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Second Childhoods and Intergenerational Dialogues: How Children's Literature Studies and Age Studies Can Supplement Each Other

Vanessa Joosen

In the past decades, life expectancy has steadily risen in Western countries, and the number of elderly persons has equally grown. The media mostly present the consequent rising old-age dependency ratio as a problem, contributing to the “symbolic annihilation” of the elderly, which, according to Margo DeMello, “results in a distortion of the public’s understanding of that group” (45). This is a distortion that age studies scholars aim to amend. Age studies is a booming interdisciplinary field, uniting researchers in biology, gerontology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies in its focus on intergenerational relationships and cultural conceptions of age and the life course. Just as children’s literature critics such as Roni Natov, Perry Nodelman, and David Rudd explore the construction of childhood in fiction, an important tenet in contemporary age studies is that age and the life course are socially constructed: as age critic Margaret Gullette puts it, “Human beings are aged by culture” (12).

Childhood studies, Karen Sánchez-Eppler notes, has offered “persuasive evidence both of how attitudes toward childhood have changed over time and place, and of how much the content and duration of this life stage has differed even for children in the same society but of different genders, races, or class positions.” Nevertheless, “despite such constructivist scholarship, the sense of childhood as a ubiquitous and fundamental category of human life has proved remarkably resilient. Belief in the universal and unchanging essence of childhood can make all sorts of cultural arrangements and power structures appear natural” (35–36). The same is true for concepts of senescence. Gullette is particularly concerned with the “decline narrative” that dominates Western thinking: growing old is depicted as an unpleasant ride downhill, with death looming at the bottom. This model empowers youth at the expense of the elderly. Gullette suggests an alternative perspective, first referring to “the lit-

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erary doctors of the nineteenth-century,” who held that “In no one thing do people differ more than in their aging” (qtd. in Gullette 9), and adding, “The world is full of diversity and non-comparability and age is another fascinating difference” (9). Moreover, recent international sociological research by David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald indicates that the relationship between age and happiness follows a U-shape, with a dip between the mid-thirties and late forties, when stress levels peak. This means that children and old people generally have a higher sense of well-being than does the generation in between. Nevertheless, the “master narrative of decline” is not only dominant in the American context that Gullette discusses, but also of concern to the European Network in Aging Studies, whose mission statement indicates that, like Gullette, it aims at “a thorough reflection on . . . the cultural meanings of the aging process, the theories and policies on aging.” Those cultural meanings are, in part, constructed in children’s literature.

Except for their respective fields’ overlapping in childhood studies, age scholars and children’s literature specialists rarely draw on each other’s work.¹ Yet both start from the same constructivist approach to age and have many insights to offer to each other. Children’s books are, after all, populated by characters of all ages. Life course theories can put into a larger perspective how the stages in life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age) are diversified for young readers. Elderly characters, for example, play a part in many stories, and age studies can help to contextualize the features of old age as it is evoked for children. Conversely, age critics may discover in children’s media a source for exploring how age-related norms are taught to younger generations.

As cultural artifacts with ideological and didactic dimensions, children’s books are already used to counteract the symbolic annihilation of the elderly and foster respect for diversity in its stead. The books discussed in this article display an array of favorable portrayals of seniors; in this regard they form a contrast with adult literature, where senescence is often cast as a period of loss and pain. With reference to Gullette’s *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, Anne Wyatt-Brown attributes that framing to late twentieth-century literary trends, with “realism’s typical plot of ‘systematic disillusionment’” (Gullette, qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 2). Children’s literature has its own trends and preferred modes, which frequently differ from those of adult literature. For example, a decline narrative is present in Pieter Gaudesaboos’s *Oude Opa Waterman* (2012), in which an anthropomorphized watering can is confronted with the limits of old age. Yet the story closes on an optimistic note, with the old can discovering a new profession: after failing as a tour guide, home decorator, neighborhood watchman, and baker, the old watering can finds out that he is an excellent fireman. Gaudesaboos maps the popular trope of children’s self-discovery and development onto senescence. The narrative of systematic disillusionment, although it certainly exists in children’s books, is not dominant, and this circumstance affects juvenile literature’s construction of old age. Age critics point out, however, that the inclusion of positive images of the elderly is not

necessarily beneficial to intergenerational dialogue and may reinforce other ageist stereotypes.

