices, Forster allows the reader to watch the struggle the middle-aged narrator has with the effort entailed in keeping the grandmother at home and, by doing so, keeping her

⁴⁴ Margaret Forster, *Have the Men Had Enough?* Penguin. 1989 p 96.

⁴⁵ Coleman, Pearce, *Ageing in Society*, Sage Publications, 1993 p 253.

dignity.

This narrative voice is sharply contrasted with the voice of Hannah, the teenager who adopts a far more pragmatic view:

Grandma isn't an intolerable burden as far as I can see - yet Mum acts as if she is.
It disgusts me.⁴⁶

Although Forster's description of the rapid decline into senility is unsentimental, it does draw attention to the dilemma the family faces as they seek answers to the problem of the old lady. A calendar makes its appearance in this novel - Jenny needs to keep control on the times and dates for each carer, whether family member or paid help. Like Rebecca in *Back When We Were Grownups*, by strict adherence to times and dates, Jenny is able to cope with looking after Grandma. It can also be argued that, by attending to these details, Jenny can assuage any guilt she may be feeling; she can see that she's doing all she can.

The relentlessness of the downward spiral of Grandma's senility causes enormous problems within the family. Forster's narrative is, at times, bleak and uncompromising:

Most alarming of all is her inability to eat and drink. She looks at the tea, she feels the mug and then she just stares at it. Food gets flattened, squeezed, pushed around the plate, up her nose, even into her ears. It takes hours to get a tiny cube of toast into her.⁴⁷

Initially Hannah searches for the spark, the essence of her grandmother:

Sometimes I can catch her eye and I know she is sane. I look up and stare at Grandma and, for a moment, she catches my eye and I hold my breath.
It is there - sanity. What can I do with this?⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Have the Men Had Enough?* p. 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 197.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.44.

There is an echo of this spark of sanity to be found in John Bayley's biography, *Iris*. He writes movingly of the time that Iris Murdoch tells an acquaintance that she feels she is "sailing into the darkness."⁴⁹ Bayley felt that this demonstrated a "terrible lucidity about what is going on."⁵⁰

As well as the accelerated slide into senility, Forster also describes Grandma's physical decline: she uses harsh language to present the reader with a vivid picture of an ageing woman; she is, "bent," "bowed," "shabby and grey." Her skin is "the colour of an old tea-bag."

Initially Hannah acts as a buffer zone between her Grandma and the rest of the family; she strives to understand why everyone thinks it is such hard work looking after an elderly woman. The young boy in my novel also acts as an intermediary, defending his grandfather, making allowances for his rituals, understanding his need for them. In Forster's novel, Hannah initially fails to appreciate the emotional toll that the family is under but, eventually, she understands something of the pressure. Towards the end of the novel, the old lady enters a home and she dies there while Jenny sits by her bedside:

Dying was proving so hard. I thought of the natural childbirth exercises I had conscientiously done. Where are the natural death ones? Grandma did not know how to die and she did not want to die. There was no giving up, no surrender.⁵¹

Interestingly, the *Lessons* referred to in Tyler's *Breathing Lessons*, relate to the deep breathing technique taught in childbirth lectures.

Although, *Have the Men Had Enough?* is an angry novel, often quite brutal in its narrative, compassion is at its heart. It is essentially a love story, the love a family has for an elderly relative,

⁴⁹ John Bayley, *Iris*, Abacus, 1998 p. 277.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p.277.

⁵¹ *Have the Men Had Enough?* p.237.

but it is also a condemnation of the way society treats old people. Ageing is not only about becoming very frail and needing care. Hannah's voice at the end of the novel, merely asks: "When my time comes, I will say I've had enough and go - but will I be able to?"⁵²

The second Forster novel under review is *Mother Can You Hear Me?* in which a middle-aged daughter comes to terms with her childhood as she brings up her own family. It is in this novel that traces of Forster's father can be detected in the character of the elderly father. Throughout the novel the parents are referred to as *Mother* and *Father*. It could be argued that by using titles rather than Christian names, in both this novel and *Have the Men Had Enough?* Forster instantly places her characters: she gives them their rightful status.

Angela Bradbury is the protagonist; she has an unhappy relationship with her parents, particularly so with that of her mother. She resents the air of martyrdom that her parents adopt as they grow older, and she resolves never to treat her own children in the same manner.

