

Vanessa Joosen

Connecting Childhood Studies, Age Studies, and Children's Literature Studies

John Wall's Concept of Childism and Anne Fine's *The Granny Project*

*Abstract: Diverging definitions and uses of concepts such as "ageism," "aetonormativity," "adulthood," and "childism" point at the relative separateness of the fields of childhood studies, age studies, and children's literature studies, while also highlighting their shared interest in questions of age, prejudice, and agency. This article uses John Wall's concept of "childism" to highlight the potential of bringing these fields into conversation to explore intergenerational relationships. Using Anne Fine's *The Granny Project* (1983) as a case study, it shows, moreover, that children's books themselves can help foster the paradigm shift that Wall envisages with childism. Fine's novel about four children's resistance to their parents' plans to move their grandmother out of their home thematises processes of othering, ageist prejudices, human rights, and intergenerational dialogue and care. While provocative scenes and gaps in the story may pose hurdles to children's engagement and even risk reinforcing ageist stereotypes, the novel testifies to a belief in young readers' agency and the potential for intergenerational understanding that Wall puts central in his concept of childism.*

Keywords: childism, childhood studies, age studies, care, agency, human rights, senescence, dementia, death, John Wall, Anne Fine

In his keynote at the congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature in Toronto in 2017, Peter Hunt deplored that children's literature studies has often been inspired by childhood studies, but that this has largely been a one-way street.¹ Hunt lamented the lack of sustained interest in children's literature theories on the part of childhood studies. In "Second Childhoods and Intergenerational Dialogues: How Children's Literature Studies and Age Studies Can Supplement Each Other" (2015), I made a related observation on the fields of age studies and children's literature studies. Despite their joint interest in age and the life course, the potential for dialogue between the two fields has not been exploited to the full. Since then, various scholars have tried to bridge the gaps between age studies, children's literature studies, and childhood studies, and this article offers another contribution to that effort (e.g. Benner and Ullmann; Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques; Henneberg, "Moms"). The relative separateness of the three fields is still particularly tangible when it comes to the use of the terms "ageism" and "childism," which have gained increased currency in the last decade. In this article, I first elaborate on these concepts to explore how they can not only divide children's literature studies, age studies, and childhood studies, but also bring them closer. I highlight the potential of John Wall's concept of "childism" in particular. Using Anne Fine's *The Granny Project* (1983) as a case study, I then argue that children's books themselves can help foster the paradigm shift that Wall envisages with childism, especially if they thematise power struggles and alliances across generations, as Fine's novel does. Such books can contribute to a broader awareness of human rights and questions of agency and care, while also pointing at some challenges for Wall's concept of childism.

Historical Contexts

A first step in understanding the relationship between children's literature studies, childhood studies, and age studies is defining and situating these academic fields in their historical contexts. Karen Wells defines childhood studies as: "a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field with a shared focus on childhood as a social category or structure and children as social agents or actors." While it is a relatively young field that started to gain ground in the 1980s and 1990s, its roots lie in longer established disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, and history (Wall, "Childism" 2). In addition to gaining more insight into views on and experiences

of childhood, scholars are concerned with exploring how childhood agency operates and can be enhanced. Childhood is understood in a broad sense, as the period from babyhood to adolescence and the transition into adulthood. Important to childhood scholars is to respect children as fully human beings in their own right, rather than marginalise them or treat them only as adults in the making (Spyrou et al.).

Age studies, also called ageing studies, has emerged from gerontology. Like childhood studies, it has started to gain visibility especially since the 1980s, uniting critics from, amongst others, medicine, sociology, legal studies, and cultural studies. Margaret Gullette defines age studies as “the interdisciplinary movement that wants to disrupt the current age system in theory and practice” (*Declining* 18). While the focus in many publications still lies on old age, the scope of age studies has extended from gerontology to include life course studies and theoretical reflections on age in general, and some sociologists are trying to establish dialogues between childhood studies and age studies (e.g. Hockey and James, “Back”, *Growing*; Settersten; “Linking Ages”).² Like childhood studies, age studies is rooted in praxis and has a political agenda in its efforts to expose ageism and boost the agency of older people (Katz).

