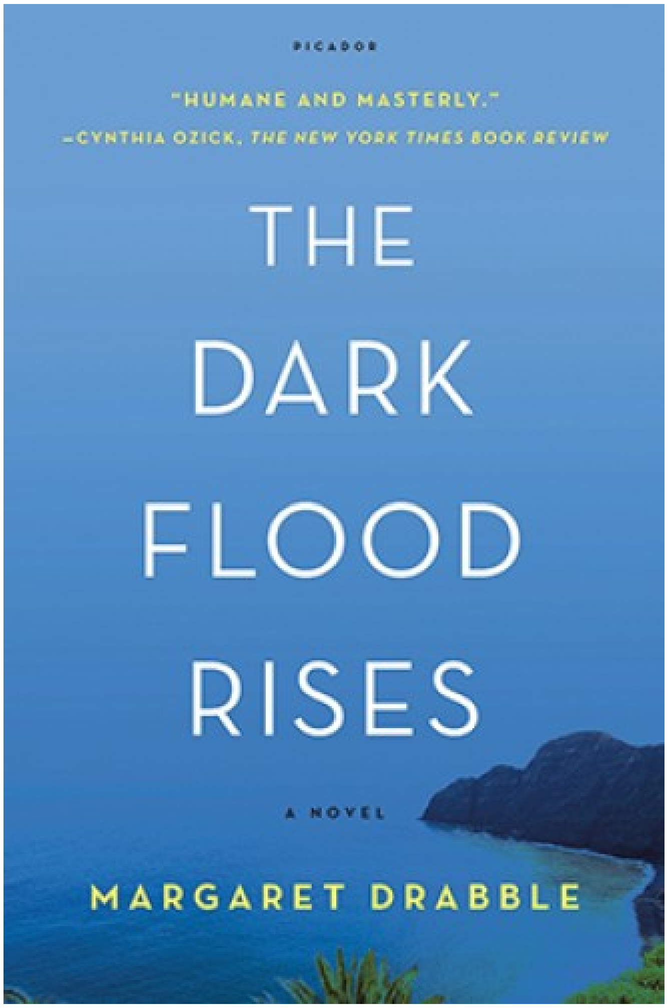
The coming-of-age novel comes of age

If old age is another country, three novelists are exploring not just the peaks and valleys but also the rough places in between.

