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Book Review by Daniel Wiser, Jr.

SEPTEMBER SONG

Old Age: A Beginner's Guide, by Michael Kinsley.
Tim Duggan Books, 160 pages, \$18

How to Grow Old: Ancient Wisdom for the Second Half of Life, by Marcus Tullius Cicero, translated by Philip Freeman.
Princeton University Press, 216 pages, \$16.95



IN HIS 1976 ESSAY, “THE ‘ME’ DECADE AND the Third Great Awakening,” Tom Wolfe analyzed an “unprecedented post-World War II American development: the luxury, enjoyed by so many millions of middling folk, of dwelling upon the self.” The postwar economic boom afforded Americans of all classes, Wolfe wrote, the leisure time and income to sculpt their personalities and their very selves—a solipsistic enterprise that was previously reserved for the wealthy. The Esalen Institute’s “encounter sessions” for personality change, the Scientology movement, psychedelic and New Left communes, ecstatic spiritualism and “charismatic Christianity,” feminism, the sexual revolution, “psychological consultation”—all were ultimately devoted to the study and service of “Me.”

Not all members of this generation, which became known as the baby boomers, were

hippies and mystics, of course. In fact, only a relatively small group were. Many had normal middle-class upbringings before they became factory workers or business managers. But they were all shaped by the *Zeitgeist* of self-indulgence and narcissism that the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and ’70s embodied—what Wolfe called “the greatest age of individualism in American history.”

TODAY, BOOMERS, WHO ARE GENERALLY described as being born between the years of 1946 and 1964, are approaching retirement and the last third of life. As the largest, most affluent age cohort in American history, it should come as no surprise that they continue to exercise an outsized influence on our culture and politics. Consider this year’s presidential candidates. Hillary Clinton, a boomer, promises to “expand” Social Security

and Medicare benefits—primary concerns for those about to retire—and work toward “full equality,” a nod to the culture of self-expression and liberation incubated by boomers in the ’60s and ’70s. Donald Trump, also a boomer and a first-rate narcissist, constantly invokes nostalgia for a postwar golden age when jobs were more plentiful and America was respected at home and abroad. He promises to make America great again.

That these competing nostalgias on the Left and Right ignore the realities and challenges of 21st-century American life matters little. Americans of all generations increasingly view politics the way boomers do: as an opportunity to turn selfishly inward, and to express one’s anger, anxieties, longings, grievances, and pessimism. Or, as Yuval Levin puts it in his brilliant new book, *The Fractured Republic* (reviewed on page 18), “our political,

cultural, and economic conversations today overflow with the language of decay and corrosion, as if our body politic is itself an aging boomer looking back upon his glory days.”

Though some of these anxieties and frustrations are self-indulgent, others are entirely reasonable—such as fears about the nation’s future, and the future of children and grandchildren—and should not be condemned. And given that the influence of boomers appears to be rising rather than waning as they grow older, helping them find joy and peace might just begin to heal America’s dysfunctional culture and politics.

AS BOOMER JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS prepare for old age, they are naturally devoting ink to the subject. One recent example comes from Michael Kinsley, the *Vanity Fair* columnist and founder of *Slate*. Kinsley was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 1993 when he was in his early forties. The premise of his book *Old Age: A Beginner’s Guide* is that, given the similarities between symptoms of Parkinson’s and the effects of aging (trembling hands, trouble swallowing), he feels “like a scout from my generation, sent out ahead to experience in my fifties what even the healthiest boomers are going to experience in their sixties, seventies, or eighties.”