In *Precious Lives*, Forster's biography of her father, she writes of his passion for a calendar - indeed he has two. He records daily events in minute detail: what he had for tea, the weather conditions. Forster says of her father that he was "a man of rigid routine."⁵³ The elderly Father in *Mother Can You Hear Me?* also keeps a careful note of every mundane task. Forster uses words like "rigid" and "meticulous," - these illustrate the almost fanatical desire to write something down on the calendar. In my own novel, the character of the grandfather also maintains a calendar with painstaking care. It can be argued, that for a lot of older people, the keeping of a calendar or diary maintains a link with the outside world. Empty pages spell empty days and Forster's father needed the sight of a full calendar to enable him to feel part of life. She said of her father that he *had to have a calendar, "so he would know where he was."*⁵⁴

⁵² *Have the Men Had Enough?* p.251.

⁵³ Margaret Forster, *Precious Lives*, Vintage. 1999 p. 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p.82.

In his essay, *Becoming and Being Old*, Jonathan Lang says:

Spare time is not the enemy. It was 'time on your hands' that was seen to be the enemy. Elderly people who felt that they had time on their hands did tend to report fewer activities and were also more likely to have had a worse experience of retirement than they had expected.⁵⁵

Forster's father took immense pride in the fact that he still worked in his garden, planting vegetables, mowing the lawn. He wrote in his calendar every day, it was a reminder that he was still active, still capable.

In *Mother Can You Hear Me?* Angela's parents also use their calendar as a weapon; they tell her that after she's left them following a family holiday, their days will be empty. "I'll be stuck in this room for another 12 months."⁵⁶ Angela talks to her parents about changing their attitudes, particularly so when her mother says: "it takes us a long time to do anything. We're old and slow."⁵⁷ In my Journal I have noted that, during a conversation with my own mother about choices in life, taking on new interests, she simply shook her head and said that I'd had more opportunities than she ever had and, anyway, she'd left it too late. Angela Bradbury also tries to tell her mother that her mother's life wasn't wasted, she'd achieved a lot.

...and you could embroider and make lace - look at all the lovely things you've done.
That patchwork quilt you made....⁵⁸

But, like my mother, Angela's mother merely shakes her head, and says she's had a wasted life. Although verbally disagreeing with her mother, Angela understands the truth of what has been said:

Mother was right - she had been wasted. She was clever and gifted and ought not to have

⁵⁵ Bill Blytheway, Teresa Allat, (editors) *Becoming and Being Old*, Sage Publications, 1989 p. 58.

⁵⁶ *Mother Can You Hear Me?* p. 110.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 103.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p.86.

spent her life cleaning out grates and lugging vast baskets of washing about. She had wasted her considerable energies scrubbing floors and mending clothes. Nothing in her had ever flowered. Angela had always known Mother was a rare bird, if doomed to fly nowhere.⁵⁹

Like my parents, Angela's Mother and Father continue to be fixed in their belief that once old age is reached, their lives are constricted and, even worse, they believe the world turns its back on the elderly.

In an article in *The Daily Telegraph*, Elizabeth Jane Howard said, "There is a conspiracy about old age - not discussed, dreaded."⁶⁰ This is yet another example of the *otherness* as discussed in my Introduction, and of the ageism that affects even the elderly.

There is a teenage daughter in this novel - another buffer between the generations. Sadie is 15 years old and, like the initial confusion that Hannah faced, cannot understand her mother's frustration as Angela struggles with her ageing parents. Like *Have the Men Had Enough?*, there is anger in this novel. Angela is determined to prove to her parents that being old does not necessarily mean waiting for death. Her stance causes friction between them. The need for days to be full, for her parents to have some purpose in their lives, exasperates Angela. Whilst she longs for peace, her parents loathe the silence that surrounds them. She tells her mother that she longs for the day when the children have left home and she can have peace in her house. Her mother's reply is martyred:

You'll be wanting noise before long when all the children have gone and there isn't a sound all day and nobody to speak to you. No one wants you when you're old, nobody bothers you then.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Mother Can You Hear Me?* p. 86.

⁶⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 23rd May, 2001.

⁶¹ *Mother Can You Hear Me?* p.47.