by Shirley Hershey Showalter in the June 20, 2018 issue

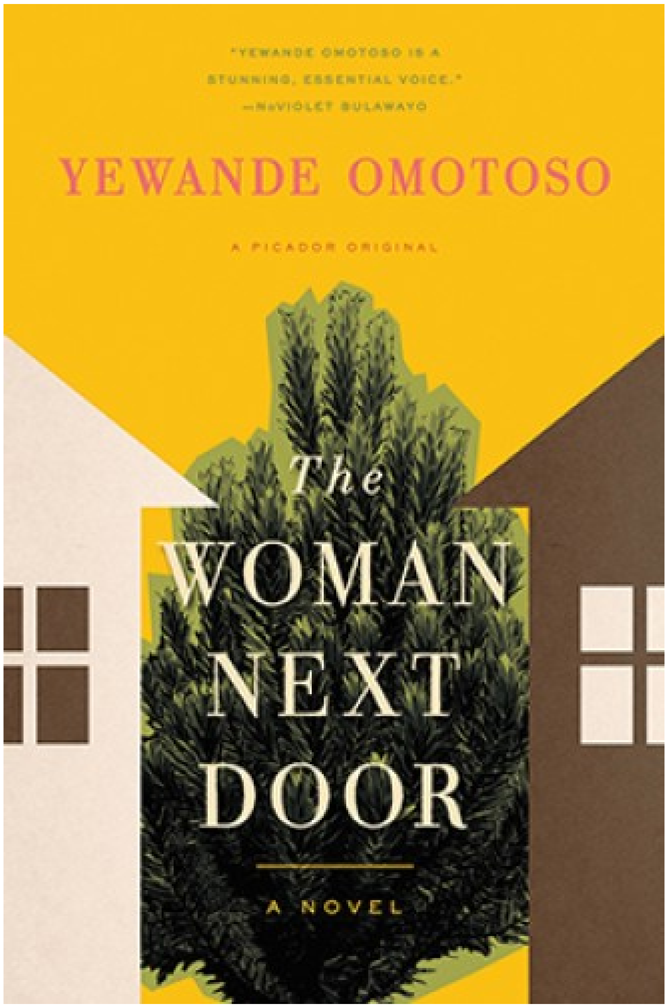
In Review



The Dark Flood Rises

A Novel

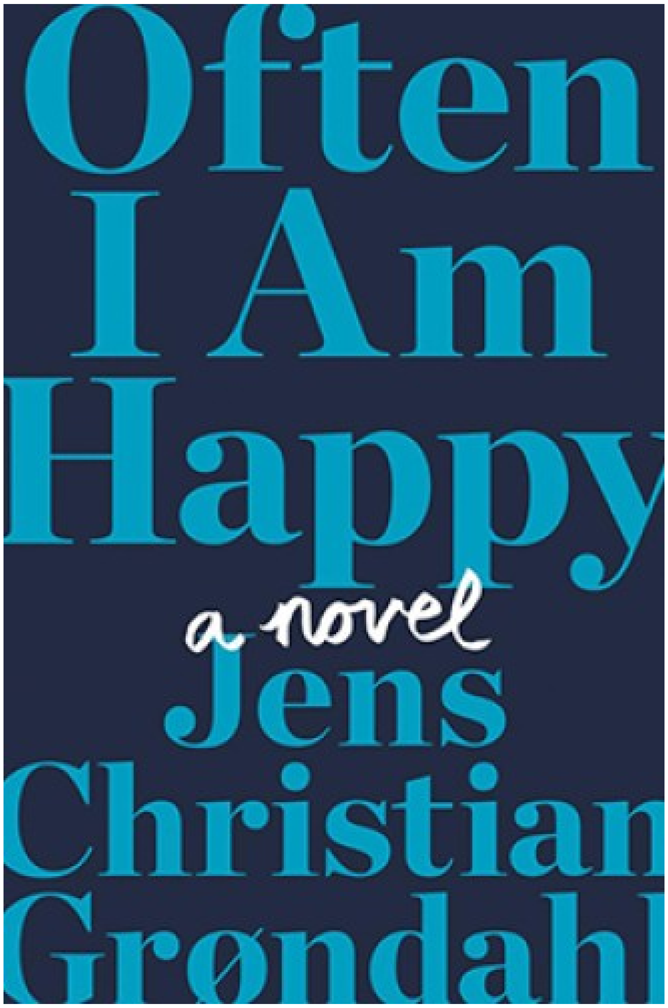
By Margaret Drabble
Picador



The Woman Next Door

A Novel

By Yewande Omotoso
Picador



Often I Am Happy

A Novel

By Jens Christian Grøndahl
Twelve

The world population has never been as old as it is today, and the trend is accelerating. In developed countries, one-third of the population will be older than age 60 by 2050. One UN study declared this growth “without parallel in the history of humanity.” As the population ages, so do novelists: think of Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Marilynne Robinson, Anne Tyler, Anne Lamott, and Richard Ford. Even young fiction writers are curious about the new narrative possibilities that arise from this changing demographic.

Recent coming-of-old-age novels written by Margaret Drabble, Yewande Omotoso, and Jens Christian Grøndahl contain elements found in other contemporary genres: a confessional tone, a journey or quest motif, dreams and flashbacks that link to the past, explorations of sexual passion, ethical questions about how to use time and money, and an emphasis on relationships with children and grandchildren.

Each of these writers also focuses on themes common in aging populations: grief, moving after the death of a spouse, the pressure to live in retirement communities, processing past experiences (like abortion, miscarriage, infidelities, and vocational choices), how to manage a body that breaks down either gradually or suddenly, and what friendship means as friends begin to die. What they try to avoid are the stereotypes of previous eras: the decrepit old grouch or the rebel of the Red Hat Society romantically making up for the "sobriety of youth." The poet May Sarton said, "Old age is another country." If so, these authors have chosen to explore not just the peaks and the valleys but also the rough places in between.

The Dark Flood Rises best illustrates the coming-of-old-age novel in all its contemporary complexity. The protagonist Fran rushes onto the first page imagining her last words to be "you bloody old fool" or "you fucking idiot." Like her creator, Margaret Drabble, Fran is "well into her seventies" and is not retired. She's an expert on housing for the elderly. The job takes her all over England. The country itself is "her last love. . . . She wants to see it all before she dies."

As Fran careens across her beloved country, moving from one standardized hotel room to another, she prides herself on her perceptiveness about the role of physical place in emotional and psychological health. "No, there is nothing heroic about the housing stock and planning policy . . . but old age itself is a theme for heroism. It calls upon courage." These words throw down the gauntlet, and Drabble spends the next 322 pages demonstrating their truth. The book begins and ends with Fran's explorations of sheltered housing for the elderly. Throughout, each character is defined to a large extent by the choices (or lack thereof) he or she makes in dwellings.

The house as metaphor is a common theme in women's literature. One of Edith Wharton's first published short stories, "The Fulness of Life," includes this memorable passage: "I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms . . . and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes." More than a century later, anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson also turned to the house as metaphor when searching for a way to describe a new passage in the life cycle, a passage she calls “second adulthood,” full of possibilities for “active wisdom.” The house of age, she says, has not just gotten larger, but it has added a whole new room: on average people live 30 years longer than a century ago. And most of those years are relatively healthy.