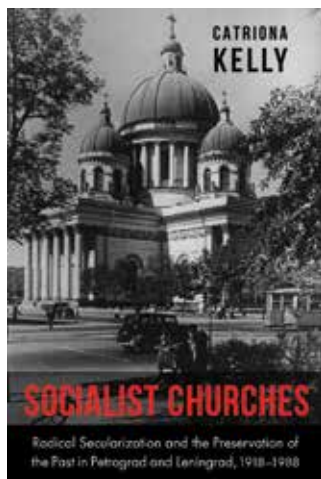
What has Kinsley found on his expedition? Boomers, like all aging humans before them, will experience the basic fears of rejection, humiliation, failure, pain, and death. He recounts how he was offered the editorship of the *New Yorker* in 1998, an offer promptly withdrawn after he informed the owner that he had Parkinson’s. (Kinsley says he chose to believe the owner’s assurance that Parkinson’s wasn’t the reason.) Whether they have a disease at the time or not, most seniors will eventually lose jobs they covet to people who are younger or healthier, a signal that “you’re over,” as Kinsley puts it. There is the depression and infantilization that comes with the loss of adult privileges like driving and the decline of working memory. He notes that, among the 79 million boomers, about 28 million or one-third are expected to suffer from Alzheimer’s or some other form of dementia. And, at some point, “we all cross an invisible line” when “death becomes a normal part of life—a faint dirge in the background that gradually gets louder.”

For a book about such a grim subject, Kinsley’s is surprisingly upbeat and jokey. After enduring a nine-hour brain surgery to relieve his symptoms of Parkinson’s—he had to be awake for most of it—his first words are a zinger to show that he’s still with it: “Well,

of course. When you cut taxes, government revenues go up. Why couldn’t I see that before?” Beyond comedy, *Old Age: A Beginner’s Guide* doesn’t offer much guidance to those approaching the twilight of life. He dismantles the futile competitions among boomers for things—“What good are the toys if you’re dead?”—and reputation—even prominent journalists are “almost immediately forgotten by all” except close friends and family. He mentions almost as an afterthought that, “If you want to be remembered as a good person, then try to be a good person.” But how?

KINSLEY DOES, HOWEVER, PROPOSE one goal for boomers. And it’s a big one. To match the sacrifice of the Greatest Generation in winning World War II, boomers should band together to pay off the national debt. He feels that his generation has been unfairly targeted for running up that debt (boomers are the ones who have paid for their parents’ Medicare and Social Security, he notes) but urges nonetheless that they offer a “once-in-a-lifetime parting gift to those who follow.” This “gift” would be financed by broadening inheritance taxes to cover more middle-class boomers and introducing more rationing into the health-care system.