Forster comments on her father's martyred attitude when, after his death, she finds notes written in his diary: "Nothing doing - no-one called - long day."⁶²

Forster's technique in *Mother Can You Hear Me?* is to use two voices for Angela: as well as the narrative flow, we also listen to Angela's thoughts. This echoes Tyler's use of an inner voice for Rebecca in *Back When We Were Grownups*. We have access to Angela's thoughts as she strives to be a good parent:

A mother, Angela thought, should be there when you come home to soothe and explain and support. It is the most important function there is. But often she was left with a sense of foreboding. What was she nurturing by providing such a service? She was a soft cushion, delicious to sink into - and extremely bad for the back if sat upon too long.⁶³

Running parallel to Angela's thoughts is her knowledge of how her own parents brought up their children, a trap Angela does not want to fall into. All of this is watched and commented upon by Sadie - who, with the studied carelessness of a teenager, fails to understand Angela's problem. By using teenage characters in both novels so far discussed, Forster allows readers another insight into the problems of coping with ageing parents. Like Hannah in the previous novel, Sadie simply doesn't understand what Angela is so upset about.

Forster is pragmatic when she writes of her own father's grim adherence to life, the almost evangelical zeal that drives him from one birthday to another, although, as he nears his 96th birthday, he admits that "life is no fun."⁶⁴ This phrase is mirrored in the novel as Angela steadfastly tries to show her parents that old age is not necessarily a passport to illness and death but her Mother insists that getting old is "no fun."⁶⁵ Each interlude is watched by Sadie until Angela understands that she is falling into the same trap of parenting, the one she'd tried to avoid,

⁶² *Precious Lives*. p.54.

⁶³ *Mother Can You Hear Me?* p.87.

⁶⁴ *Precious Lives* p.207.

⁶⁵ *Mother Can You Hear Me?* p.89.

"but she felt the cloying wraps of self-pity and resentment ensnaring her."⁶⁶

She too wanted the sort of daughter that her mother wanted. As in *Have the Men Had Enough?* Forster has put a teenager into the role of mediator.

At the end of the novel, following the death of her mother, Angela watches Sadie's face. She sees, for the first time, that Sadie bears a great resemblance to her dead grandmother. She listens too as her daughter tells Angela that she is glad they don't have the same relationship that Angela had with her mother. Sadie feels the relationship she has with Angela is altogether better, healthier.

Although both novels share the same ending, the death of an elderly mother, the message in *Mother Can You Hear Me?* is entirely different to the previous novel. As Angela sorts out her mother's effects, she reflects upon her mother's life and how she, Angela, created a different image from that of her mother. She reflects too on how deep the roots were that went back to that other view of maternity. She asks:

Would Sadie suffer with an aged mother exactly as she herself had suffered?

Was pain the inescapable price for that unstinting love mothers gave to their young children in such abundance?⁶⁷

The final Forster novel under discussion is *The Seduction of Mrs. Pendlebury*, which chronicles the lives of Rose and Stanley Pendlebury; an elderly couple living in an antiquated house in Islington, North London. The novel deals with the isolation that the Pendleburys feel as their neighbourhood is smartened up. The renovation and refurbishment that takes place around Rose and Stanley - leaving their house like an island in the middle of a sea of building work - might be a metaphor for society's view of the elderly. This too can be seen as the *other* discussed by Professor Raymond Tallis.

⁶⁶ Ibid.p.193.

⁶⁷ *Mother Can You Hear Me?* p.192.

Again, there are three generations in this novel: an eighteen-month-old child, her parents and their neighbours, Rose and Stanely. Rose is "brittle as toffee."⁶⁸ She is suspicious, defensive in her dealings with the new neighbours. She mistrusts the people next door, believing that they won't want anything to do with her simply because she is old. Rose's behaviour is so extreme, she is brusque to the point of rudeness when any of the neighbours stop to talk. She is unable to believe that they ask questions out of kindness - she immediately thinks that everyone laughs at her, mocking her elderly appearance. "She was just a boring old lady, sitting on a park bench, with nothing to do."⁶⁹ There is a marked similarity between the characters of Mother in *Mother Can You Hear Me?* and Rose Pendlebury. Both these elderly women believe that they are judged by others, judged and found wanting because of their age. Forster appears to be reinforcing a statement made earlier in this essay, that ageism has reached the elderly. Particularly so in the case of Rose, who believes that she's invisible because she's old, so she ceases bothering to take care of her appearance. Forster, again by use of the journalistic technique, describes her as "white-faced, dressed in scruffy, egg-stained clothes and her hair unbrushed."⁷⁰

By direct contrast with his wife, Stanley Pendlebury is an open, friendly man who takes an enormous interest in the lives of the new neighbours. Rose hates the fact that he asks questions; she says he's nosey and interfering:

I don't need you or anyone else to make advances for me Stanley Pendlebury.
I've still a civil tongue in my head and I'll use it when I want to issue invitations,
so keep your big mouth shut in future.⁷¹

Stanley keeps a calendar in their kitchen, taking a delight in the marking down of appointments,

⁶⁸ Margaret Forster *The Seduction of Rose Pendlebury*, Penguin 1979 p. 56.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 249.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.23.

the date of a forthcoming wedding. Rose is scornful of his calendar, she says there is nothing in their lives worthy enough to write down. It is, however, the sight of so many blank days that bothers her. So many empty days, reaffirming her belief that nobody takes any notice of elderly people.