Children’s literature studies started to gain ground in academia in the 1960s and 1970s, under the impetus of emancipation movements and ideology criticism. Children’s books became a topic of interest in several fields, and to date, children’s literature programmes can be situated in faculties of education, cultural studies, literary studies (arts), and librarianship. Scholars reflect on the production, content, and style of children’s books (also in comparison to literature for adults), its implied readership and the reception by real readers. Children’s literature is a site where constructions of age take place on various levels: in the way that characters of all ages are shaped, and in the way that young and adult readers are addressed.

Ageism, Reverse Ageism, Aetonormativity, and Childism

The three domains of childhood studies, age studies, and children’s literature studies are concerned with age and agency, and they highlight the importance of societal norms and cultural products in constructing age, often challenging biological and developmentalist paradigms. Relationships between people of various ages are central to the three fields, and the terms “ageism” and “childism” help to understand those relationships. Ageism is in theory the broadest term

of the two, as it is defined as prejudices and discrimination on the basis of age. In practice, however, ageism is often reserved for old age only. In this light, age critic Sylvia Henneberg coins the term “reverse ageism” for discrimination on the basis of young rather than old age (“Crones” 121). The word “childism” was developed in children’s literature studies by Peter Hunt, who in 1984 coined it in analogy with feminist criticism, as an approach that takes into account the potential of the child as reader, rather than simply applying “adult” literary theory to children’s books (see also Reynolds 53–56; Superle 162). In *Childism: Confronting Prejudice against Children* (2012), the American psychotherapist Elisabeth Young-Bruehl draws a parallel between the treatment of children and forms of discrimination such as sexism or racism. She defines “childism” as “a prejudice against children on the ground of a belief that they are property and can (or even should) be controlled, enslaved or removed to serve adult needs” (37). This perspective has been adopted by children’s literature scholars for reflections on children’s rights and adult-child relationships in children’s books (Superle; Joosen, *Adulthood*).

John Wall, a childhood studies scholar, distances himself explicitly from Hunt’s and Young-Bruehl’s definitions. He criticises Hunt for relying too much on the adult imagination to understand children’s potential contribution to children’s literature studies. Wall deplors that Hunt ignores the methodologies and findings of childhood studies, which have involved actual children and have found their experiences highly relevant and diverse. Wall argues that

Once it is recognized that children’s own experiences are not some vast unchartable territory, but just as available to research as those of adults, then it becomes clear that children’s readings of literature can and should be studied in all their social and cultural diversity and constructedness. (Wall, “Childism” 6)

In “Thinking and Doing with Childism in Children’s Literature Studies” (2022), Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macarena García-González argue that Wall’s criticism of Hunt relies on a misinterpretation of his theory and reclaim Hunt’s work on childism to match it with approaches that try to foster collaborations between adults and children, such as participatory research.

Wall is even more critical of Young-Bruehl because her concept of childism puts adult attitudes central rather than children and casts children as victims: it “offers only a negative, deficit-oriented lens for studying childhoods, and not a positive, agentic one” (7). While Wall notes that the prejudices against children that Young-Bruehl

addresses should not be ignored, he pleads for situating that moment in “a larger positive project of understanding and empowering children in and of themselves” (8).

For Wall, the term “childism” is central to such a project, but in a meaning that is different from Young-Bruehl’s. While she grafts it onto sexism, Wall returns to the analogy with feminism that also inspired Hunt, but defines it as a discipline that builds on childhood studies and “use[s] children’s experiences as means for broader systemic critiques of scholarly and social norms” (Wall, “Childism” 4). Childism in his definition becomes a critical paradigm to challenge “the social and political foundations on which children’s lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed” and that have been dominated by adult perspectives (4). As a discourse that is strongly invested in imagining childhood, children’s literature is particularly relevant to study through this lens, and in fact, the scholarship on this literature has for decades practiced what Wall describes here as the mission for childist criticism (e.g. Shavit; Stephens; Nodelman, *Adult*). What, then, might be the added value of this perspective for children’s literature studies, given that scholars in this field have already developed their own theoretical concepts and frameworks to analyse and criticise the construction of childhood? The crucial difference is that Wall does not want to limit the idea of childism to childhood, but rather use the insights and actions that result from a reflection on childhood as leverage to challenge age prejudices and discrimination more widely. He uses voting as an example. The debates on the disenfranchisement of children can be used as leverage to develop a more just voting system for all, where all those who cannot vote themselves have the right to give proxies.