Central to this article, then, are the questions of how old age and intergenerational relationships are constructed in a selection of contemporary children's books, and how insights from age studies can contribute to interpreting and contextualizing these fictional constructs. The four books on which I focus here describe an alliance between young and elderly characters on the basis of four related aspects: an interest in stories and the supernatural, a connection with the past, a passion for fighting social injustice, and a fondness for play. Similarly, my analysis addresses four ageist tropes: the decline narrative, the infantilized senior, the disregard of the old body, and the wise old mentor. In addition, I will address an unfortunate seesaw effect that appears in the emancipation of the young and the elderly and downgrades the generation in between. The titles were selected from a larger corpus of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century children's and adolescent books from the Netherlands and the UK. They are all award-winning titles, and their construction of old age was thus endorsed by the literary establishment. In my discussion, I indicate in what aspects they are representative of a wider trend and in what aspects they are revealingly exceptional.

Fostering Childhood as Infantilizing or Denying Old Age?

The pairing of childhood and senescence is not new. As Claudia Nelson has pointed out, Victorian literature "sometimes showed youth and age as interdependent allies against a more powerful mainstream," yet did so on ambivalent terms: "the aged might be perceived as preying on, exploiting, or projecting their own weaknesses onto children" (2). That ambivalence has largely disappeared from the children's books in my corpus, where the relationship with an older person is usually constructed as being in the child's best interest, fostering his or her agency, emotional strength, and imagination.² Contemporary age studies critics argue, however, that the alliance between the old and the young has the opposite effect from Nelson's observation: the child's weaknesses are projected onto the elder, whose age and adult status are in turn denied.

Ambivalence about age and status is central to my first case study, Guus Kuijer's *The Book of Everything* (2004). Here, nine-year-old Thomas's supernatural epiphanies serve to undo age-related distinctions. Growing up in the 1950s with an authoritarian Protestant father, he finds distraction with his elderly neighbor, Mrs. Van Amersfoort. She has preserved not only respect for childhood, but also a sense of the childlike. Mrs. Van Amersfoort owns various children's books, including titles that she must have bought as an adult. When Thomas reads aloud from Annie M. G. Schmidt's verses, he is surprised at his neighbor's enjoyment: "Weren't these supposed to be children's rhymes? So why did they make a grown-up person laugh?" (78–79). Mrs. Van Amersfoort helps Thomas to deconstruct the strict opposition between adults and children

he has been raised to accept as natural, and her affinity with childhood goes even further. While reading aloud, he gets an epiphany in which the old lady is actually transformed into a young girl:

Her head nodded as if she was saying, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” And without him noticing, she had grown two plaits, bows and all.

At first Thomas didn’t know what he was seeing, but that didn’t last long. He saw that Mrs. van Amersfoort was not an old lady, but an old little girl. She might jump out of her chair any moment and grab her skipping-rope. That’s what she looked like. (79)

In an earlier collection of critical essays, *Het geminachte kind* (The despised child [1980]), Kuijer had provocatively defined the adult as someone who “has announced the child’s death and so it dies within him” (25; my translation).³ Thomas’s father belongs in that category, but Mrs. Van Amersfoort is an adult who has cherished her childlike self. She draws happiness from the little girl she once was, transgressing the boundaries of time and age. According to age critic Sylvia Henneberg, some literary works, such as those of Adrienne Rich, challenge “the linear stage theory of aging advanced by Erik Erikson” (“Crones” 118). *The Book of Everything* and David Almond’s *Kit’s Wilderness* (see below) do this as well.⁴ Like Rich’s books, they offer “a model in which life is more appropriately understood as cyclical and capable of backtracking” (Henneberg, “Crones” 118). In children’s literature, classics by Philippa Pearce and Eleanor Farjeon, or more recently Kuijer and Almond, employ the fantastic mode to make that backtracking tangible: through transformations, age inversions, and time shifts, their elderly characters re-embody their former childlike selves in order to bond with the young.