The Pendleburys are unable to afford major alterations to their home so Rose maintains a punishing schedule of cleaning, endlessly polishing and vacuuming every room. The toddler, Amy, finally breaks through Rose's antipathy. She delights in the child and slowly drops her prickly guard. A friendship between the eighteen-month-old girl and the 72 year old woman blooms. Eventually the child's mother also becomes a friend and the two women share cups of coffee and Rose takes on the role of baby-sitter. The barriers that Rose has put up around her life, her house, slowly disappear and she begins to think:

...that the world was not such an unfriendly jungle. It might contain things worth discovering. She didn't feel the need to bury herself in her home and never go outside.⁷²

It could be argued that the plot so far is clichéd: elderly woman succumbing to the charms of a toddler, but Forster avoids sentimentality by continuing to focus on Rose's insecurities. As fast as the relationship develops, Rose's deep distrust of outsiders keeps pace. She is unable to relax, she feels that she is being judged, commented upon and Amy's mother finds friendship with Rose hard work. The young mother struggles to choose the right words, the right phrase in her continuing battle to win the old lady over. They exchange gifts at Christmas:

Like children they clutched their respective gifts to each other and wondered what to say and do next.⁷³

The young mother suffers a miscarriage and, in the ensuing upset, Rose mistakenly feels that

⁷² *The Seduction of Mrs. Pendlebury* p. 80.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p.192.

she has been ignored, forgotten. Every one of her old insecurities comes flooding back and she tells Stanley to stay away from the house next door.

When Alice, the young mother, returns home from hospital, she is naturally subdued and Rose mistakenly believes that the reticence is due to the fact that her young neighbour regrets all the overtures of friendship and, in turn, Alice feels overcome by the energy she needs to soothe Rose Pendlebury.

It had all gone sour. What she had hoped for when she first set out to convert Mrs. Pendlebury to human fellowship had backfired and she had become a martyr.⁷⁴

The novel closes at almost exactly the same point it commenced. The two families are apart again. Rose resolutely refuses to have any contact with her neighbours. Her original belief that nobody talked to her because she was old, is back firmly in place. Her neighbours eventually give up all attempts at friendliness because they feel she behaves the way she does, due to her age. The differences between generations is played out in full in this novel. The perpetuating misunderstandings continue and, although Forster portrays Rose as a brittle, defensive woman, as readers we still feel compassion for her. At the end of the novel she is again friendless but she vows that, next time, she'll try harder to overcome her misgivings.

These six novels have been chosen to underpin my research. I have discussed how both Forster and Tyler write with compassion, yet neither flinch from portraying the harsh reality of what it is to become old. And, significantly for the purpose of my Study, they show the rippling effect that elderly parents have on family life. We may have succeeded in glossing over middle age, but how do we deal with the years beyond that? It is a major triumph of the 21st century that many more people survive to a ripe old age, but there can be room for complacency. Until we learn and

⁷⁴ *The Seduction of Mrs. Pendlebury* p. 205.

understand a little more about what being old tells us in respect of human possibility, there is a danger that a long life and a healthy old age will not even seem worth striving for.

3.0 CONCLUSIONS:

The use of calendars in these novels serves a dual purpose: they are necessary reminders of appointments but they also act as proof that the elderly can still keep control of their lives. Being in charge of one's life is an essential part of self-confidence; when that control is wrested from you, self-confidence dwindles. Writing about her father, Margaret Forster said, "he had to have a calendar so he'd know who he was."⁷⁵ She believed it was his insistence upon the endless notes in a calendar that anchored him to life. In my novel Frank not only makes notes of his own appointments, but he writes in laborious detail everything his son and grandson do - keeping him abreast not only of family life, but keeping him part of it. The idea for this came from my mother, and I've recorded in my Journal that she writes all family appointments in her calendar, not just her own, but also those of my three daughters, my sisters and mine, and also those of her sons-in-law.