Wall pleads for using childhoods as “prisms or microscopes through which to deconstruct historical expressions of adultism and reconstruct more age-inclusive social imaginations” (“Childism” 5). On the one hand, this quotation once again illustrates a terminological divergence from the field of children’s literature studies. The adult normativity that Wall evokes has been addressed there, but under a different term. In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (2010), Maria Nikolajeva coins “aetonormativity” to describe what Wall calls adultism. However, the fact that the two fields have developed different terms for the same issue also shows that they are both concerned with adultism/aetonormativity, and it provides an opportunity to exchange ideas and methods. Children’s literature is, after all, a site of intense negotiations and exchanges of power and agency between children and adults. Traditionally it is viewed as an adult-produced discourse that contributes to children’s

socialisation and has even been said to “colonize” the minds of children with adult ideas about childhood (Nodelman, “A is for”). This point of view has been challenged not just for the problematic analogy with colonised subjects, but also for the passive role to which it reduces children (e.g. Bradford). Instead, critics like David Rudd and Marah Gubar stress that children should not only be viewed as subject to discourses of childhood, but as actively inhabiting, performing, and transforming them. Moreover, recent scholarship highlights that children’s role in contributing to the production of children’s literature has been underestimated (Gubar; Smith). Instead of intergenerational power struggles, many scholars in children’s literature studies are now putting the emphasis on intergenerational entanglement and collaboration on various levels: the production, content, reception, and study of children’s books (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques; Deszcz-Tryhubczak; Joosen, *Adulthood*, “Second Childhoods”; van Lierop-Debrauwer and Steels; Wesseling).

The focus on intergenerational entanglements ties in with the questioning of binary mechanisms of power that Wall’s childism paradigm offers. Crucial to the broader social critique of adultism that childism is supposed to elicit is a keen awareness of interdependence and interconnectedness (Wall, “Childism” 11). It is in this idea that I see a strong potential for interdisciplinary exchanges not only between childhood studies and children’s literature studies, but also with age studies. The adultism that Wall identifies in the relationship between adults and children is echoed in the criticism of the treatment of older people by younger adults as it has been voiced in age studies. Childhood studies and age studies are both faced with the challenge of fighting the marginalisation and deprivation of agency of people who need care or are at least perceived as needing care. Already in the 1990s, Jenny Hockey and Allison James discussed connections between the treatment of children and older people. They criticised the way older people were infantilised, for instance when residents of care homes were offered Disney films for entertainment or given assignments associated with pre-school, such as cutting and pasting. More recently, the use of diminutives in addressing children and older people has also been criticised (Peuteman). Such processes of infantilisation go hand in hand with a reduction of agency. Hockey and James argue that through “overt and hidden social practices, whether of caring control or controlling care, both elderly people and young children were being denied full personhood,” in particular when it came to “autonomy, self-determination and choice” (*Growing* 3). With this observation, they

point at the denial of agency and even human rights to the young and the old. Yet, here it is important not to reproduce the discourse that Wall identifies in Young-Bruehl's idea of childism and to stress only victimhood and disempowerment in the connection between childhood and old age. As I have argued before (Joosen, "Second Childhoods"), the connection that is set up between old and young characters in children's literature is not just based on disempowerment, but also on characteristics that are positively valued – playfulness, a fondness of stories, a strong imagination and sense of justice – and the characters are shown to gain agency through this friendship.