In *The Book of Everything*, the transformation of the senior adult into a child is valued positively. In age studies, however, the equation of the elderly with children is rejected as a form of ageism, a prejudice against old age that is harmful, “operating as it does in the interests of one group, adults, at the cost of others, children and elderly people” (Hockey and James 135). Pensioners who are treated as children experience this treatment as an insult. Jenny Hockey and Allison James note that when, for instance, toddler-appropriate activities (watching Disney movies, drawing greeting cards) are organized at homes for the elderly, “the apparent ‘limitations’ of childhood are mapped on to a parallel series of ‘inadequacies’ believed to characterize old age,” and the elderly are denied their adult status and capacities (135). Children’s books with a romantic vein such as Kuijer’s, in contrast, cast the young as empowered, intelligent, and sensitive beings and suggest that the equation with childhood is the biggest compliment an adult can receive. They project not the weaknesses, but the supposed strengths of childhood—creativity, fantasy, curiosity—onto old age. Moreover, Kuijer presents the ability to act as a child as a performative role that Mrs. Van Amersfoort willingly takes on in Thomas’s company and can also cast off, for instance in her interaction with other adults. Through

their friendship, the child and the old lady are not denied agency but rather become empowered to challenge Thomas's father. The idea of performativity presupposes in the elderly a sense of agency that age critics argue is denied to them when they are compared to children.

In a self-affirmative mode, Kuijer presents storytelling and literature as the ultimate means through which the generations bond, and that connection is reinforced on a metalevel. Unlike most children, the elderly can play an active role in publishing literature about their own age group. Kuijer was sixty-two when *The Book of Everything* originally appeared in Dutch. As it is based on his childhood memories, Kuijer, too, can be said to reconnect with the child in himself. Read with this context in mind, Mrs. Van Amersfoort's transformation and her influence on Thomas invite the young reader to put trust in those adults who have not neglected their inner child. This interpretation further complicates Hockey and James's critique of infantilized seniors. Old people are not only the subjects of this discourse but also contribute to it, bending it to their own purposes, on their terms, and employing it to oppose other ageist stereotypes such as the decline narrative. Kuijer uses Mrs. Van Amersfoort's alliance with a child to evoke respect for the elderly and for himself as a children's writer.

Countering the decline narrative may entail another ageist stereotype, however: the denial of senescence. In the passage cited above, the child sees through his neighbor's old body to reveal the girl inside. Age critic Kathleen Woodward describes a phenomenon that is similar but valued differently: "As we age we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies. We say that our real selves—that is our youthful selves—are hidden inside our bodies. Our bodies are old, we are not. Old age can thus be described as a state in which the body is in opposition to the self, and we are alienated from our bodies" ("Mirror" 104). Is Mrs. Van Amersfoort a split personality who cannot match her aged body with her youthful spirit?⁵ Again, Kuijer provides an alternative view of an ageist stereotype. The old lady is the most balanced adult in *The Book of Everything* exactly because she has not lost touch with her childhood self. The story does not give any indication that she denies her old age. She does not hesitate to tell Thomas when she needs a rest, and she in no way resembles what Aagje Swinnen characterizes as the hyperactive senior associated with the denial of the old body (36). Her past and present selves work together to give her empathy and authority.

Fighting Social Injustice: The Wise Old Man and the Seesaw Effect

Many children's books describe young and elderly characters sharing stories.⁶ In the young adult novel *The Sherwood Hero* (1995), Alison Prince combines this trope with an original addition, namely a strong sense of social justice. I will analyze the friendship of twelve-year-old Kelly and her Scottish grandfather in this novel with regard to two ageist tropes in addition to the decline narrative

and the denial and infantilization of old age discussed above: the “wise old man” motif and the seesaw effect that downgrades the generation in between.

Kelly and her parents move in with “Granda” when his wife dies. The teenager and the retiree spend ample time together after school, discussing literature, history, and philosophy. Kelly’s grandfather and parents are contrasted in various ways, including their attitude toward stories. Like Mrs. Van Amersfoort, Granda values the imagination—“if you canny imagine what it is you want to know, you’ll never get knowin’ it” (13)—whereas the parents appear as rational and controlling. Kelly explains that when she had nightmares as a child, “Mum and Dad thought the dreams might be because of the books, so one of them always came with me to the library, to make sure I didn’t borrow anything unsuitable” (25). Their monitoring does not alleviate Kelly’s fears, the true cause of which the parents fail to understand.⁷ Likewise, they shield her from seeing poverty (45), whereas Granda tries to increase her social awareness. He talks about philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who came from their town, to teach her about socialism: “Listen to this, Kelly, what the man said—*A man who dies rich dies disgraced*. Some statement, eh?” (42; italics in original). Ultimately he spurs Kelly to fight poverty even if it means breaking the law: “*These poor folk livin’ in the streets as if they were rats. Rob the rich and feed the poor, aye, so we should*” (46; italics in original). Kelly accepts the challenge, taking his advice literally. A seesaw effect takes place here, with the rise of some groups (the young and elderly) happening at the expense of another (the generation in between). When Granda captures Kelly with his stories about workers’ marches, her father remarks that “*times had changed, and it was no use marching any more, it was every man for himself*.” This shocks the old man, who “*clapped a hand to his forehead and said with closed eyes, ‘God forgive ye, boy. That a son of mine should say a thing like that’*” (48; italics in original). The rational, dispassionate attitude of the parents contrasts with Kelly’s enthusiasm for Granda’s stories. The narrative supports her perspective rather than theirs.

