

# Literary style helps Jacoby tackle serious subject in 'Never Say Die'

"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve it through not dying." In a nutshell, this quote by Woody Allen pretty much sums up the main point Susan Jacoby is making in her new best-seller, "Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age."

"Denial is not necessarily a bad thing – as long as one never loses sight of the reality that is being denied," Jacoby writes. "For too many Americans, advanced old age means a sharp and unwanted transition from a sense of themselves as people valued by family and community to a diminished sense of themselves as burdens who serve no purpose."

Jacoby obviously has a vested interest in the subject matter for her latest book. She began her career as a journalist in the 1960s as a reporter for *The Washington Post*. She currently serves as program director for the Center for Inquiry, a rationalist think tank in New York City. Her previous nine books include "Alger Hiss and the Battle for History," "Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism" and "The Age of American Unreason."

"Never Say Die" consists of 11 relatively well-researched chapters with 12 pages of notes after the conclusion of the main text. Jacoby provides a fascinating and inherently interesting look at an issue that all Americans will face sooner or later. Her fluid literary style effectively integrates opinion, facts and anecdotes into an enthralling narrative that reads more like an edge-of-your-seat suspense novel than a scholarly treatise on a very serious subject.

Jacoby works hard to dispel the widely circulated myths that older people are necessarily smarter and

happier than their younger counterparts. In large measure, she succeeds at deconstructing a view of aging that has largely been fabricated by the media and tirelessly promoted by almost constant marketing. Unfortunately, after reading what Jacoby has to say about the cold, hard truth of the aging process, it becomes much easier to understand why so many Americans are in denial about it.

"Since the 1960s, there has been a significant but bifurcated change in American attitudes toward old people," Jacoby explains. "On the one hand, we recognize that many Americans over 65 are healthy, productive members of society. On the other hand, we refuse to think about the growing number of those who, in their ninth and 10th decades of life, are sick, removed from active intellectual and social life, and unable to take care of their most basic daily needs."

The author notes that a growing number of people seem to be exhibiting an unhealthy tendency to base their image of older individuals on the exception rather than the rule. In a particularly poignant illustration that many readers will instantly recognize, she points out how Betty White is often held up as an example of an older person who is still active and even "feisty." People want to believe that this is how most people in the late 80s are (or will be), when the reality is that this will not be the case for the vast majority of octogenarians.

In short, Jacoby sees most Americans as being intentionally oblivious to many of the realities of advanced old age, which she consistently refers to as "old old age."

"For many boomers now in their 50s and early 60s, the narcissistic

component of the self-help movements that flourished in our young adulthood has fused with a faith in science and medicine to reinforce our determination to 'defy' age," Jacoby laments. "At some point, nearly every boomer will have to cope with the shattering of vanity and self-delusion about the capacity to remain, as the song goes, forever young."

Jacoby goes to some length to address those who like to characterize their age by comparing it to how they think it was viewed by those in previous eras – exemplified by the use of such absurd phrases as "50 is the new 30."

Jacoby pursues her thesis through a wide range of disciplines and philosophies, from feminism. "I have been greatly disappointed by the failure of women's movement leaders from the 1960s and 1970s to face old old age as a women's issue," to economics, "Healthy old old age is costly, and unhealthy old old age is even costlier."

She is especially critical of what some see as the promise of medical science and increasingly sophisticated technologies to keep everyone active and engaged in life well into advanced old age. To illustrate the immense challenges science and engineering are up against, she cites some incredibly sobering statistics about the unending crusade against one of the great scourges of humanity: cancer. "The death rate from metastatic cancer (meaning that cancer cells have already spread through the lymph nodes and bloodstream when the disease is first identified) dropped only 5 percent between 1950 and 2005," Jacoby reports. "Belief in magic pills and the imminence of magic cures has adverse social as well as personal consequences."

"Never Say Die" has implications for our social, cultural, political and economic existence at both the individual as well as the societal level. "I consider it significant that so many people do feel a need to justify longevity by redefining old age as a highly desirable stage of life instead of as a period fraught with difficulties that must be addressed by society as a whole as well as by individuals," the author comments.

Ultimately, Jacoby just wants us to age gracefully and realistically. This is a very powerful book; it needs to be required reading for all Americans.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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