A sense of disempowerment or injustice can be a strong impetus to form intergenerational alliances, but people in different generations can also empathise with each other regardless of whether they are in the same boat. In some European countries this was evident, for example, in the support that Youth For Climate received from the group Grandparents For Climate. In *Intergenerational Solidarity in Children's Literature and Film* (2021), Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zoe Jaques notice a "growing awareness of both the complex nature of the concept of generation and generational identity and of the importance of intergenerational bonds for the sustainability and welfare of contemporary societies" (16–17). While they do not cite Wall, this idea resonates with his article "Human Rights in Light of Childhood" (2008), in which he takes a childist approach by connecting the issue of children's rights to the larger debate about human rights. He puts the "moral responsibility to 'the other'" at the centre of this debate (537), arguing that the concept of otherness cannot be limited to people who are marginalised in society. Instead, he suggests that we should view societies as "webs of otherness": "Societies are networks of interdependent human relations responsible to each other in their endless otherness" (537). Wall imagines an ethical circle of responsibility in responding to this otherness, which he relates to questions of autonomy and care. These concerns are not only relevant for the relationship between childhood and adulthood, but also occupy critics in age studies, where agency, autonomy, and care are important topics (e.g. Gullette, *Culture*; Falcus and Sako).

Wall's idea of childism also holds a critique of binary thinking that is currently topical in children's literature studies and childhood studies, and that ties in with debates in age studies and education. Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss, who combine philosophy, pedagogy, and literary studies in their research, defend a "post-age" approach to education. They argue that "[a]cross the entire lifespan,

linearity and ageism give rise to stereotypical and prejudicial ideas about age-related needs, interests and achievements, and lead to over-segregated provision, and increasingly to competition for resources to be allocated to particular generational causes" (971). They suggest an "intra-generational" organisation of education that pays more attention to children's abilities and interests than their age, and that "grows out of a strong sense that this evergrowing age-based categorisation is misguided, unnecessary, limiting and counter-productive" (971). Instead, "age-transgressive" practices may prove more productive in creating meaningful learning experiences. Crucial is that Haynes and Murriss stress the agency that children already have as "meaning-makers and problem-posers" (972), an observation that has been made by various other scholars in children's literature as well (e.g. Gubar; Rudd). It resonates with the plea in childhood studies against viewing children only as "becomings" – that is, as adults in the making – in favour of seeing them as "beings" with their own qualities independent of their future selves (Spyrou et al.). Vice versa, in *Adulthood in Children's Literature* (2018), I have argued that concepts of education, growth, and "becoming" should not be reserved for children and adolescents: there is potential for learning and personal development in every stage in life, including old age (Joosen 92).

In short, in childhood studies, age studies, and children's literature studies we see joint concerns as scholars are looking for perspectives that take age into account without overstating its importance. There is a shared demand of respect for the qualities and possibilities of agency that people have in all stages of life. Finally, scholars in all three domains are actively looking for ways to acknowledge, create, and analyse intergenerational dialogues and collaborations. It is here that children's literature itself can have an important role to play. While most published children's books are still written by adults, they rely on child readers' capacities as "meaning-makers and problem-posers" and often raise issues that are related to age and to the power dynamics between children and adults. Haynes and Murriss develop their theories on post-age education and other societal reflections by using picturebooks as a source of inspiration. Children's novels can play an important role in steering conversations about age. Not only ideas about age, but also the suggestions and multiplicity of meanings that characterise fictional narratives can become an interesting starting point for such reflections on age and intergenerational dialogues. This is especially true for novels

that thematise intergenerational power struggles and reflections on social rights and obligations.

The Granny Project

The case study I use to develop this idea is Anne Fine's *The Granny Project*, first published in 1983 in the United Kingdom and still in print in a slightly revised edition, which I have used for this article. The story reports a struggle in the Harris family, which consists of the parents, four children, and the grandmother. Natasha, the mother, is tired of having to care for her mother-in-law and has made arrangements for the old woman to be moved to a so-called leisure home. The children are shocked and decide on a plan to prevent it. The two eldest, Ivan and Sophie, develop a case study based on their family situation for a social science project, and Ivan ends up using their assignment to put pressure on their parents to let the grandmother stay. When the parents finally give in, the mother delegates all care to the children, with Ivan taking most of the responsibility. Since he and Sophie destroyed their social science paper once their mother agreed that the grandmother could stay, he also decides to use stories about her past for a new project. After Ivan collapses from exhaustion due to managing too many roles and tasks, the care for the grandmother is distributed more equally amongst the children. However, it turns out Ivan has developed a severe cold and infected his grandmother, who consequently dies from pneumonia.

