



# Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age

By Susan Jacoby

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## Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age By Susan Jacoby

Susan Jacoby, an unsparing chronicler of unreason in American culture, now offers an impassioned, tough-minded critique of the myth that a radically new old age—unmarred by physical or mental deterioration, financial problems, or intimate loneliness—awaits the huge baby boom generation. Combining historical, social, and economic analysis with personal experiences of love and loss, Jacoby turns a caustic eye not only on the modern fiction that old age can be “defied” but also on the sentimental image of a past in which Americans supposedly revered their elders.

*Never Say Die* unmask the fallacies promoted by twenty-first-century hucksters of longevity—including health gurus claiming that boomers can stay “forever young” if they only live right, self-promoting biomedical businessmen predicting that ninety may soon become the new fifty and that a “cure” for the “disease” of aging is just around the corner, and wishful thinkers asserting that older means wiser.

The author offers powerful evidence that America has always been a “youth culture” and that the plight of the neglected old dates from the early years of the republic. Today, as the oldest boomers turn sixty-five, it is imperative for them to distinguish between marketing hype and realistic hope about what lies ahead for the more than 70 million Americans who will be beyond the traditional retirement age by 2030. This wide-ranging reappraisal examines the explosion of Alzheimer’s cases, the uncertain economic future of aging boomers, the predicament of women who make up an overwhelming majority of the oldest—and poorest—old, and the illusion that we can control the way we age and die.

Jacoby raises the fundamental question of whether living longer is a good thing unless it means living better. Her book speaks to Americans, whatever their age, who draw courage and hope from facing reality instead of embracing that oldest of delusions, the fountain of youth.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"If old age isn't for sissies, then neither is Susan Jacoby's tough-minded, painful-to-read and important book, which demolishes popular myths that we can "cure" the "disease" of aging and knocks the "g" right out of the golden years...[Jacoby supports] her arguments eloquently and persuasively with historical, sociological, scientific and economic research." –*Washington Post*

"Jacoby's tough-minded refusal to buy the rosy image painted by advertisers and the 'anti-aging industry'—a greedy crowd that includes bogus health gurus, pill pushers and other medical hucksters—is empowering." –*Time Magazine*

"Providing a compelling, convincing account of current reality, Jacoby simultaneously demolishes the overly optimistic scenarios of the baby boomer generation...A cogently argued and well-written corrective to 'the fantasy of beating old age.'" –*Kirkus*

"An important reality check." –*Booklist*, starred review

"Moving and informative." –*Publishers Weekly*

"Jacoby sees a new ageism that doesn't just stigmatize old people for their years, but blames them for physical ills that no lifestyle adjustments or medicine can yet forestall...Among other perils, the 'old old' have a roughly even chance of being counted among the mind-eaten ranks of Alzheimer's victims. We may not like to think that poverty, social isolation, crippling pain, dementia and loss of autonomy are likely to come calling the longer we live, but it's a fact." –*New York Times Book Review*

"Mixes rigorous reportage and tart-tongued criticism with memoir and history, slashing through romanticized versions of the golden years and delivering tough truths." –*Newsday*

"Eloquent...[Jacoby] is courageously right...one can hope that her impassioned, closely ar...

#### About the Author

**Susan Jacoby** is the author of nine books, most recently *The Age of American Unreason*, *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*, and *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. She writes The Spirited Atheist blog for On Faith, a website sponsored by *The Washington Post*. She lives in New York City. For more information, visit [www.susanjacoby.com](http://www.susanjacoby.com).

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### Preface

Anyone who has not been buried in a vault for the past two decades is surely aware of the media blitz touting the "new old age" as a phenomenon that enables people in their sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties, and beyond to enjoy the kind of rich, full, healthy, adventurous, sexy, financially secure lives that their ancestors could never have imagined. Much of this propaganda is aimed at baby boomers now in their late forties,

