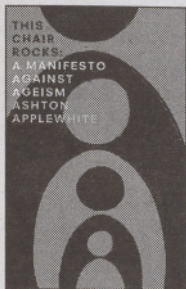


A toolkit for pushing back against ageism



This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism,
by Ashton Applewhite

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The oldest baby boomers turned 71 in 2016. Since boomers have a reputation for being involved with social movements, it's not at all surprising, as they hit retirement age, that they've rediscovered a form of oppression, ageism, that was first named when they were in their 20s. What's surprising, actually, is that it's taken this long for the fight to be revived. Perhaps that's because the quintessential boomer subculture was the youth subculture with its explicit revolt against "olders," as Ashton Applewhite calls them.

Ageism, in case you don't get it, is institutional and personal discrimination against people solely on the basis of their age. But, you may protest, isn't it logical that olders are treated differently? After all, they're forgetful, cognitively and physically less able, short-timers as far as employment, have less energy, are slower to learn new things, etc. But, like corresponding statements about women and disabled people, these stereotypes don't apply to all or even most older people, and, in many cases, even if these characteristics exist in particular olders, they are often outweighed by other factors.

Applewhite, who says, "I have no problem saying I'm 63," starts by puncturing a few myths. For example, "only 4 percent of Americans over 65 live in nursing homes." Nearly 90 percent "can think just fine." Retirement homes are "hotbeds of lust and romance, as evidenced by skyrocketing STD rates." And "older people enjoy better mental health than the young or middle-aged."

As far as employment, Applewhite isn't arguing that older people should work at jobs they're not capable of doing. She's

arguing for flexibility and reasonable accommodation for older people, who have as much right to work as any other adult. Whatever someone's age, they should have the right to start a new career or further their education, without being held back because they might die in 20 years instead of 40 or 60. As people age — which Applewhite points out is the equivalent of saying "as people live," since living means aging — it becomes harder to make generalizations about their capabilities — 90-year-olds vary much more in their abilities than 20- or 40-year-olds.

Applewhite takes aim at the youth-biased stereotypes of physical beauty and sexual attractiveness that are a staple in our culture, to the extent that it's a compliment to tell someone they look younger than they are. She suggests that when told "you look great for your age" by someone younger, a good response is "you look great for your age, too!"

As far as sex, "we don't ask when people age out of singing or eating ice cream; why would we stop making love?" Intimacy, she says, is a right at all ages, and she quotes Margaret Gullette: "Cultures truly interested in pleasure don't romanticize inexperience." Sex may be different and more focused on process than outcome, but that actually is a recipe for greater pleasure. Applewhite does warn that what people do as they age is their choice: whether to be sexual, whether to work, whether to live independently or seek help. The important thing is that it's really a choice, based on an older's realistic assessment of desires and capacities.

Applewhite argues that cognitive decline is stigmatized much more than is warranted. Forgetfulness can happen at any age, but if you're over 65, it's attributed to age. Slow processing of information may be less due to cognitive

problems than to the fact that an older brain has many more connections between bits of information to draw on. At the same time, this means that an older brain can make more connections between disparate things. Some cultures have interpreted that as wisdom.

Applewhite's points strike home. But one weakness of Applewhite's "manifesto" is that it's almost entirely oriented to personal interactions and personal change. It's as much a self-help book as a manifesto, with advice and discussion of end-of-life issues and ways to maintain cognitive and physical health — all useful advice, but off the main topic.

Even though several of the chapters have sections about action against ageism (each titled "Push Back"), the suggested actions are all on the individual level. Applewhite cites Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers in the 1960s, as an inspiration, but nowhere does she encourage actual organizing around issues of ageism, and there's no list of activist organizations to get in touch with. And, in spite of the fact that union contracts typically use seniority to protect older workers from layoffs and dismissal, she nowhere mentions unions as one avenue to take in the fight against ageism.

Written as a personal manifesto, the book is very much from the viewpoint of Applewhite's position in society — a middle-class white woman — in spite of her clear awareness of the broader social context. As such, it's a start toward addressing an issue that has had too little attention for the past couple of decades; we've got a long way to go.

Courtesy of Real Change News, Seattle, Wash.

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