Foreword

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Two propitious epigraphs begin *Gray Matters*, one from Miriam Toews and one from Doris Grumbach: “I think you have what it takes to endure” (Toews) and “I am ready to begin the end. . . . Until death, it is all life” (Grumbach). The book fully lives up to the expectations created by those observations. Creative, wide-ranging, and well-written, *Gray Matters* offers a many-sided, complex understanding of late life. It demonstrates that this period of our lives interweaves our past and present, takes grit, and offers opportunities for positive experiences. For some, learning becomes more enjoyable, as the phrase “senior college” indicates. *Gray Matters* also skillfully shows that aging occurs in a social context, a fact often overlooked when the process is understood as solely an individual matter.

Many older adults in North America age comfortably and lead meaningful lives despite media stereotypes of decrepit elders who either drain social resources or fill up gated communities. As the aging population increases, the need for more nuanced accounts of late life is urgent, as are challenges to ageist attitudes. People aged sixty-five to one hundred are extremely diverse and, as much scholarship indicates, perhaps more so than any other segment of the population. Thus the blanket identity “old” is ill fitting. The various identities elders have besides their age shape who they are. Even a narrower category such as “frail” tells us little by itself.

In recent years, the importance of narratives, such as creative work, interpretations of literary texts, and oral histories, as gerontological knowledge has been recognized. Members of the European Network of Age Studies and the North American Network of Age Studies further this work. Narratives convey the many-faceted aging process, as *Gray Matters* demonstrates.

The book's range of topics is impressive: parent-child relationships, housing, sexuality, living alone, gender differences, work/retirement/money issues, dementia and death. Books on aging cover some of these topics, but none I know of takes up all of them.

Another unique feature of *Gray Matters* is the inclusion of results from the author's own survey of 200 people. Real-life experience—good ballast for an academic book.

I particularly liked the chapter on sex and the one on dementia. "Sexual bereavement," considered by Lem, is a significant subject for both general readers and gerontologists, especially since many heterosexual women will be widows by their late sixties. The dementia chapter added to my knowledge of this important subject as it emphasized the value of a humanities perspective on late-life disease. The fear of dementia seems to intensify generalized fears of getting old, although increased risk of dementia mostly occurs only after age eighty-five, and some people diagnosed with mild cognitive loss either stay the same or develop increased function when tested a year later.

Gerontologists do not often discuss the role of luck in living a long, healthy, meaningful life. Our genetic inheritance may be lucky or unlucky or some of each. Our individual efforts, zealous as they may be, cannot *insure* a healthy old age. As we think of friends who have died prematurely and others who thrive despite multiple challenges, we can surely see that luck plays a role in determining who survives and who thrives. It may be hard in the United States, where we are hampered by the myth of rugged individualism, to concede that luck partly influences our late-life condition.

How do we find meaning in late life, when so many cultural messages tell us to deny it, try to fix it cosmetically, or pretend we

are ageless? *Gray Matters* sheds light on this question as it explores the lives of elders through many examples from a range of sources, including from popular culture, literature, and everyday reflections. Individuals' paths to meaning differ greatly, of course, but the tribe of elders share commonalities, including the gradual, sometimes imperceptible, decline in our bodies and the inescapable social fact of marginalization. But these borders do not begin to tell the possibilities of late-life growth and change. For some, late life brings multiple problems and understandable despair. Often, though, these outcomes not only co-exist with growth and change but also interconnect.

I have heard of a bedridden woman who reads widely and leads a book discussion group in her bedroom. Evaluated by the white, middle-class, myopic standard of "successful aging," she has failed. By her own wiser self-evaluation and by the humane and capacious norms of *Gray Matters*, she is not only aging well but contributing to the lives of others.

Recently seeing a car with a license plate that read NOT OLD, I drove alongside the car to guess the age of the driver. She was probably in her fifties. Since the ageism that afflicts us in mid-life is thought to be especially virulent, I wanted to give her a copy of *Gray Matters*. "Until death, it is all life" won't fit on a license plate.

Gray Matters