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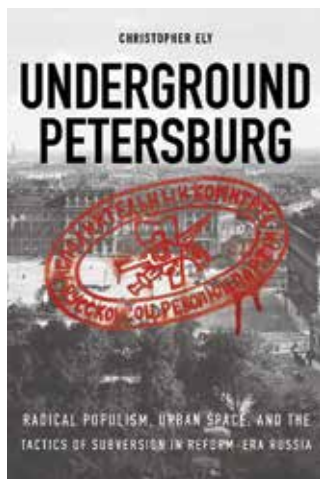
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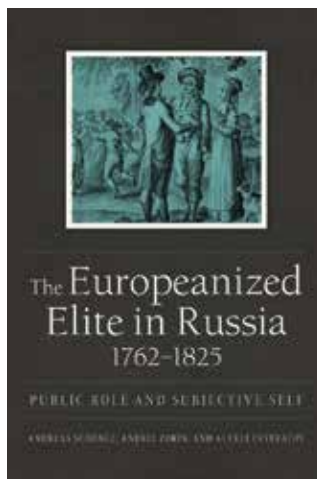
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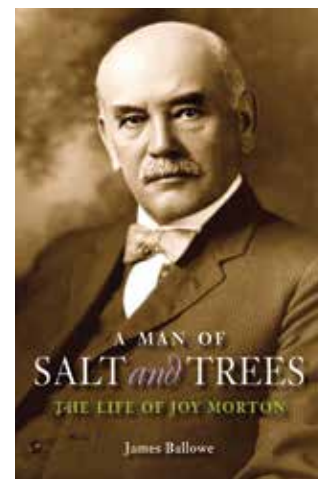
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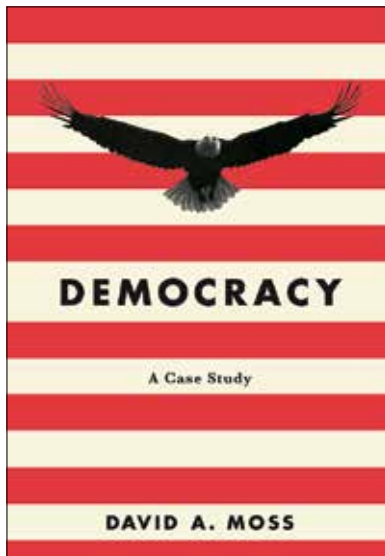
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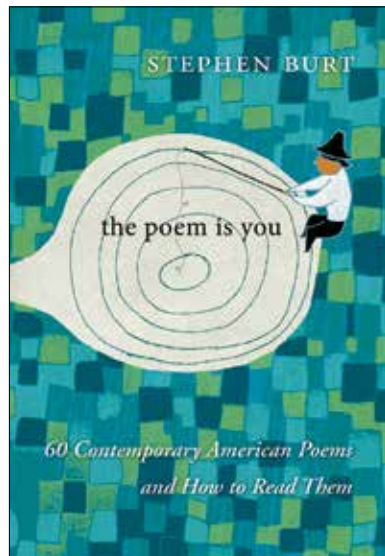
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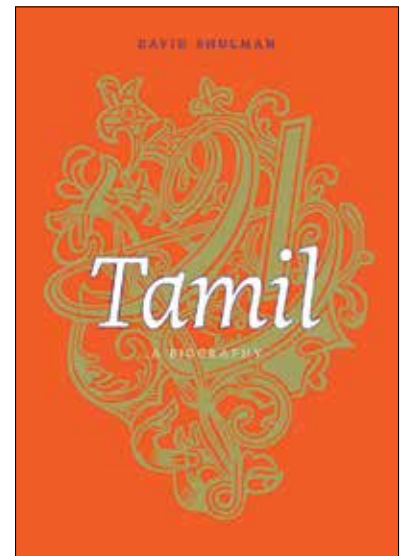
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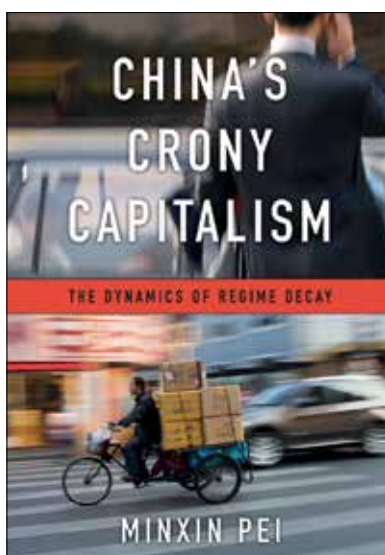
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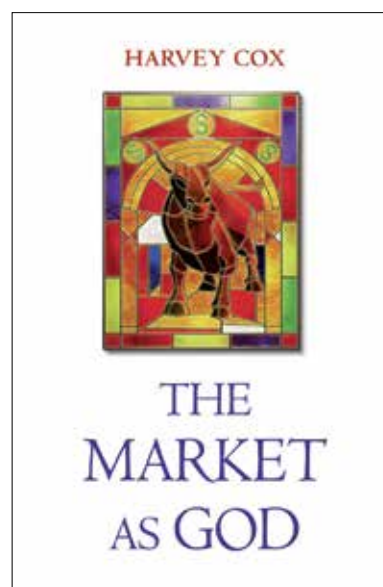
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The Market as God
Harvey Cox

"In this exceptional book, [Harvey Cox] turns his attention to economics and theology. In 2013, Pope Francis remarked in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the environment stands defenseless against a 'deified market.' With typical brilliance, Cox takes up the pope's words and examines in sparkling detail the features of the market as a religion."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)
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In Kinsley's thinking there seem to be only two conceptions of boomers: as aging individuals who should try to find the humor in life as they prepare to endure suffering, or as a generational monolith that should fulfill its commitment to "peace and love" through one last heroic act. There is nothing here about boomers' relations to their families, churches, or communities, much less about their individual souls.