Many of Barnaby Gaitlin's clients in *Patchwork Planet* wrote every detail of their everyday lives into their calendars, whilst Rebecca in *Back When We Were Grownups* kept a calendar to enable her to run a business efficiently - it also enabled her to maintain Poppy's health, keeping him alive. Tyler appears to be saying that the inevitability of death is not anything to be afraid of - we've all been leading up to it. This is captured as Rebecca listens to Poppy's speech at his birthday party:

It was like a sort of report on what it was like to be alive, she decided.

Let's say you had to report back to heaven at the end of your time on earth,

tell them what your personal allotment of experience had been: wouldn't it sound

like Poppy's speech?⁷⁶

In the three Anne Tyler novels, the prevailing message is one of hope, of something to be learned

⁷⁵ *Precious Lives*, p.82.

⁷⁶ *Back When We Were Grownups*, p. 273.

from the elderly. They are not the *other*, they are still positive and alert. The younger characters realize that a lot of their options have already been spent. Perhaps they will be more aware when they make new decisions as they grow older.

Forster's novels offer a different message, but it is a positive one: of the strength in family ties and the interaction between generations has been pronounced in all six novels. It is a fairly accurate statement to say that society expects serenity of old age, but none of the older characters in Forster's novels are serene. Befriending the irascible Rose Pendlebury is impossible and looking after a mentally handicapped grandmother places an intolerable burden on Jenny. What does evolve however, are messages of love and hope. It is apparent in Forster's novels that these messages ripple out, spreading out from the older characters, eventually reaching the lives of other members of the family. Forster places great emphasis on the generational gap - that of grandparent and grandchild. This too has been an integral part of my novel, the burgeoning relationship between grandparent and grandson.

What is wrong in our society is the tendency to generate negative attitudes where elderly people are concerned. Because a lot of old people are poor or mentally or physically frail, it is assumed that they are also rigid, unable to learn, unable to make new relationships. It is also assumed that these qualities are true of most old people; I touched upon this topic earlier in this Study. Many of these assumptions are based on ignorance. It is also a sad fact that too few professionals seek work amongst older people and yet, numerically, they are the largest group of people at risk. They present the most complex problems and their needs have the most impact on families and communities. This was demonstrated within the text of *Have the Men Had Enough?* where the family tried desperately to cope with a mentally frail grandmother. There simply was not enough help available, either through social services, the NHS and even privately run, and the most expensive residential homes had no rooms available for Grandma. It would appear that the family's experiences give credence to the research undertaken by Help the Age and Age Concern mentioned at the beginning of this study.

3.1 Missing Nancy.

I've read all of Tyler's novels and consequently I've been aware of her themes: the inevitability of failure, old age and death. Forster's themes are similar and I recognised the overwhelming impact that the life and subsequent death of her father has had on her novels. In my novel, I've tried to incorporate the themes of growing older, facing up to change, as well as my belief that negative stereotyping of the elderly can only damage our relationship with older people. When I began work on my novel, it was always my intention to show the support between generations. Although a clichéd argument, it is generally understood that very often grandchildren have a better relationship with grandparents than they do with parents. It was this *one-step* removed view of old age that I also wanted to portray - the bond that develops between Frank and his grandson, Jonathan, lies at the heart of the novel.

In *Have the Men Had Enough?* Hannah initially fails to appreciate the strain that her mother is under. She cannot understand what all the fuss is about: why her mother thinks Grandma is "an intolerable burden."⁷⁷ Hannah can only see the snow white hair and the fact that Grandma is old frail and forgetful. She thinks her family should do all they can to protect her. In my novel, Jonathan sees Frank sitting in the garden and he sees the:

old man's crumpled blazer... he saw fine, grey hair like down on the exposed
skinny legs, he could see how his grandfather must look to *her*, his mother.⁷⁸

Jonathan, like Hannah, wants to protect his grandparent and, like Hannah, he's acting as a buffer between the generations. He protects Frank too when, later in the novel, his parents talk about

⁷⁷ *Have the Men Had Enough?* p. 73.

⁷⁸ *Missing Nancy* p.17.

lying to Frank about the locality of the war graves in Dunkirk:

He doesn't deserve to be fobbed off with lies. He deserves the truth.

