

John Nicholson, *Seven Ages*, London, Fontana, 1980. 283 pp. £1.75.  
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Popular handbooks on ageing are not new. Since the turn of the century there has been a steady outpouring of literature for the layman on biological, psychological, and social aspects of growing old. In many of the earlier offerings like Sylvanus Stall's *What A Man of Forty-Five Ought To Know* (companion volume *What A Woman of Forty-Five Ought to Know*) and W. B. Pitkin's bestseller of the depression years, *Life Begins At Forty*, scientific evidence is tantalisingly intermingled with hackneyed theology and commonsensical moralizing. More recently, the floodtide of psychological and sociological research into ageing, especially in the States, has released a veritable torrent of paperbacks many of which are ostensibly designed to make the adult public more aware of the concept of age-related developmental stages through which all who survive into their sixties must pass. Symptomatic of this current trend is Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*; a journalistic version of Daniel Levinson's much more cautious theory of personal change in adult life.

In *Seven Ages*, John Nicholson, who is an academic psychologist with a talent for translating technical reports into everyday language, has contributed an exercise in optimistic English empiricism. 'The main question', he says, 'I want to answer is this: does it matter how old you are?' More specifically he wishes to find out if there is a pattern in people's lives which justifies the concept of 'a universal life cycle which affects us all'. In hot pursuit of these questions he ransacked the psychological literature on ageing and commissioned what is described as 'a major new research project' in Colchester.

'The Colchester Survey on Ageing' was carried out by Social and Community Planning Research and funded by London Weekend Television with whose series 'Seven Ages' this book runs in tandem. Its general purpose was to explore how people see the process of ageing at different points in adult life and also to discover how attitudes, behaviour and circumstances change, if at all, with chronological age, and to identify any recurrent crises in adult development. The work involved two kinds of enquiry: a qualitative study using eight discussion groups representing different stages of life events (ages 19-25; 30-37; 38-45; 50-60) together with twenty in-depth interviews with men and women from four age groups (30-36; 37-43; 44-50; 51-60); and an interview survey involving what was hoped to be a sample of adults aged between 29 and 58. In the event, as the Technical Appendix by Jane Ritchie of Social and Community Planning Research explains, there was a high rate of refusal to participate in this survey: 'more resistance to participate in an interview than is usual'. Information was collected from those who were willing to participate by means of personal interview and a self-completion booklet. Eighty people took part in the qualitative study and 461 in the main survey.

What conclusions does the author come to? Basically that the concept of predictable age-related stages is more applicable to the earlier phases of life than adulthood, defined here as the stage of life marked out by the advent of

parenthood. Because men and women find 'adulthood' and 'old age' difficult to define, Nicholson believes it is more realistic to distinguish between the stages of life, not in terms of chronology, but according to specific 'marker-events': the two great concerns of the adult years being family life and work. Contrary to the theorists of the life-stage development school, who tend to place some emphasis on crisis-ridden transitional periods which bridge the gap between each stage, the Colchester study produced little evidence of a 'universal life cycle which affects us all'. On the whole people were apparently pretty well satisfied with the age they had reached: although younger interviewees may anticipate problems as they grow older most of those in their thirties reported few such anxieties and little experience of 'mid life crisis'. Ordinary people, according to this particular research, are not obsessed by their age and are surprised by the suggestion that growing old changes the individual personality. Most of us, says Nicholson, 'would like to believe that by the time we have become adult, chosen an occupation and perhaps started a family, we have also arrived at a stable and distinct personality'.

The good news is that 'Getting old isn't half as bad as you think it'll be when you're young'. Concern with the negative aspects of ageing is largely a product of the media and the specific interests of psychiatrists who see an unrepresentative group of clients presenting what are defined as age-related crises. To be sure growing old is marked by outward physical changes like loss of hair, a tendency to put on weight, etc., but there are so many compensations for these surface alterations that they can usually with confidence be ignored. All of which is good to hear and it would be churlish to discount, yet despite the care with which these conclusions are presented, and the meticulous referrals to pre-existing psychological research, it is a curiously one-dimensional account of ageing and consequently one which leaves as many questions as it provides answers.

Firstly, we are presented with a world without passion, without hope, despair or indeed any dramatic feeling at all. Maybe that's what the people of Colchester are like but I doubt it. The problem lies with the method which despite claims to offer insight into 'subjective' aspects of ageing in fact appears to yield little information on the private struggles, projects or scripts which mark out in our own minds our passage through the years. *Of course* the majority of adults do not go through a major crisis visible to all around them but this is not to say they can entirely ignore the fact that we live in a society which does not revere what Henry called the 'deep aged' and sets great store on youth, fitness and beauty. The other problem is then that the book ignores the cultural context of ageing and consequently glosses over all of the bad experiences: by implication it's only the deviants, the unfortunate, or the unusually self-indulgent who have difficulties; a conclusion which takes us a long way away from the findings of sociological researchers most of which are, perhaps not surprisingly, ignored in this handbook for the eighties.

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