Several of the notions that I have discussed in the first part of this article surface as themes in Fine's novel. First of all, the story features various age-related prejudices, particularly about the grandmother. Especially the mother, Natasha, produces several blatantly ageist remarks. When a GP visits and lists the ailments from which the grandmother suffers, he notices that she is still mobile. Natasha remarks: "The lazy old woman can still walk, yes. If she is truly hungry" (Fine).³ In addition to her insatiable appetite, the 87-year-old is described as suffering from arthritis, deafness, dementia, and incontinence. The grandmother is repeatedly "othered" in the novel and the reader is compelled to take a position vis-à-vis the hostile stance on old age that various characters take. As soon as the children start caring for the grandmother, several of them also express irritation and even ageist hostility. I acknowledge that there is a risk that readers will simply adopt this ageist position, especially since the prejudices about old age that the novel reproduces align with ageist tropes

in society: the so-called decline narrative that suggests that as people grow older, their capabilities, health, and quality of life go downhill (Gullette, *Declining*).

However, I do want to leave open the possibility that readers challenge the ageist discourse by reading against the text. That very strategy is offered by the novel itself, as it draws attention to how texts are constructed and how language and perspectives can be used to manipulate the reader's point of view. When Sophie and Ivan are writing the first draft of their science project on "ageing in the community," they consider how the choice of vocabulary can have an effect on how the message is received:

Back in 19_ _% of people over the age of [sic] were cared for at home. However, by 19_ fewer than _% were living with their families.

"You can't say that," said Ivan. "That sort of thing will simply *encourage* them."

"True."

Sophie crossed out the whole of the last sentence. After a moment's thought, she substituted:

However, in spite of the very real difficulties of keeping an old person in the home, of the _000 people over the age of _ in Britain today, as many as _% are still living safely in the bosom of their own families.

"That's better," Ivan said. (Fine)

By giving readers a glimpse of the production of a text and the strategies authors can use to direct their readers' response, this passage invites readers to position themselves critically vis-à-vis the text they are offered – a reading stance that can also be applied to the novel itself.

Interestingly, the passage in Sophie's report also contains various blanks. These are gaps that Sophie still has to fill in by doing more research. Again, I read this as an encouragement for the reader to adopt the same strategy for understanding the novel. The narrative also leaves various blind spots that readers need to fill, in particular because of its selective view of focalisation. Childist criticism is particularly invested in making the voiceless heard (Wall, "Childism" 3). Like childism, this is an idea that might originate in a reflection on childhood but that can be extended to other age categories. In the novel, the children address the problem that they are not sufficiently heard, but in fact, the grandmother is the most voiceless of all. We

never hear what she thinks about being moved, and readers rarely get access to her thoughts and opinions. While there are various focalisers in the book, only once do we enter the grandmother's mind. When a dinner party guest complains about the burden of caring for his old mother, the grandmother muses:

She'd not refuse another helping of that delicious peach and feather sorbet, but that demented man across the table was still going on and on about his poor mother. If no one else here was capable of stemming the tide, then it was clearly up to her. (Fine)

She then shuts the guests up by telling everyone how she herself puts no burden on her son. Social decorum forces him to agree and that is the end of the scene. In the quotation, the roles of sane and demented that had been established in the previous evocation of the dinner party are swapped. By reversing the "othering" process, the scene adopts the childist principle that anyone can be othered in intergenerational entanglements. This rare insight into the grandmother's mind also raises questions about her thoughts at other moments in the story – a point that I return to below.