fifties, and early sixties, because marketers are betting that the boomer generation will spend almost anything on products that say “Hell no, we won’t go!” to a traditionally defined old age. I too have read (and occasionally written) optimistic screeds on the joys and advantages of the new old age, also known as “young old age,” also known as “successful aging.” But I now regard the relentlessly positive vision promulgated by cheerleaders for the extension of longevity as more of an exhortation, even an ultimatum, than an evidence-based portrait of old age as it is today and is likely to remain for the huge baby boom generation. As the oldest boomers turn sixty-five, it is past time for a more critical and skeptical look at old age as it really is in America today, especially for the “old old”—those in their ninth and tenth decades of life. When I told a forty-something colleague that I was writing a book about the myth of young old age, she asked how old *I* was (a question still considered impolite in most contexts). I told her I was sixty-three. “Surely you don’t think of that as old?” she asked in a horrified tone. Actually, being an American who came of age in the “forever young” decade, I do not usually think of myself as old. But when I recall how quickly the last two decades, packed with love and work, have sped by, I know how close eighty, or ninety, really is—as distinct from whatever subjective notions I cherish about my own youthfulness. Old, in America, always seems to be a decade or preferably two decades older than one’s own age. The difference between forty and sixty is that, at sixty, the imaginative leap to old old age is not only possible but inescapable.

The idea that there is a new kind of old age, experienced in a radically different way from old age throughout history, is integral to the marketing of longevity. For who would want to live to be one hundred if, as individuals and as a society, we accepted or even suspected that the new old age, after a certain point, encompasses most of the vicissitudes of old-fashioned old age? There is a considerable amount of truth in the assertion that many old people today—if they are in sound financial shape, if they are in reasonably good health, and if they possess functioning brains—can explore an array of possibilities that did not exist even a generation ago. “If” is the most important word in the preceding sentence. The idea that we can control the future by aggressively focusing on and taking care of ourselves is an article of faith for baby boomers. Yet in many instances, successful aging—or the outward appearance of successful aging—means only that a person has managed to put on a happy face for the rest of the world; present an image of vigor and physical well-being even when bones are aching; smile even though a heart may be breaking with loss; do everything possible to conceal memory lapses; demonstrate a consistent willingness to try anything new; and scoff (with just the right, light touch of humor) at those misguided contemporaries who refuse to “live in the present.”

Here’s what one cannot do and be considered a person who is aging successfully: complain about health problems to anyone younger; weep openly for a friend or lover who has been dead more than a month or two; admit to depression or loneliness; express nostalgia for the past (either personal or historical); or voice any fear of future dependency—whether because of poor physical health, poor finances, or the worst scourge of advanced old age, Alzheimer’s disease. American society also looks with suspicion on old people who demand to be left alone to deal with aging in their own way: one must look neither too needy for companionship nor too content with solitude to be considered a role model for healthy aging rather than a discontented geezer or crone. Successful aging awards are conferred only on those who have managed (often as much by biological good luck as effort) to avoid, or convince others that they have avoided, the arduous uphill fight that eventually consumes all who live too long to retain control over either the mundane or the important decisions of everyday life. It’s great to be old—as long as one does not manifest too many of the typical problems of advanced age. The reality evaded by propagandists for the new old age is that we all are capable of aging successfully—until we aren’t.

I hope that this book about the genuine battles of growing old will provide support for all who draw their strength and courage from reality, however daunting that reality may be, rather than from platitudes about “defying old age.” This commonly used phrase in the annals of the so-called new old age fills me with rage,

because the proximity of old age to death is not only undeniable but undeniable. Anger, by the way, is another emotion considered inappropriate in the old; the dubious notion of the “wisdom of old age” rests on the belief that elders can, and should, transcend the passions, vaulting ambition, and competitiveness of their younger adult lives and arrive at some sort of peace that passeth all understanding.

The capacity to negotiate between the past and the present, not transcendence of the emotions and desires that have made us who we are, is the proper definition of aging with dignity. The great Russian-born dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, who once seemed to float above stage and earth as the preeminent male classical ballet star of his generation, bravely called himself a “dancing fossil” on the *Today* show. Having just turned sixty, he described the role of the older dancer as that of “a mediator between your memories and your [current] abilities as a human skeleton.” This unromantic description of successful aging is applicable not only to nature’s blessed exceptions, who figure so prominently in most prescriptions for age-defying behavior, but to anyone whose intense desire for meaningful experience remains undiminished by a realistic recognition of time’s indelible, deepening imprint. The search for new, earthbound ways to express lifelong passions—not to transcend them in some mythical metamorphosis that seems more akin to a heavenly ascension—demands the most arduous efforts from and offers the most rich rewards for every aging human skeleton. Anyone who has outlived his or her passions has lived too long. Wordsworth got it exactly right, at the tender age of thirty-seven, in his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”: *O joy! That in our embers / Is something that doth live, / That nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive!*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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