Why can't he have the truth? He's always being lied to?⁷⁹

I've used a calendar in my novel, it's located in Frank's kitchen where, like Forster's father, he records every minute detail of his daily life. Jonathan's mother, Nina, initially fails to recognise how important a calendar is in Frank's life. At first Nina is scathing in her condemnation of the calendar:

What does he want a calendar for? He does the same things every day.⁸⁰

Frank's careful note-taking is vindicated however when Jonathan tries to find out where his father is and Frank is the only one who knows because he has written it in his calendar.

As I wrote this novel, I realised that a lot of the themes that are prevalent in both Tyler and Forster's novels have found their way into my work. Nina has tried to befriend Frank; she understands that most of his dislike of her stems from his unease and distrust of anything new. Like my father and Forster's father, Frank is happiest when he adheres to the rigid routines of his normal life. Frank's weekly menu never changes and Forster said of her father that, for most of his life, he'd eaten fish every Wednesday. There's a sense of vulnerability about this strict adherence to routines. I know it is true of my father; he understands his daily routine, anything new and he loses confidence. In my Journal I've noted how he is unable to function in a new environment or regime.

It is as a direct result of Frank's strict routines that his life may have been saved. Following a fall at his home, he lies on the floor of his bedroom, unable to move. It is only when a neighbour realizes that the curtains have not been drawn quite late in the day, that the alarm is raised. Although Frank hates the thought of neighbours keeping tabs on him, he grudgingly accepts their

⁷⁹ *Missing Nancy*. p.225.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p.7.

help.

Like Rose Pendlebury, Frank distrusts strangers, he will ignore anyone knocking on his door and when his wife Nancy was alive, she'd tease him about his unsocial behaviour. She called him a hamster and Frank replied:

It could just mean trouble, some nosey-parker wanting to know our business -
who needs `em?⁸¹

Forster said of her father that he'd never allow anyone other than family to enter his house. He hated the fact the fact that no-one called upon him any more, yet if anyone had knocked on his door, he would never dream of inviting them in.

In Tyler's novel, *Back When We Were Grownups*, I said that Poppy grounded Rebecca, he enabled her to function on a day-to-day level. I'd like to think that Frank has the same effect upon Jonathan. Whilst he is in France with Nina, Jonathan has promised to maintain contact with his grandfather, to keep him abreast of what's happening. He does this by means of a series of phone calls and Jonathan knows whatever happens to him, he has to conduct these phone conversations to his grandfather on an even keel.

It's brilliant - really good. We've got a book with French words and stuff,
food's smashing. I've had mussels in garlic, Mum let me have some wine last
night. Paris was ok, quite good really, but Euro Disney! Grandad - I can't wait.⁸²

Like Rebecca, Jonathan knows that whatever is happening to him, he needs to show Frank that everything is under control.

Although Nancy has died before the novel begins, she anchors the rest of the characters. Whenever Frank's behaviour becomes too outrageous, too curmudgeonly, he has a sudden memory of Nancy, she *speaks* to him, censuring him and his attitude softens.

⁸¹ *Missing Nancy*, p. 77.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.42.

Following his fall, he conjures up Nancy's face and her voice as he struggles to remain calm.

Nancy's face was still with him, he wanted her to know that he was trying, he had been listening. He kept on breathing, focusing on Nancy's face, *see love, I was listening*. He wanted her to know that he was trying, he *had* been listening. In and out, in and out.⁸³

He talks to her constantly as he tries to cope with the changes in his son's life and what he sees as the dysfunctional parenting which threatens Jonathan. His son, Chris, sees his parents' marriage as some sort of template and feels a failure because his own marriage has broken down. He tells Frank that he felt his marriage to Nina was vague:

That's how it felt to me - vague, undefined. I thought marriage would be positive. Thick, black lines defining it, reinforcing it, strong images. I always thought of your marriage to Mum like that, contained in those strong lines.⁸⁴

Nina also misses Nancy; she tells Chris:

She was everything I wanted to be. I didn't know my Mum but I was able to borrow yours. She was the next best thing. She was a fighter your Mum - she took everything life threw at her - grabbed everything with both hands, just to see if she could handle it.⁸⁵

For Jonathan, he remembers the sayings, the phrases that his grandmother used. Like Barnaby Gaitlin, he wasn't bothered by the greying hair or the liver-spotted hands. Whilst I was writing the novel, it became important to me that I didn't present Nancy as above reproach. I needed to be aware that, simply because she was dead, I didn't imbue her with saint-like qualities. Although, at the same time, it was important to me that she was seen as a major influence on the lives of her

⁸³ *Missing Nancy*. p.172.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*p.48.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.167.

remaining family.