In the familial struggle for power, the children as well as the grandmother insist on their rights from time to time. The younger siblings, Nicholas and Tanya, challenge Sophie and Ivan when they devise plans that exclude them. Nicholas protests: "I still think you two are planning to leave Tanya and me out of this, just because we're younger" (Fine). Nicholas is not just able to challenge exclusion on the basis of age, but also grasps how it operates: through the use of complex language that Sophie and Ivan have acquired in their social science project, the younger siblings cannot take part in the decision-making process. Similarly, the grandmother is left out of important decisions due to her old age, and occasionally she, too, insists on her democratic rights. The most striking scene concerning age-based discrimination and human rights is one where the grandmother demands to be taken to the voting station. Voting is an example that Wall brings up as an area in which his paradigm of childism can lead to a shift, reflecting on who has the right to vote and how the voting process can be reconceived to boost children's and other people's agency. According to Henry, the father in *The Granny Project*, his mother lost her right to vote when she lost interest in politics. However, she insists that she should be able to exert this right and the children decide to accompany her, eager to watch what they call "democracy in action" (Fine). The young and the old become

allies to make sure that her rights are respected. Ironically, however, the grandmother puts her vote in the wrong place so that it does not count. Yet even that, it could be argued, is her electoral right.

Wall develops the idea of childism not just on the basis of children's rights, but also around the idea of care. Questions of care lie at the heart of the argument in the Harris family, with the grandmother becoming more dependent and Natasha less willing to provide care for her children and mother-in-law. The younger characters assume that the grandmother is showing signs of dementia, but the reader does not necessarily have to agree with their assessment of her mental condition. While the grandmother's conversations with Ivan seem perfectly normal and coherent, her responses to Natasha are often confused and blunt. This can be read as a symptom of dementia, where patients can no longer be assumed to follow the norms of social propriety. However, one might also suspect a personal rivalry with Natasha in which the grandmother has more control and consciously performs ignorance and misunderstanding. Natasha is, after all, the most determined in trying to get rid of the grandmother. Consider, for example, the scene where the older woman thinks it's Natasha's birthday and asks her how old she is now:

Natasha stood for a while, considering. "It's my seventeenth," she decided.

"Oh, really, dear?" Mrs Harris smiled fondly at her.

"Seventeen! Fancy!"

Natasha carried the dustpan and broom towards the door.

"Seventeen," Mrs Harris repeated gently. "I hope you know that you will soon be past the first bloom of youth." (Fine)

The final line of the quote is also the final line of the chapter, which gives it extra weight. The blanks that the reader needs to fill in here are numerous: how does Natasha react? More importantly for my argument: why does the grandmother make this hurtful remark? Has Natasha been able to fool the grandmother by lying about her age? Or does the grandmother realise she is being mocked and does she want to hit Natasha back? By all means, the grandmother's comment alludes to a reciprocity of care that is part of a social contract which puts people alternatingly in the positions of caregiver and receiver of care, something that Wall points out in "Human Rights in Light of Childhood" (see also Beauvais, "From Solitary"). As the grandmother reminds Natasha, she, too, will one day be old. The comment reminds me of a Korean fairy tale which voices a similar thought: "The Son Who Abandoned His Old Father in the Mountains" (Lee).

There, a man wants to carry his old father to the top of the mountain to let him die there. His son convinces him to refrain from the plan by reminding him that the man will one day be in this vulnerable position too and would not want to be carried up by his son to die. The moral of the tale is that those who are young now will one day be old and in need of care, and so we should treat our elders as we would like to be treated ourselves in old age. Is that what the grandmother implies here too? The reader is left to guess. From the rest of the story, however, we can derive that not Natasha's compassion, but her frustration with her mother-in-law only grows with situations like these.

Natasha's refusal to keep caring stands in stark contrast to the children's spontaneous impulse to resist her plan to take the grandmother to a nursing home. One crucial question is asked but never fully answered in the book: "Do we care?"