Kelly is mostly adverse to adult life, especially when she thinks about her brother. Once they were partners in crime who shared many laughs, but not anymore, and Kelly laments, “Now that he’s living with Susan, I suppose he’s changed into a proper grown-up. I never thought he would” (60). Kelly does not want to make the same mistake. A seesaw effect is not unusual in literature that tries to promote the agency of weak or previously downgraded groups, for example in feminist fairy tales.⁸ Paradoxically, however, the seesaw reinforces the dichotomy and thus partly endorses the very opposition it means to challenge. Moreover, with regard to adulthood, the opposition is hard to maintain. Granda will remain in old age until his death, but Kelly will soon enter a stage in life she despises. I will discuss below how the novel resolves that tension.

Whereas the parents’ practical attitude is not promoted, Granda, with his critical questions and historical anecdotes, fulfills the role of the wise old mentor who guides the young to knowledge and understanding. Yet this ideal also has its downside, as age critics stress. According to Woodward, wisdom is “almost

always understood as a capacity for balanced reflection and judgment that can only accrue with long experience,” and usually involves “a lack of certain kinds of feelings—the passions, for instance, including anger” (“Wisdom” 187). Mrs. Amersfoort, for example, can be regarded as such a wise old woman. She is appalled when she realizes that Thomas’s father abuses him and his mother, but she does not let her emotions rage. Instead, she acts carefully to amend the situation.⁹ Woodward is concerned that because of the ideal of wisdom, the intense emotions, especially anger, that the elderly also experience are not tolerated or are dismissed as trifling and even pathological, as signs of illness or dementia. Kelly’s parents, for example, treat Granda’s enthusiasm for socialism with irony, rolling their eyes and calling him “a political dinosaur” (48, 61). In contrast, poverty shocks Granda, and Kelly shares his rage. Referring to G. Stanley Hall’s *Senescence*, Woodward connects adolescence and old age as two stages in life in which humans reinvent themselves, causing “emotional perturbations.” Prince’s novel corroborates Hall’s idea that the young are most influenced by the old in early puberty, a partnership that, for Hall, “borrows the energy of adolescence and transfers it to old age” (Woodward, “Wisdom” 195). Woodward pleads against wisdom and in favor of respect for the anger of senescence.

As a young adult novel, *The Sherwood Hero* adds a dimension to the relationship between old and young that is largely absent from books for younger readers; it casts their time together as disconcerting rather than reassuring. Moreover, it complicates the opposition of wisdom and anger. Granda’s passion ultimately brings Kelly only unhappiness, her Robin Hood plan being revealed as naïve and even harmful. It does not change any poor person’s condition fundamentally, but instead causes her and the family severe distress. In terms of their actions, neither Granda nor Kelly appears as wise.¹⁰ Prince’s story, however, supports a different understanding of wisdom, one that is not devoid of emotion. Granda’s wisdom is constructed as lying in a sense of morality that is superior to legal and social norms—another trope of romantic childhood that is transferred onto an elderly character. Prince’s novel demands sympathy for the idealism of the pair, finding more fault with a system that benefits some and impoverishes others than it does with the girl and the old man’s act of solidarity and rebellion.

As mentioned above, Kelly’s imminent entry into adulthood means that *The Sherwood Hero*, as a young adult novel, will employ a different dynamic in its approach to intergenerational relationships from that portrayed in a children’s text such as *The Book of Everything*. The seesaw effect in the special relationship between old and young means that the parental generation in between is, at best, absent from the intimate moments, and more often depicted as shallow, preoccupied, unhappy, and unimaginative. If Blanchflower and Oswald are right in saying that the relationship between happiness and age follows a U-curve, then the seesaw effect has a sociological basis. Yet the frequency with which this pattern occurs¹¹ gives the impression that a new generational stereotype is

being created, one that is paradoxical with regard to the readership of children's literature. Even if the books suggest that after many years, happy times lie in store for those who reach old age, it is not a happy prospect for young readers that parenthood and middle age are dull and stressful stages in life, in which intergenerational bonding is rare.

