

Anne Leonora Blaakilde (2005). *Livet skal leves – forlæns, baglæns og sidlæns* [Life shall be lived – forwards, backwards and sideways]. Gyldendal, 272 pp. ISBN 87-02-02593-0

REVIEWED BY KARIN LÖVGREN

The cultural gerontologist Anne Leonora Blaakilde's popular science book *Livet skal leves – forlæns, baglæns og sidlæns* consists of a number of interviews on life course and ageing. The life course is like a journey, she writes, her interviewees tell of their respective journey and how they perceive societal norms on ageing, and a prescribed timetable for the normal and normative life course. The interviews are interspersed with Blaakilde's summing up and reflections on different life course phases and on what ageing can mean in cultural and social terms.

The interviews with Danes are with a number of persons, from a 17 year old student to the oldest, in her nineties. In other words, a chronology from young to older is followed. Some of the people interviewed are well known in Denmark: an actor, a politician, a journalist, an author for example.

The interviews focus on where in life the interviewed is and what he or she thinks about age, life experience and ageing. They are asked to reflect forward, what expectations they have for life, as well as backwards, how life has shaped itself. Here, and in the book's title a quotation from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is alluded to: life can only be understood looking back but has to be lived forwardly.

The book is addressing an interested general public, it contains no scientific jargon, and all scientific terms are explained in plain Danish. Blaakilde invites the reader to reflect on age-related expectations and age norms, generational and cohort experiences.

It is striking that all the interviewees are satisfied with their own lives, mature and in balance they look back on their lives without bitterness or regret; increasing age has given them experiences that

have allowed them a soothing distance to what others may think of them. With confidence they reflect on the future. Where is all the hesitation and doubt? Where are reflections on wrong choices at the cross-roads of life, the feeling that if I had done this, or had the opportunity to do that, life would have evolved differently? With a smile even the random ageist attitudes encountered are commented.

As an underlying current in Blaakilde's intersecting texts is a notion that thirty-five, forty is an inexplicitly expressed age boundary at which, to quote the author, the count-down commences and one is perceived as being older in Danish society. With common sense, the interviewed are reflecting on this without any one of them appearing to be affected in any way by a, as the Danish expression formulates it, *køreplan*, timetable where they have missed the train and got stuck at the station. Perhaps this has to do with the genre and outline of the book: friendly questions and answers, without ever getting heated. "All my dreams have come true", is a quotation also forming the heading of a chapter.

Perhaps there is also a connection with an underlying agenda of Blaakilde's. She wants to rouse an interest for issues regarding age and ageing as a perspective, how we culturally define ageing, and show the rich experiences that can come with age, perhaps in dialog with a perceived ageist environment. The age course is represented as a funnel in inverse proportions with fewer opportunities with increasing age, writes Blaakilde, and perhaps as a rejoinder to this conception all the interviewees get to convey and mediate such nuanced mature and positive accounts of ageing.

This though, gives an impression of oversimplification, plucky pleasantness. Not even the surroundings, the social structures the agent has to act within and negotiate, is described and conveyed as hindrances in the staging of a good life and dreams come true. The life course becomes upwards, forwards, onwards.

At the same time Blaakilde's text is distanced from this benevolent picture of ageing. The social timetable of society has a built-in default, that we should have reached completion by the age of thirty-five. We do not believe in fresh ideas and new approaches in people over thirty-five, we are neofils as never before, we worship the new as equivalent with the best, she writes. Today, age matters far more than ever, states Blaakilde.

We focus more on exact chronological age than previously and this exposes people to an age stress tied to expectations and norms of what to have achieved at a certain age, and most importantly, before thirty-five. The linkage of new and young as contrast to old reflects a depreciating attitude to elderly.

One of the books benefits is its authorial voice, the reflexive tone Blaakilde adopts; that she doesn't hide behind academic jargon or choices of word that would exclude the layperson. Her interlacing text parts are inviting, openly formulated thoughts, putting perspective on what age and ageing can mean in our society, and here the author invites a broader public to ponder on gerontological issues.