The children held their meeting at the back of the garage. [...]
"First thing," said Ivan. "Do we care?"
Four hands went up.
"Next thing," said Ivan. "Do we believe we can stop them [their parents]?" (Fine)

The children answer the question about care affirmatively by raising their hands, but it is never articulated *why* they care. The summary on Anne Fine's website explains that the Harris children take action because the grandmother is "as much a part of their lives as their shambly house or the whirring of the washing machine" ("Granny"). The idea that the grandmother belongs to their community and that they do not want to break their entanglement would be one way of reading their commitment (even if the comparison with the washing machine is dehumanising). This reading fits in with Wall's view of communities as places where a constant othering process takes place that appeals to all individuals' responsibility, as well as my own reading of other children's books where the marginalised position of young and old leads to strong alliances to oppose adults who are in power (Joosen, *Adulthood*).

However, other and less romantic reasons for the children to care are offered later in the story. Ivan's reasons for taking over Natasha's assistance and spending a lot of time with his grandmother are presented as not entirely selfless. As it turns out, he has devoted his new social science project to an evocation of her past life, and some opportunism on his part is suggested as he presses her for anecdotes. Moreover, as the narrative progresses, it implements ever more op-

opportunities for readers to emotionally distance themselves from the grandmother. When Ivan feels guilty about infecting the old woman, Sophie comforts him:

“I think she’s old enough to –”

“What? Old enough to what, Sophie?”

“To call it a day. She’s nearly eighty-eight, after all.”

“That’s not that old.”

“It is that old. [...] You should look on the bright side. There are loads of worse ways to go. She got one of the best because of you.”

“One of the best?”

“Pneumonia is called The Old Man’s Friend. [...] She isn’t even conscious any more.” (Fine)

Ivan lets himself be convinced by Sophie that the grandmother’s fatal illness should be seen as fortunate, not tragic. Moreover, the matter-of-fact way in which her passing is subsequently narrated stands in stark contrast to earlier, dramatic scenes in the book: “The death came some time in the middle of the night. Natasha thought of waking Henry and then decided against it. He was as tired as she was. There would be much to do the next day” (Fine). The chapter in which the grandmother’s death is described is only focalised through Natasha, in whom it seems to provoke few emotions. The grandmother is once again dehumanised: it is not said that she dies, but that death arrives. In the subsequent lines, the reader is invited to sympathise more with Henry’s and Natasha’s exhaustion than with the deceased. Again, we do not know how the grandmother experiences her final hours – is she unconscious, as Sophie suggests, or does she feel or think anything? The reader does not learn how Henry or the children react either, since the next chapter immediately jumps from Natasha calling the funeral director to the actual service itself, when everyone has already processed the news.

These scenes make me wonder to what extent the novel still invites the reader to care about the grandmother. Subsequent events further exploit that ambiguity, as we see Nicholas crying about the removal of his grandmother’s television set – is he missing her TV or is this a way of channelling his grief over her loss? When Ivan submits his extensive social science report on his grandmother’s life, his teacher remarks that he must miss her. “Not really,” he responds, “In fact, I’m rather enjoying the break from her, myself” (Fine). The reader may be as perplexed as his teacher is. Has Ivan really stopped caring? Or is he just putting up a pose, unwilling to go into a deeper

conversation with his teacher? At the end of the book, the question “Do we care?” still lingers, as does the issue of what sustainable care is and how caregivers can balance their own needs with those of others without being numbed.

The final and radical twist in the novel also highlights a challenge in applying John Wall’s concept of childism to other age categories. While the novel suggests parallels between children and older people when it comes to democratic rights, interconnectedness, and the need for care, it also highlights a crucial difference in the expected development and the impact that has on power. As Clémentine Beauvais argues in *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children’s Literature* (2015), the “becoming” aspect of children does grant them a kind of power (might), which people lose as they grow older.⁴ In *The Granny Project*, we see that the children gain independence, agency, and voice as they grow older, and this has an effect on their parents’ investment in them and their own attitude towards the grandmother. Then again, the crudity of the grandmother’s othering in the children’s response to her death, which stands in stark contrast to their earlier care, may be there to provoke readers into a “childist” response.