For teenage readers, this problem is more acute, and *The Sherwood Hero* makes the reassertion of the adult order tangible. After her plan has failed, Kelly is sanctioned by her parents but forgiven at the end of the book. She then conforms to the adult norm, reporting that "Mum . . . doesn't fuss so much, even though I'm going out with Peter Carrick. But then, I'm getting quite good marks at school, and I painted the scenery for the end-of-term production of *Grease*, so there's nothing much for her to grumble about" (152–53). Once Kelly conforms to her parents' expectations, her relationship with Granda also changes. Whereas they were once partners in the battle against poverty, Kelly now describes him from a significant distance: "Granda's enrolled himself with the Open University! He records TV programmes that come on at five in the morning, and bores us all stiff, reading out his assignments" (153). The boredom builds a strong contrast with the earlier inspiration that Kelly had drawn from his stories. Granda has changed from Kelly's soul mate into a humorous character, a fierce and somewhat pitiful old man without an audience. In contrast to *The Book of Everything*, in which young Thomas and old Mrs. van Amersfoort subvert the father's authority, *The Sherwood Hero* ultimately endorses the practical, sensible orientation of Kelly's parents. The ending affirms Hockey and James's perception that the alliance of old and young ultimately strengthens the interests of the generation in between.

A Narrative of Decline? *Kit's Wilderness*

Several of the previously addressed themes recur in Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999): the special connection between old and young through memories and stories, but also the exclusion of the parents' generation, the prominence of the wise old mentor, and in particular the narrative of decline and the infantilization of old age. In my analysis of this case study, I will focus on the last two aspects in particular. Of the novels discussed here, Almond's is the only one to address the approaching death of the elderly individual, and to map onto old age not only the joys and qualities of childhood, but also its weaknesses. The setup is similar to that found in Prince's novel: the teenager Kit and his family move in with his grandfather, a recent widower. While new friendships at school slowly develop, Grandpa takes Kit for walks through Stoneygate, telling stories about the town's past and his own. They become soul mates. For example, when Kit gets into trouble for playing the game of death (in which, as the player chosen to "die," he waits in the darkness and finds himself communing with the dead), his special bond with his grandfather is stressed: "Hope you're not keeping it from me 'cause you think an old bloke like me wouldn't

understand.' . . . I didn't tell him that he'd be able to understand it more than any other" (79). In the course of Almond's novel, Kit actually relives some of Grandpa's experiences, most notably descending into the old mine and sensing the mixture of fear and excitement his grandfather once felt. The past and present mingle more concretely when Kit goes skating, closes his eyes, and sees his grandfather as a boy, feeling his former presence (87). Through the stories Grandpa tells, the surreal enters the novel almost naturally. Kit and Grandpa are what the old man calls "time travelers" (43), exploring fossils and listening to the voices of the past. Both see the spirits of the pit children who died in a mining accident in 1821. Kit's parents do not participate in the intimate moments that he and his grandfather have together, nor do they share the pair's interest in the darker side of life.

A combined fear of and fascination with death runs through the story. Gradually, Grandpa turns more inward and describes a dark feeling of not being present anymore (62). Kit experiences this himself when playing the game of death with friends and losing consciousness, feeling himself "deep in darkness" (69). The grandfather's condition declines rapidly. He enters so-called second childhood, a euphemism for dementia. Whereas in *The Book of Everything* the connection between Mrs. van Amersfoort and Thomas relied on empathy, creativity, and curiosity, the metaphors that link Kit's Grandpa with youth rely on his vulnerability. When he gets lost and Kit finds him, he "yell[s] like an animal, or a baby" and then "start[s] to cry like a child" (120). Grandpa's condition then begins to run parallel to a story Kit is writing about Lak, a teenager in the Stone Age, who becomes separated from his family and tries to save his baby sister. The despair Kit ascribes to Lak relates to his own anxiety about losing his dearest companion—not a baby, but an old man. As Kit's story and reality start blending, Lak's mother visits him, begging him to restore her son and the baby, while Kit asks, "Bring my grandpa back" (132).