Whilst writing this novel, I was conscious of the fact that for many people, growing older can mean losing identity. Elderly equates with becoming anonymous; this can be likened to what Paul Thomson referred to earlier in the essay - the loss of individuality. Deliberately I avoided any reference to Frank's appearance although I have made mention of his age - almost eighty years old. It was important to me that he is seen through the eyes of a reader without any verbal prodding from me.

At the end of the novel, although still *missing* Nancy, the characters settle down into some semblance of normal family life. Frank has realised that Nina is not a bad mother, she just doesn't operate the same way he does and he has also understood that even at his age, change can still be welcomed. Nina has taken Frank into her home and finds that they can live together in their middle and older years. Nina recognises too that she needs to focus on Jonathan's needs rather than her own. For Jonathan, he has been the catalyst, the buffer between the generations throughout the novel and, with casual oblivion, fails to recognise any problems between his parents and grandfather. He simply doesn't understand what all the fuss has been about.

3.2. Across the Downs.

At the beginning of this Study, I mentioned that, amongst the stereotyped depiction of old age, are the spectres of loneliness and the loss of dignity. These are factors at the forefront of Valerie's mind. Valerie is a character in *Across the Downs*, the title story in my short story collection. She is single following a divorce and she meets up with an elderly lady on her daily walk across the Downs. Molly is the old lady's name and she is desperately lonely; she waylays Valerie and insists they have tea together. Valerie feels threatened by Molly, she sees her garish makeup, her youthful clothes, all at odds with her elderly appearance. Valerie understands that Molly is lonely, but she has no wish to assuage Molly's loneliness. In Valerie's thinking, Molly is the *other*.

With this story, I felt it was important to contrast Valerie's life with the suggestion of the loneliness of Molly's life. I felt too that the story would have greater impact if it was written in first person narrative - but unlike Barnaby Gaitlin, Valerie is unable to see beyond the physical signs of ageing.

When the two women meet they sit on an old bench:

...vandals had attacked it, only two strips of wood to sit on and the ground underneath was littered with empty cans, used condoms and a pair of black tights fluttered like a sad banner from the wrought iron frame.⁸⁶

By comparison Valerie's house is a detached home in a prosperous street. I wanted the suggestion of decay, of something past its sell-by date, to re-affirm in Valerie's mind that she was neither old nor lonely. Molly is insistent that Valerie meets her again and suggests another day when Valerie will walk on the Downs again. Valerie walked away:

⁸⁶ *Across the Downs* p. 46.

I left her there, holding her mug of tea and the grey cardigan lying amongst the empty beer cans and crisp packets.⁸⁷

In Valerie's mind, being old and being lonely are inextricably linked and she stays away from the Downs, and Molly. The obvious need in the old lady disturbs her. Valerie's working life is busy but she spends a lot of time on her own. When eventually she returns to the Downs, she sees Molly with new friends:

I waved but Molly had turned away. I could see her head turned to one side as the bus passed me. I'd finished my walk, I might as well go home. No-one looked up as I walked by.⁸⁸

Valerie eventually understands that although an old lady, Molly will always be able to make friends. Perhaps she recognised that, although she was a younger woman, Valerie is the one who needed company.

Seeing Mum Out is a story I wrote about a daughter's wish to make life easier for her elderly mother. I based the character of the mother on a combination of my own mother and grandmother. Throughout the story, the daughter is irritated by the way in which her mother makes *do*; she puts up with second-best, second-rate. In a perverse way the daughter wants to apologise for the fact that her mother is old, to somehow soften the blow of ageing. Although I found this story painful to write, it has been published and won first prize in the Lichfield competition. Whilst I recognise the fact that I modelled the daughter on myself, (this story too was written in first person narrative) I recognised that the daughter wants to cushion her elderly mother, prepare her for her approaching death.

As discussed earlier Julia Johnson in *Ageing and Later Life*, said that perhaps there was a tendency in us all to treat elderly people in a disrespectful manner; this is often exacerbated by

⁸⁷ *Across the Downs*. p.46.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p.53.

their appearance. For the protagonist in my story, the need to buy the mother good clothes, to pay for a good haircut, is a way of giving her mother some dignity in old age. Or is it? Is it a simple fact that, for the protagonist, it's easier to look at older people if they have the trappings of wealth, of a comfortable life. This is a complicated issue and I recognised that when I was writing it. As children we need to feel that we've done all we can for our ageing parents.