A final point to consider in the analysis of this novel through a childist lens is that *The Granny Project* draws parallels between the children’s and the grandmother’s struggle for agency and raises sympathy for their cause, but also features what I have called “a seesaw effect” (Joosen, “Second Childhoods”) in doing so: the empowerment of the children and their grandmother is matched with a particularly unsympathetic depiction of the generation in between, in particular of Natasha. As the villain in the story, however, she plays an important part in creating narrative tension and her character is also used as a source of humour. Such aspects are crucial for a children’s book that is expected not just to teach, but also to entertain young readers. For Nikolajeva, the need for a good story puts limits to intergenerational solidarity, and for this reason the potential of children’s literature to contribute to a childist project may be limited too (“Afterword”). After all, childism relies heavily on intergenerational solidarity. However, it is not because a story features intergenerational conflict that it cannot provoke reflection that may lead to solidarity. After all, *The Granny Project* also offers moments of insight into Natasha’s plight and her demand for more time to herself feels justified. While the story may start with conflict, right before the grandmother passes away, the family comes up with a plan in which they all pool resources and time to make the care for

the grandmother a joint responsibility. As Sophie remarks in the end, "That was all right, that plan. It would have worked" (Fine). Even though it never materialises because of the grandmother's death, it shows that intergenerational solidarity is the way to move forward.

Conclusion

Opposing definitions of the term "childism" illustrate the need for more dialogue between childhood studies, age studies, and children's literature studies. Yet, the fact that the three fields have developed different terms for similar and related issues, or defined the same terms differently, also reveals shared concerns with age that offer possibilities for interdisciplinary crossfertilisation. The concept of childism as it has been redefined by John Wall holds the potential to propel this interdisciplinary work forward, as it relies on breaking down binary oppositions and finding common ground between generations that are entangled in processes of othering, gaining and granting agency and human rights, and providing and receiving care. I hope that my analysis of Anne Fine's *The Granny Project* has demonstrated that not only children's literature studies, but also children's books themselves can play a role in the childist paradigm shift that Wall envisages. Due to their accessibility to younger age groups, children's books can pull not only adults, but also children and adolescents into the process of rethinking agency, power, rights, and shaping intergenerational dialogue and solidarity. *The Granny Project* raises questions that closely align with Wall's childism paradigm, as the novel thematises processes of othering, ageist prejudices, human rights, and intergenerational dialogue and care. It is not an easy read, as the story revolves not only around insightful dialogues or appeals to readers' empathy, but also uses provocation, irony, and elusive gaps. I recognise that these narrative techniques may provide hurdles for readers to engage with the story and its potential to provoke profound reflections on age; I would even acknowledge that *The Granny Project* risks reinforcing ageist stereotypes about old age (malice, senility, and weakness in particular) and adolescence (self-centredness, immaturity) because it relies on those for its humour. However, the novel's provocation and challenges also testify to the belief in young people's agency that Wall puts central in his concept of childism, a faith in child readers' capacities as "meaning-makers and problem-posers" (Haynes and Murriss 972, see above), as opposed to the more passive role that Young-Bruehl's notion of childism ascribes to young people. Viewed in this light,

the explicit ageism, moments of intergenerational conflict, narrative gaps, and ambivalence in *The Granny Project* give readers the responsibility to recognise prejudices, complex situations, and conflicting emotions, to reflect on them and to take a position. Ideally, their reading will lead into an intergenerational dialogue that is focused on age without being governed by it, allowing readers in various life stages to share their views and expand their understanding of and respect for the experiences that childhood, adulthood, and old age entail.

Biographical information: Vanessa Joosen is professor of English literature and children's literature at the University of Antwerp in Belgium, where she leads the ERC-funded project "Constructing Age for Young Readers" and organises the annual Children's Literature Summer School. She combines research on children's literature and fairy tales with theories and methods from age studies, gender studies, translation studies, and digital humanities. She is the author of, amongst others, Adulthood in Children's Literature (2018) and edited the volume Connecting Childhood and Old Age in Popular Media (2018).

Notes

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2 "Linking Ages" is a project set up at Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main, with the aim of creating more dialogue between childhood studies and age studies ("Linking").

3 The e-book edition of *The Granny Project* is non-paginated.

4 Children's might is one of the reasons why Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macarena García-González are critical of the analogy that Wall draws between childism and feminism (8).

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