In addition to the metaphors and echoes, Almond makes meaningful use of the transitions between the chapters that describe Kit's reality and his story. While his grandfather is in the hospital and hardly responds anymore, he visits Kit in a dream, where their feelings blend with the experiences of the trapped mine workers of former times: "'Grandpa,' I whispered. 'Kit,' he said. We held each other tight for hours, until at last we heard the footsteps in the tunnel, saw the distant lights of the lamps, heard the voices of the men who'd come to find us" (148). The chapter that immediately follows shows Lak and the baby in a similar position: "The baby woke him, sobbing against his chest. Light filled the entrance to the cave, the endless ice outside. Lak reached into the bearskin and touched his sister's lips. 'Hush, my sweet,' he whispered" (149). The infantilizing comparisons link the grandfather with a small child's weakness. In contrast to the toddler activities for the elderly that Hockey and James criticize, however, the scenes described do not involve belittling. In spite of his entry into second childhood, Grandpa is still treated with respect, and the moments when he cries like a child are described as particularly painful to his family.

Like *The Sherwood Hero*, *Kit's Wilderness* is a young adult novel in which the parents are excluded from the special bond between teenager and grandfather. Although there is no real generational conflict in Almond's novel, the parents are once again more rational and practical. Does Kit, like Kelly, ultimately move into the next stage in life, to discard his former passions and conform to the adult norm? Kit's development carries the symbolism of an initiation rite, and it is as if his transition into adulthood requires that he part not only with childhood, but also with the wise old mentor who guided him. Shortly after his re-emergence from the mines—a powerful metaphor for Kit's rebirth—the old man dies, and the entire surroundings transform. The mysterious landscape of the mines, once the site of Kit's epiphanies, is transformed into a museum and a playground (229). Kit is determined to treasure his grandfather's memories and souvenirs, but they have lost the immediate intensity and transformative power that they had had earlier in the story.

A Parody of the Connection Between Youth and Old Age

The three books described above vary in the degree to which they romanticize the relationship between the old and the young (see also Joosen, "As if"). Quite original is a 2011 children's book by Marjolijn Hof, *Mijn opa en ik en het varken oma* (My grandpa and I and the pig grandma), because it parodies many of those features, while continuing others.¹² The grandfather and his unnamed granddaughter share the interest in storytelling and the supernatural that I have noted in my earlier discussion, but Hof adds the dimensions of play and parody. The grandfather in this book is just as eager to go jumping over ditches as his granddaughter is, and he is always up for a prank. In the first chapter, he so delights in making pancakes that he generates enormous piles, and they have to buy a pig to eat them. They call their pig "grandma" and decorate its stable with a neon sign announcing its name, which flashes to draw the reader's attention to the fact that there is no actual grandma in this book. The grandmother's absence or loss is neither addressed nor mourned, as it is in *The Sherwood Hero* and *Kit's Wilderness*; rather, it is parodied by assigning her name to a pig.

Grandfather and granddaughter do not play only during the daytime; like Kit and his grandfather, they also meet in their dreams. That they can recall their joint dreams over breakfast gives the narrative a magic touch. Yet whereas in *Kit's Wilderness* this magic realist aspect contributes to the story's mysterious atmosphere, with Hof it is part of the book's absurdity and parody. For example, the girl sets up the scene, announcing, "Tonight I want to dream about you. . . . It's better if you stay downstairs. Then I'll feel all lonely upstairs and I'll think of you here downstairs. And then my dream begins" (95; all translations from this book are mine). The romantic alliance between youth and senescence is again mocked when the grandfather adopts an animistic view of the world—a feature usually ascribed to young children—and invents "thing's day" to thank the objects that "are always ready to help us." In fact, this grandfather is often

more childlike than the child herself, who reminds him that “Things can’t talk” (74), and who keeps asking exactly which objects should be thanked on thing’s day. Apparently the animistic view of the world does not come as naturally to the granddaughter as it does to the grandfather. It is also she who decides that they should get back to normal.

The tireless, creative, and ever playful grandfather that Hof depicts is reminiscent of Woodward’s warning about the denial of the old body, as well as a stereotype that reinforces that denial: the hyperactive senior, on whom old age has no physical or mental effect. Hof stages such a hyperactive senior to counter the narrative of decline, once again employing a parodic role reversal. In one chapter, the granddaughter pictures the old man in a state of loneliness when she is grown up and will not have time to visit him anymore. She thus breaks the taboo that lingers behind many children’s books that romanticize the relationship between the old and the young: namely, that the idyll in which they dwell is necessarily limited in time, as the children will enter a stage of life with more responsibility and less time to spend with the old. The grandfather in Hof’s book wants to prepare himself for this phase, so he buys a laptop and soon develops an interesting life online, thus countering the ageist stereotype that pensioners are averse to technology and slow adapters of new media.¹³ In Hof’s text, the grandfather acquaints himself with the computer programs overnight, and by the time his granddaughter wakes up, he is already active on gaming sites, electronically playing their favorite game of jumping over ditches, and chatting with other grandfathers online. This leads to a humorous role reversal, as the girl scolds him: “That is very unwise. Maybe that other grandpa is not another grandpa at all. It might just as well be a little girl pretending to be another grandpa” (69). Hof not only provides her readers with a twist of age-related conventions, but at the same time mocks the sentimental association of the young and the old and the mapping of children’s weaknesses (online vulnerability) onto the old. Above all, her two characters are mischievous, absurd, and playful, providing an untraditional, revealing match between a senior and a child.