It's only when the elderly mother dies, that the protagonist finally understands that she can buy her mother something substantial:

A warm coat, a good length with a soft velvet collar she can feel against her skin. A silk lining and deep pockets, hand-stitched buttons. It must be a quality coat, to see my Mum out.⁸⁹

The need to have things as they were, as a way of maintaining dignity dominates another story. In *Waiting for Lunch*, I wrote about an old lady coming to terms with living in a nursing home. Elizabeth Cooper had turned a blind eye to her husband's many affairs, purely because he had made up for his philandering by taking good financial care of his wife. However, his life of excess eventually frittered away all his possessions and, when he dies of a heart attack, Elizabeth finds herself in a home for the elderly. Cushioned by money, Elizabeth had not associated herself with other old people; for her they were simply the *other*. Money kept Elizabeth married to Ben, her husband and now that he's gone, she cannot understand why her lifestyle must change. She tells her sons that:

"It's only money - can't take it with you." Elizabeth wanted all this talk about money to go away, she really couldn't cope with all *this*. Ben would sort it out, she simply wanted to hand the whole thing over to him.⁹⁰

But, by dying, Ben *had* taken it with him and Elizabeth's mind finally crumbles as she faces life on her own, away from the things that have propped up her life.

⁸⁹ *To See My Mum Out*. p. 75.

⁹⁰ *Waiting for Lunch* p.23.

The comment made by Alan Bleasdale about how, when we reach 50, we should stay at home and “have a good cry,” might have been something that four characters in the final story in the collection had in mind. *Miles from Memphis* is about four men as they approach middle age and who, for different reasons, worked on a voluntary basis for a hospital radio station. Their lives were safe, and certainly followed predictable patterns. Life at the radio station offered something exciting, a new challenge to aim for before the onset of middle age. Nigel, the most recent addition to the staff wanted to:

Give something back to the community...realise a life-long ambition before
it's too late.⁹¹

Like Maggie Moran in *Breathing Lessons*, they are all mindful of the passing years; they feel, like Tyler's characters, that a lot of their options have already been spent. But nothing can change for these men - they have all left it too late to make any significant changes to their lives. In their eagerness to present their own radio show, not one of them thought to check that anyone was actually listening. Such a thing was unimportant to them, all they were concerned with was the excitement of listening to their own voices. For the four of them, they finally recognised that there really wasn't much left for them other than growing older, without their dreams of stardom to soften the blow.

My novel and the fifteen short stories that make up my collection, are all about change, changes in lives, growing older, and death. It has been particularly interesting for me to re-read the novels of Tyler and Forster as I researched the material for this Study. I can recognise that my interest in the portrayal of the elderly originated from understanding first hand, the combination of dignity, fear, anxiety and frustration that accompanies my parents as they grow older. I saw too the deference that my own daughters showed my parents. In my Journal I've noted that when I took my grandmother out in the car, I vigorously strapped her in, protecting her. I now do the same for my mother and recently one of my daughters did the same to me. It is this generational aspect of

⁹¹ *Miles from Memphis* p.130.

ageing, the caring *loop* that carries on between the generations that fascinates me.

In my comparison between the novels of Anne Tyler and Margaret Foster, I noted how Forster makes use of the life and death of her father. This use of material, in my opinion - this sharing of his life - does not detract in any way from the long life that he had, nor does it rob him of his dignity when he dies. At all times Forster writes movingly of the tremendous support members of his family were able to offer. It is this support that comes through so strongly in her novels. In my own Journal, I've made many references to my parents; I've used the word *re-cycle* as I make note of their anecdotes, and I've made use of many of their phrases in my work. This too can be likened to the fabric that Barnaby Gaitlin was looking for when he stole from neighbours' homes, the fabric that forms the foundation of family life.

The *loop* between the generations as portrayed in all the novels is strong and I've found this within my own family and hopefully it will continue to grow. It would be too glib to say that having researched this topic, I now understand a bit better what it is to grow older and to ensure that I never, ever discriminate against the elderly. In Tyler's novels, she has written of the strong presence that the older generations have within a family unit. She hasn't positioned them on the periphery of family life, they are placed in the centre, *grounding* those around them. I'm aware of Tyler's influence in my own work as I write about loneliness and change in circumstances. What I have discovered through the books of Anne Tyler and Margaret Forster, is that the writer in me can at least try to do something about the portrayal of the elderly - I can put them back into their rightful slot - taking their proper place within society.

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