FOR A RICHER UNDERSTANDING OF THE vital contributions that a society's elders can make, one can turn to Luther College Classics professor Philip Freeman, who recently completed an excellent new translation of Cicero's dialogue on old age, *De Senectute*—here retitled *How to Grow Old: Ancient Wisdom for the Second Half of Life*—that was well-known to American founders like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

The first-century B.C. Roman statesman and philosopher composed it during a difficult time both personally and professionally. He went through two divorces in quick succession, his beloved daughter Tullia died, and he was forced out of politics in Rome as his nemesis Julius Caesar assumed dictatorial control. In his early sixties and alone, he could have wallowed in self-pity, or even committed suicide like his friend Cato the Younger. Instead, he threw himself into writing.

Old age, Cicero believed, offered far more advantages than disadvantages. One could finally put aside the arduous struggles of youth—"lust, ambition, strife, quarreling, and other passions"—and return to living "within" one's soul, by which he meant a devotion "to knowledge and learning." Anyone who failed to recognize this when they grew old, and became "morose, anxious, ill-tempered, and hard to please," should blame their character, not their age, Cicero suggests: "Older people who are reasonable, good-tempered, and gracious will bear aging well. Those who are mean-spirited and

irritable will be unhappy at every period of their lives." (Cicero speaks in the dialogue, according to Freeman, through the voice of Cato the Elder who is asked by two younger friends what old age is like.)

THERE ARE FOUR MAIN REASONS THAT people fear old age, Cicero writes: it seemingly deprives us of an active life, weakens us, denies us sensual pleasures, and brings us closer to death. Addressing each in turn, he asserts that great deeds often don't require strength but rather "wisdom, character, and sober judgment," qualities that "grow richer as time passes" (members of the Roman Senate were known as *senes* or "elders"). Leaders like the consul Valerius Corvinus were happier in old age "since his influence was greater and he had fewer responsibilities." The old have ample opportunities to offer their wisdom to the less experienced, and yet also more time to take up hobbies like farming that can soothe sorrow and instill discipline (Cato includes a somewhat tedious disquisition on the pleasures of farming). Rather than becoming frail, the old can maintain strong minds through the "mental gymnastics" of reading, thinking, writing, and, in the evening, going over everything one has done that day. And the loss of sexual desire is a blessing, not a curse, he insists. "If you don't long for something, you don't miss it."


Death, of course, looms over all of these concerns, but even when contemplating it, the philosopher is quite cheerful. Either our souls are immortal and they happily enter eternity when we die, he says, or they are destroyed, and then we don't feel anything. The former belief makes him happy, even if it is false, and the latter is of no concern. He is decidedly against nostalgia. The world will change whether we like it or not, and "the past returns no more and the future we cannot know." And yet, "a man should live on as long as he is able to fulfill his duties and obligations, holding death of no account.... Therefore, old people should

not cling greedily to whatever bit of life they have left, nor should they give it up without good reason."

WHAT, EXACTLY, ARE THESE "DUTIES and obligations"? This is where boomers should really listen up, and where Cicero proves most useful. It is by fulfilling our generational duties, toward those who came before us and those who will come after us, that the old achieve personal happiness and leave a lasting legacy. In another horticultural metaphor, Cato says that the farmer "plants trees for the use of another age" and expresses gratitude to "the immortal gods, who have not only handed down to me these things from my ancestors but also determined that I should pass them on to my descendants." "What responsibility could be more honorable," he asks, then leading the young to virtue and "prepar[ing] them for the many duties of life"? There is also the pleasure of *convivium* or "living together" with friends and neighbors. "[W]hen at home with my neighbors," Cato says in the dialogue, "I join them every day for a meal where we talk as long into the night as we can about all sorts of things."

So, for boomers who want to find meaning in senescence, prove that your generation is not a bunch of geriatric narcissists and nostalgists by thinking and acting outside of yourself, and teaching your children and grandchildren all the wisdom you've collected over the years. Make your churches and communities better not by lamenting their decline, but by joining your friends and neighbors in helping those in need while you still have the time and energy to do so. Instilling and promoting these virtues at the familial and local levels may have a "trickle-up" effect, and, even if not in your lifetime, produce a better country by better statesmen.

Daniel Wiser, Jr., is an assistant editor of National Affairs.



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