Matching Children’s Literature and Age Studies: What Is to Be Gained?

“[D]ismissing old people as deprived souls is nothing short of a total failure of the imagination,” Henneberg asserts (“Crones” 109), and indeed many children’s authors use their imagination (and sometimes fantasy) to create a more optimistic discourse about old age than is common in literature and media aimed at adults. The four titles analyzed here, and many others, counteract a simplistic decline narrative,¹⁴ focusing instead on what can be gained in old age. Moreover, they counteract what Gullette calls the “age fragmentation [that] jams us into tiny separate terrains” (192), instead providing examples of intergenerational solidarity between children and pensioners. Yet, as I have shown, discussions in contemporary age studies can help to contextualize and

challenge the construction of old age in these books, drawing attention to the infantilization of senescence, the stereotype of the wise old mentor, and the denial of old age.

To conclude, I will single out three trends that are related to these topics and that require further research with an expanded corpus. First, except for *Kit's Wilderness*, the books I discuss here pay little attention either to the old body or to its gender. Old women and men play interchangeable roles and are equally playful, fanciful, adventurous, and understanding.¹⁵ Gender differentiation according to traditional role models is more prominent in children's books that feature an elderly couple, such as Kuijer's *Polleke* (2009) or Petr Horáček's *Elephant* (2009). Second, I have addressed what Henneberg calls the "reverse ageism" in "elderly individuals as wise mentors who have no needs of their own" ("Crones" 121). Seniors such as Kelly's, Kit's, and the Hof grandfathers and Mrs. Van Amersfoort do indeed conform to the image of the wise mentor—although Prince permits the combination of wisdom and anger in Kelly's Granda that Woodward sees as missing from the discourse of old age. Children's literature may reinforce this stereotype because it tends to focus on young characters. In all my examples, the elderly are only depicted in their interaction with the young, and frequently from a child's narrative perspective. Mentorship is absent from books that have an elderly person as their protagonist, such as Raymond Briggs's *Father Christmas* (1973), which features a grumpy Santa who cares more about his pets than about humans, or Ceseli Josephus Jitta's 2006 picture book *Lola en de Leasekat* (Lola and the Rental Cat), which describes a widow's attempts to deal with loneliness. Hof is the only author in my selection who develops the idea of a grandfather having a life of his own, at least an online one, and who addresses the discomfort that these independent activities cause to the granddaughter who prefers him as her exclusive companion. At the same time, Hof also parodies the idea of the wise old man, depicting him in situations where he exaggerates games and loses control, so that his granddaughter has to put things right. It is left to the judgment of the reader whether the grandfather orchestrates these situations to give the girl a sense of agency, or whether this is his actual behavior.

Finally, with the seesaw effect that I examine in this article, a new "symbolic annihilation" is happening, whose wider ideological implications deserve more attention. The symbolic value of the working generation in the stories discussed above is very low, especially when compared to children and the elderly, who (except in *The Sherwood Hero*) seem to dwell far removed from economic realities. The annihilation of parents in a story for children is not new, and it usually serves a narrative purpose: once the supervising adults are out of the way, the children's adventures can begin. That is the case in *Mijn opa en ik en het varken oma*. In young adult fiction, conflicts with parents as described in *The Sherwood Hero* are also not exceptional. It is striking, however, that the elderly are adults who do not have to be removed, but who are allowed to join in the adventures, and that Kuijer, Prince, and Almond depict them as being