Fran herself lives in Tarrant Towers, a gritty, urban, active location where the elevators break down but the city view is good. Her friend Josephine lives in Athene Grange, “built to give its residents the illusion that they are living in a Cambridge college.” Her daughter Poppet lives in a farmhouse on a floodplain. Her son Christopher is drawn to the Canary Islands, where two gay male friends share a house called “La Suerte” (good fortune) described as almost Gatsby-esque:

> The sea was before them, and behind them the volcanoes, and their gardens were full of the music of running water. At night the sky was bright with the stars that had guided Columbus from La Gomera towards the unknown west.

But even a house that beckons with beauty can’t overcome the enemy. The phrase “a man could die even here” follows the passage above and becomes a mantra that reminds the characters (and readers) that beauty alone cannot hold back death indefinitely. Courage is required.

The house imagery of Drabble’s narrative connects to an even stronger symbol: the body. Houses and bodies, both of which are visible manifestations of invisible realities, are deeply affected by age and death. Fran’s friend Jo, for example, disapproves of Tarrant Towers, the extreme opposite of Jo’s own luxurious, artificial Athene Grange. When Jo contemplates the Towers, she remembers a passage from one of the now obscure “graveyard poets” influential in the 19th century, when death, unmediated by the funeral industry, was a favorite subject of both preachers and poets: “In that dread moment, how frantic the soul / Raves around the walls of her clay tenement.” The body itself is a dwelling. And like any dwelling, it can be viewed as base or elevated.

Early in the book Fran has a “curious and interesting dream” about Tampax in which she tries to staunch a thin and constant stream of menstrual blood. Though strange, the image does not disturb her. In fact, it buoys her spirits into thinking of old age as a fascinating journey into the unknown. She begins to sound like Bateson, who believes that the new old age is like an unexplored continent and people over 60 years of age are pioneers. The dream leads Fran to a comforting insight. The bodies of the old are not new bodies; they still contain youth: “The thin flow was the blood of life, not of death, reminding her that she is still the same woman, she who had once been the bleeding girl.” There is continuity between the old body and its earlier form.

But as the narrative progresses, Fran senses a decline, this time described as geography rather than architecture:

> She’d been walking steadily on a plateau, for years, through her sixties into her seventies, but now she’s suddenly taken a step down. . . . She’s been warned many times about this downwards step, this lower shelf. It’s not a cliff or fall, but it’s a descent to a new kind of plateau, to a lower level.

Her bed seems to be getting higher, but that’s because she is getting smaller. Fran’s experience of the body, moving from shelf to lower shelf, does not replicate that of any other character. One character, elegant and vigorous, dies suddenly. Another dies slowly and painfully. Another dies mysteriously. No condition of health or illness predicts exactly the course of any life.

Male characters, especially Fran’s ex-husband Claude and Christopher’s friend Bennett, seem to experience failing bodies differently than the women. Claude wallows in two forms of female caregiving: Fran’s home-cooked meals and his paid caregiver Persephone’s nursing, including her acquiescence to his desire for “cuddling.” Similarly, Bennett has Ivor, a younger companion and former lover, to care for him. And when Bennett dies, Ivor finds care in a monastic community. Male bodies, especially when men have some wealth, enjoy protection and respect, which gives them the luxury of relative indifference to the bodily impact of age.

But women, even comfortably middle-class women, continue to rely on their bodies for physical strength and social standing. Their carriage, clothing, and grooming all carry cultural weight, and they make choices aimed at keeping control over their bodies as long as possible. When on the road, Fran refuses the full English breakfast in favor of one perfect soft-boiled egg.

The Dark Flood Rises is not designed to offer comfort. Its strength lies in its refusal to settle on any preexisting expectations about old age, its insightful observations about the body, and its insistence that all experience—even the small moments—are significant. It shows that the dark flood of age, alongside the literal floods of immigration and climate change that run through the narrative, can be faced courageously.

Writing about old age means exploring everyday acts of heroism and courage.

The rising tide of age is a global phenomenon, and novelists of every country are putting in their oars. Yewande Omotoso is a 37-year-old architect who was born in Barbados, spent her formative years in Nigeria, and now lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her novel takes readers to one of the most affluent suburbs in South Africa, a place built upon land that had been a vineyard and had housed slaves. There, Hortensia James and Marion Agostino, both octogenarians, are neighbors. Hortensia is black like the author; Marion is white (and an architect, like the author). Both are successful women with impressive careers who have recently been widowed.

The hedge between their two houses symbolizes their mutual animosity: each of them desires something the other one possesses. Circumstances force them to reveal more of themselves than they want to. In the end, readers must decide how much understanding they have reached and whether genuine friendship between two old women with lots of baggage is possible.

