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BOOK REVIEW

Things That Matter: Special Objects in Our Stories as We Age

By William L. Randall and Matte Robinson (eds.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024. 360 pp. ISBN: 9781487524470

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Things That Matter: Special Objects in Our Stories as We Age is a well-written, richly detailed example of narrative research authored and edited by Drs. William L. Randall and Matte Robinson. Contributions to the various chapters within the book come from their team of interdisciplinary researchers representing gerontology, nursing, social work, ministry, literature, and education. In this work, the authors explore the relationship between an individual's cherished objects, their personal narratives, and resilience by analysing written stories and interview data. The book is divided into three parts. In Part One of the book, 'Theoretical Meanderings', Randall and Robinson set the stage for what will come. We learn that the findings described later in the book were actually somewhat incidental. The original research study aimed to examine the role between the strength of personal narratives and resilience among older people, hypothesising that more robust accounts of life stories would be positively correlated. Randall clarifies that strength, in this case, refers to 'thick' narratives that are '...rich in detail, colourful in dialogue..., and abundant in stories, long and short, about their lives'. To answer their research question, the researchers compared quantified resilience scores with semi-structured interviews about study participants' life stories. This first phase of their study supported the original hypothesis. In phase two, they set out to demonstrate that teaching older people how to write richer life stories could further enhance their 'narrative resilience'. Randall characterises this type of resilience as having more self-worth and greater reserve later in life, which results from 'good strong' life stories. During this second phase, participants attended writing workshops, and a subsample agreed to participate in pre- and post-workshop interviews and to provide a writing sample that told a story of personal significance. Through these interviews and stories, the researchers identified the importance of objects as 'reminiscentia' for most of their participants and where the central thesis of this book was born. Part One includes an overview of the research study and the book itself, as well as a concise, informative primer on narrative research (by Randall) and a theoretical understanding of the roles that objects play in our lives (by Robinson). By the conclusion of Part One, the authors have done well to ensure that the reader understands the conceptual underpinnings of the study and the research methods.

In Part Two of the book, 'Research Adventures', the reader is introduced to authors Jennifer Estey and Denise Resmi. Estey conducted all the interviews as the *storylistener*, and Resmi reviewed the transcripts and participated in the analysis. Little is provided here about the background and experience Estey and Resmi bring to the project, but Randall highlighted their (and the other contributors') professional credentials in Part One, and lengthier profiles are provided at the end of the book. In the first chapter of this section, they introduce and briefly summarise the objects and stories shared by study participants (referred to as *storytellers*), which are provided in greater detail in each of the subsequent eight chapters. As the stories centre on the objects themselves, Estey and Resmi used the first chapter to provide more detail about the individual storytellers and the

circumstances of their interviews. This chapter gives the reader a sense of the rich narratives to follow. Chapters 5–12 are the real heart of the book. Each focuses on a single storyteller (or dyad) and the specific object that the storyteller (or dyad) identified in their written stories, interviews, or both. The authors of each chapter carefully weave these written and oral narratives alongside both their analysis of the research and their own personal connection to what was shared. In this section, we learn about the ways that sea glass, patchwork quilts, a Labyrinth ring, a page from a textbook, two decades' worth of letters between friends, a beer stein, frozen red currants, and a mahogany table shaped the stories and life experiences of the study participants and how reading and analysing these stories affected each of the chapter authors.

In the book's final section, Part Three, 'Pathways of Practice', author Randall begins by providing additional context about the practice of life writing. Deborah Carr, the writing workshop facilitator from the research study, shares details about this aspect of the study, including the various writing exercises research participants were asked to complete. The section concludes with the transcript of a conversation between interviewers Randall, Robinson, and Resmi and interviewees Anthazia Kadir, an educator and writing instructor, and Shelley Swift, a relocation and transition specialist, where they discuss how Kadir and Swift have observed the link between life stories and personal objects, in their professional roles. Clive Baldwin, a professor of social work and narrative studies, provides the afterword, where he offers insight into the role of cherished objects, how they signify specific moments or relationships with other people, and how they contribute to the narrative itself.

Both with their initial study and the book it ultimately became, Randall and colleagues aimed to counter the mainstream, biomedically driven narrative of ageing that conjures images of frailty and decline. To that end, I'd say they've been quite successful. The narratives in Part Two describe people with extensive life experiences who are just as active, if not more so, in their older age. Each storyteller also engaged in the challenging and rewarding work of life review. In highlighting the resilience and vitality of older adults through their cherished objects, Randall and colleagues remind us that ageing is not just about decline but the continuous weaving of rich, meaningful narratives. As a reader, I was deeply moved by the stories shared in this book and left with a renewed appreciation for the objects in my life that anchor my personal narrative.

The interdisciplinary author group positions this book as accessible to a broad range of fields, particularly those engaged in the research or care of older people. I also find the text worthwhile as a methodologic reference for narrative research; Randall and colleagues discuss aspects of the methodology throughout the book, including the role and impact of the researcher on the findings and how they are reported. Overall, *Things That Matter* is a compelling contribution to narrative research and gerontology, offering a nuanced understanding of ageing and a practical guide for those who wish to explore the deeper connections between personal stories and cherished objects.

Author Contributions

The corresponding author is responsible for the manuscript.

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The author has nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.