on the side of the children in conflicts with the parents. As I have shown for Kuijter, older writers can actively contribute to the discourse about old age in children's literature, and may construct the alliance between the young and the old as nurturing in order to ask for respect for their generation. But the favorable portrayal is by no means exclusive to books written by older authors, and a different dynamic may be at work there. Maria Nikolajeva, after all, interprets children's literature as a carnivalesque genre: "paradoxically enough, children are allowed, in fiction written *by adults* for the enlightenment and enjoyment of children, to become strong, brave, rich, powerful, and independent—*on certain conditions and for a limited time*" (10; italics in original). As in carnival, upgrading the young typically means downgrading those who traditionally hold power: the parents' generation, as my case studies demonstrate. One can argue that in the four books discussed here, the elderly are implicated in this carnival, inasmuch as in these stories they share with the young the empowerment that they lack in real life. In age studies, the same objection has been made. "By linking old age with childhood, the hegemony of adulthood remains unchallenged," write Hockey and James (138), just as Nikolajeva suggests that the power reversal that takes place in children's literature, as in carnival, ultimately serves the survival of existing hegemonies (10). Nevertheless, she also points out that children's literature has "*the potential* to question the adults as norm" (11; italics in original). Likewise, children's books challenge the decline narrative about old age and the strict division of the life course into distinct phases, even while they may reinforce other generational conflicts and forms of ageism that actually limit what they seem to promote: the diversity with which age can be experienced.

Again, many of the features in the alliance of senescence and youth are not new. But the current graying of the population in European and other developed nations, together with the decline narrative that still informs the discourse on senescence, gives a new sense of urgency to children's literature about old age and to the study of these books. With its interdisciplinary insights, age studies can help children's literature scholars and other professionals to recognize the inconsequent reasonings and stereotypes on which its positive alternatives to the decline narrative rely. This effort, however, will also require from age studies a broader view of childhood, one that recognizes young people's potential agency and strength, and for which the field of children's literature studies may provide inspiration.

Notes

1. One notable exception is Sylvia Henneberg's "Moms do badly, but grandmas do worse: The nexus of sexism and ageism in children's classics" (2010).
2. One exception, Alison Prince's *The Sherwood Hero*, will be discussed below.

3. For a more detailed discussion of this passage and Kuijer's views on childhood and adulthood, see Joosen, "Adult."
4. Various mid-twentieth-century examples are mentioned in Joosen, "As if." More recent examples include narratives on dementia with a surreal dimension, such as Bette Westera's *Aan de kant, ik ben je oma niet* (Move to the side, I'm not your grandma) and Jaap Robben and Merel Eyckerman's *Josephina*, both published in 2012.
5. The same is true for Mrs. Oldknow in L. M. Boston's Green Knowe series and the grandfather in Enne Koens's *Sammie en Opa* (Sammie and Grandpa [2013]).
6. In addition to the examples discussed here, see Dyan Shelson and Gary Blythe's *The Whales' Song* (1990), Amy Hest and P. J. Lynch's *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* (1997), and Michael Morpurgo's *The Wreck of the Zanzibar* (1995).
7. The cause of Kelly's nightmares is only revealed toward the end of the story: as a child, she and her mother had walked through a London homeless encampment, "Cardboard City," where open fires were burning. When her mother's dress accidentally caught fire, nobody helped her; the lack of interest or care shocked the frightened child so much that it gave her nightmares (147–49).
8. See Anna Altmann's "Parody and Poesis in Feminist Fairy Tales" for a discussion of this effect with regard to gender.
9. In contrast to the wise old women characters that Henneberg discusses in a selection of children's classics, Mrs. Van Amersfoort does not reside in "an aloof position, far removed from the center of action" (Henneberg, "grandmas" 129). Although she is Thomas's neighbor and not part of his household, she does not hesitate to step into "the center of action," his home, when she notices that the father's abuse is getting worse.
10. One can even argue that Granda continues the nineteenth-century trope observed by Nelson, of the old "preying" on the young—after all, he talks Kelly into the Robin Hood plan but does not carry the same burden when it fails.
11. For examples, see Joosen, "As if," and, among others, the aforementioned *The Whales' Song*, *The Book of Everything*, Kuijer's *Polleke* series, and Marjolijn Hof's *De regels van drie* (The rules of three [2013]).
12. Parts of Koens's *Sammie en opa* can be said to do the same.
13. This stereotype emerges in *The Sherwood Hero*, for example, in which the grandfather mistrusts computers (see 72).
14. An exception is Catherine Rayner's *Harris Finds His Feet* (2008), a story about a young hare and his grandfather that describes the decline of the old hare. At the end he is simply left behind.
15. In Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*, the elderly Mrs. Oldknow is even repeatedly compared to a boy.

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