This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism

BY ASHTON APPLEWHITE

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Battle lines

Ageism is the last great prejudice to be tackled by society, and the fight will only be won if we recognise the ingrained bias in all of us, ASHTON APPLEWHITE says

Ashton Applewhite didn’t set out to be a writer or an activist, but the roles are increasingly familiar to the 67-year-old New Yorker after several years in the trenches researching, writing and speaking out against ageism.

“I didn’t start writing until I was 40,” Applewhite says. “I’ve never had a plan. I started thinking about longevity in my mid-50s, about 10 to 15 years ago, because I was afraid of getting old. I started researching longevity as an ordinary person and I learned, in a matter of weeks, that everything I thought I knew about what it was like to be really old was really off-base or flat-out wrong.

“I became obsessed with why so few people knew these things, why was our fear about ageing so disproportionate to reality.”

The result, after first blogging on the subject, was her book This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism, self-published on Amazon before being picked up by a publisher last year after it sold almost 30,000 copies online. “I tried to sell it and failed,” she says. “A publisher said to me, with a straight face, that they were concerned nobody else was writing about this, and I knew I was doomed.

“I call it age cooties, when people are so brainwashed, they think anything to do with ageing is going to be sad and scary and yucky, and how do we sell it? Which are legitimate questions but figure it out: it’s your job.”

The book’s nine chapters distil Applewhite’s thoughts and research on the subject into a framework to help readers understand the ingrained culture of ageism, debunk the forest of fallacies around the nature of ageing and encourage people to speak out against them. She points to a tweet that day from former World Health Organisation director of ageing Dr John Beard: “Old’ is a meaningless social construct that boxes an amazingly diverse array of people. Might as well try to group horses, oranges and orangutans. Problem is it drives social policy and, worse, can internalise expectations that come with the label.”

For Applewhite, it’s important she is not painted as a “positive-ageing person”. “It drives me nuts when people say, ‘Just have a good attitude’ or ‘Eat enough kale’,” she says.

“It’s not that our fears are without basis, but not all the bad things are going to happen for sure. Fear itself is bad for us. It’s bad for our health, it segregates us, it makes us dread our futures. Age is a real number with some physical consequences (but) the larger point is the older we are the less that very real number says about us, physically, cognitively, socially.”

Ageism is the last prejudice to be acknowledged by the world, long after racism, sexism and ableism became social and political causes. “We are all biased: when we see the proverbial little old lady hunching across the street, we think, ‘That looks awful’ – we project our fears,” Applewhite says.

“Part of that is human but, in huge part, we live in a culture that ... bombards us with this message that to age is to fail, when in fact to age is to live. You can’t challenge bias unless you are aware of it. No one wants to admit it but we all are.

“I urge people to look around. The evidence of older people being in the world in all sorts of interesting ways is everywhere around us.”

The book retails for $34.95 in bookshops.
INTRODUCTION

I’ve never lied about my age - I have no problem saying “I’m sixty-six” loud and clear - but I sure know a lot of people who do. People who’ve lied on résumés and on aeroplanes and on dates. There was the opera singer who fudged upward at the beginning of her career so she could get cast as Norma, but was holding at thirty-nine. And the woman who loved passing off her granddaughters as her kids, and who was regularly connected to her bank’s fraud department because she couldn’t remember what birth date she was using. I would never have been able to keep my stories straight either - one reason I told the truth. Another was because the typical response wasn’t so terrible: “You look great for your age!” I inherited my mother’s no-grey-hair genes, I’ve always had plenty of energy and no plans to slow down, and I certainly never felt like any of the labels out there - “senior,” “cougar,” “woman of a certain age” - applied to me. But if I was so cool with it, why didn’t “You look great for your age” feel like a compliment? The fact was that the hazy prospect of growing old filled me with something between free-floating anxiety and stomach-churning dread. I didn’t want to think about it until I had to, and when it crossed my mind, I flipped the channel.

Was I driven by fear of losing my looks? Of growing frail? Of my own mortality? Wouldn’t I be better off making my peace with the passage of time than waging a battle no one could ever win? I wish I could report that I found the answers in one blinding epiphany. Instead, it’s been a gradual awakening over the past twelve years.

I started learning about longevity, interviewing people over eighty who work, and blogging about it.

The possibility that life could become more fun in your eighties had never crossed my mind. Nor that growing a little shorter of breath each year would fail to terrify. Nor that an ever more circumscribed life could be an ever greater source of personal growth and specific pleasures. Nor that such joyful clarity would be rooted in awareness - not denial - that time was short and therefore to be savoured. After this first jolt of fresh old air, I kept going.

The more I read and the more experts I talked to, the clearer it became that these older workers were typical of a large and fast-growing cohort of older people. Why the disconnect between what I had imagined about old age and the reality that was coming into view? Had I bought into some kind of fast-growing cohort of older people. Why the disconnect between what I had imagined about old age and the reality that was coming into view? Had I bought into some kind of awareness - not denial - that time was short and therefore to be savoured. After this first jolt of fresh old air, I kept going.

My darkest nightmare was the possibility of ending my future held? Had I bought into some kind of awareness - not denial - that time was short and therefore to be savoured. After this first jolt of fresh old air, I kept going.

What might an age-friendly world - friendly to all ages, that is - look like? What can we do, individually and collectively, to provoke the necessary shift in consciousness, and catalyze a radical age movement to make it happen? Let’s find out.

CHAPTER NINE

SOME PLACES TO START:

• Look for ways in which you are ageist instead of looking for evidence that you aren’t. You can’t challenge bias unless you’re aware of it, and everyone’s biased some of the time.
• If you’re not sure whether something is ageist or not, think about whether the same language or image would be appropriate if the situation involved someone significantly older or younger. When does an amorously entwined couple get downgraded from “hot” to “adorable,” for example?
• Don’t assume that older people aren’t ageist. Plenty of them unthinkingly accept second-class status as “just the way things are.”
• Don’t compliment an older person by telling her she’s “different” - fitter, stronger, more stylish - from other people her age. Saying “I can’t believe you’re seventy-five” implies that seventy-five-year-olds look a certain way. She can only accept the compliment at the expense of other women her age.
• Watch out for sanitized or romanticized views of ageing... Whitewashing only masks anxiety. Idealized depictions of late life distract from the real challenges of ageing and the need to confront them.
• Talk to people significantly older and younger than you, and listen carefully. If you don’t know many of them, seek them out.
• Don’t use “still” when describing a routine activity, because it suggests that the activity makes the person an outlier. Older people are not still driving, going to the gym and the office, travelling, having sex, etc. They’re just doing them, like countless others.
• The next time someone asks how old you are, tell them the truth. Then ask why they wanted to know, or what feels different now that they have a number, and why, if you’re asking a child how old they are, tell them your age first.
• Instead of telling people they look great for their age, tell them they look great. If someone says, “You look great for your age,” resist the impulse to thank them. Say, just as brightly, “You look great for your age too!”
• Avoid youth-centric language like “young at heart” or “youthful” or “young for your years.”
• Have you ever heard anyone describe themselves as “elderly”? Avoid the word. Skip “the elderly,” too.
• Don’t use “grandmotherly” unless the topic is grandmotherhood.
• Assume capacity, not incapacity. Speak to an older person the same way you would to a younger one.
• Start or join a consciousness-raising group around age bias... You can download a free booklet - “Who Me, Ageist?” How To Start Your Own Consciousness Raising Group – at thischairrocks.com/resources.
• Don’t assume this topic is only relevant for older people. Ageism affects everyone.