Omotoso handles imagery of space very well, as one might expect from an architect. The idea of designing old age, down to the funeral, permeates the text. Both protagonists are fighting valiantly to age in accordance with their concepts of self. What they are fighting for, and even why they are fighting, however, is not always clear.

Hortensia and Marion both take great care with their bodies. As artists, they know that bodies are more than objects: they are subjects, canvases for the self. Hortensia especially seeks control over her body, particularly while she recovers after a crane knocks her down and breaks her leg. Recalling the time she shaved her head at age 12 to avoid submitting to plaits, she fights valiantly for her body's independence. "Hortensia could smell the odour of superiority when in the company of nurses or doctors." The accident that breaks her leg also causes damage to

Marion’s house and brings the two women into a grudging form of intimacy.

Many questions linger after the last page. Can the country of old age overcome historic injustice? Underneath the entrenched truths of systemic racism and classism depicted in the novel lie some smaller truths. Occasionally human beings can see each other. Death is a great leveler. That’s small compensation for the inequities of life before death, but we must, like Hortensia, keep walking toward it.

Danish novelist Jens Christian Grøndahl sets his novel in Copenhagen, quoting 19th-century Danish poet B. S. Ingemann in an epigraph that announces the theme of bittersweet age: “Often I am happy and yet I want to cry; For no heart fully shares my joy.” The voice that opens the narrative belongs to Ellinor, the 70-year-old protagonist. Her chosen intimate listener is her friend Anna, who died in an avalanche many decades ago. Georg, the man to whom they were both married, has just died. Anna might have been the least likely of listeners to this dramatic monologue. She was not only Georg’s first wife but was also involved in an affair with Ellinor’s first husband, Henning, who disappeared in the same skiing accident that killed Anna.

Ellinor explains that Anna’s twin sons, her stepchildren, who are now fathers themselves, have been “down on me lately.” They see her as tough and dry-eyed even though she loved their father, Georg, and is grieving deeply in her own way. What most upsets them is that Ellinor’s first decisive step almost immediately after Georg’s death is to sell the family home and move into an apartment in the “rough” region of the city, Amerikavej, where she had grown up. One son describes her new place bitterly as “surrounded by junkies, prostitutes, and Muslims.”

Again, the architecture of the home symbolizes the protagonist’s interior struggles. Ellinor chooses to downsize, rejecting the upper-middle-class accoutrements her sons enjoy. She has been freed by Georg’s death to become herself at last: “Yes, I have become a communist in my old age.” The empty apartment she chooses is a place to start over, to hear the sound of her own footsteps bounce off the walls, to grieve on her own terms, and to explore the secrets of her birth. She deliberately underfurnishes it, exclaiming joyfully to Anna: “I almost didn’t bring anything.”

Ellinor confesses to Anna the long-suppressed story of her own shameful origins as the offspring of a German soldier and a young barmaid during the German occupation of the country in World War II. This story, and the fact that she never tried to track down her father, who didn't know of her existence, has shadowed her life.

As she tells her story, Ellinor reflects on age itself, endorsing the idea found in *The Dark Flood Rises* of continuity under change:

> It is all just something that passes you by. You're being pushed and pressed, sometimes even crushed, and you can be knocked off your course, but you remain the same on the inside. You grow older and the city changes, but they are the same eyes and the same streets.

Of the three novels in this group, *Often I Am Happy* is the subtlest when it comes to the theme of the body. Since the point of view is first person rather than third, and since reticence is Ellinor's usual *modus operandi*, we see little of her body.

The most vivid body in the book is Anna's. Her laughter, ease, and birdlike freedoms don't inspire jealousy in Ellinor, the friend she betrayed. Rather, Ellinor marvels at a memory of young Anna and Henning dancing the slow foxtrot when they think nobody is watching. "She was so beautiful" is all Ellinor can say. Her deepest love of all is perhaps for Anna, whose "pretty ears with rosy earlobes" are the ones to whom she tells her story.

Ellinor's spiritual strength is unperceived by her materialistic children. She loves Anna and Henning, the friend and first husband who betrayed her trust. She loves her second husband, Georg, and his difficult children. She even comes to love her difficult mother. Like the archbishop in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Ellinor draws sustenance in older age from a single image of youthful love that centers on her German father. The only thing she knows about him is his name and the place where she was conceived. Out of such a filament, she weaves a robust web of forgiveness: "We forgive our parents when they forget us, if only they love each other. I think of it every time I try to see Thomas Hoffmann, that late summer when he walked with my mother under the harvest moon, out at the cove."

There are no unblemished affirmations of old age in Grøndahl's book—nor are there in Drabble's or Omotoso's. These coming-of-old-age novels offer no fantasy of escaping to the next stage of life. Heroism in old age consists of small acts: making choices as long as possible and connecting with the people and memories that matter most.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Coming of old age in an aging world."