

IMPROVEMENTS IN HEALTH AND WELFARE HAVE DISTORTED LONG-ESTABLISHED STAGES OF LIFE. Rachel Hills ATTEMPTS TO GET TO GRIPS WITH THE NEW PARADIGM OF AGEING.

WHEN DO WE START TO FEEL OLD?



If we know nothing else about age, we know this: it is relative. As a short, spotty 12-year-old, the litesome year 10s seemed impossibly grown up. To a 19-year-old at a music festival, the mud-splattered 35-year-olds seem embarrassingly past it. At 80, a romance with a fresh-faced beau of 65 feels deliciously like cradle-snatching.

Age is relative in other ways, as well. It isn't just our own age that determines who we think is "over the hill" and who's a spring chicken; our perceptions of age – and of what it means to be a particular age – are a matter of time, place and culture. In 19th-century England, the poverty-ridden working class sent their children to work in the mines. In 1950s Australia, most people were married and mortgaged before their 25th birthday.

Now, a combination of longer lifespans, greater affluence and increased flexibility around work and reproduction means that, in the words of one doctor, today's 50-year-old really is "yesterday's 30-year-old". And that applies to everything from our health, to the popular culture we consume, to the way we look.

Not everyone is happy about this shift: witness the sneers at motorcycle-riding boomers, hoodie-clad X-ers, and Gen Ys who won't move out of home. But there's more to it than wanting to stay forever young, explains Catherine Mayer, author of *Amortality: The Pleasures and Perils of Living Agelessly*. What we are witnessing is a complete decoupling of chronological age from social behaviour, which

manifests itself as much in figures such as Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg as it does in the relentlessly toned physique of Madonna.

Still, there's no denying that when it comes to "living agelessly", more of us choose to position ourselves on the younger end of the spectrum.

Amortality doesn't just resist ageism by opening up new, less age-dependent ways of living. It is also a product of ageism: what happens when youth and everything associated with it are so revered that it's not so much that we have the *choice* not to grow old, as that we are not allowed to age. Amortality – in its current form, at least – may open up new opportunities, but it also creates new obligations.

Some of these are immediately recognisable: think of celebrities like Demi Moore or Johnny Depp who, whether through good genes or skilful cosmetic

surgery, look not much different pushing 50 than they did at 25. But our obsession with youth isn't just about the way we look. It's about the way we are rewarded for behaving.

When it comes to moving through stages of life – singledom to marriage, employment to retirement – many of us are understandably ambivalent. It's not just a question of being afraid of death, or being "too selfish" to take on new responsibilities or let the next generation take the stage. In a culture in thrall to youth even as we thumb our nose at its hedonism and intensity, it is a fear of becoming irrelevant – a fear that not even the young are immune from.

It is ironic that, as we redefine what is permissible at 30, 50 or even 80, the parameters of what it means to be "young" have grown tighter than ever. Researching perceptions of youth, sex and liberty for my own book, I've listened to 23-year-olds bemoaning the passing of their high school days. "Once you hit your 20s, it's all over," one told me. A recent UK study found that women start to feel "old" on average at 29 – as much because of self- and socially-imposed deadlines around work and family as imaginary sagging skin. It's not their age that makes them feel old but their failure to live the life that age represents.

Part of the problem is that youth and age are too often presented as a false dichotomy, with no in between. If you are not young, you are old. You are staying out until 3am, or falling asleep in front of the television; a swinging single on the prowl or lucky to get laid once a week by your long-term partner. You are Lady Gaga or you are Barry Manilow. "There is this sense that only way you can have fun as an older

person is to do the same things you enjoyed when you were younger, otherwise you're kind of staid and boring," explains Claire Hollowell, a young UK academic studying the relationship between youth and fun.

But growing older doesn't have to mean growing boring. Catherine Mayer comes from a family of amortals, in the best sense. Her father, in his 80s, is an active diver. Pushed into retirement in her late 60s, her mother

bounced into her 70s by starting her own business.

In *Amortality*, Mayer argues if we truly want to live agelessly, we need to focus not just on lengthening our lifespans but on improving our health and communities so that we can fully enjoy those extra years. Perhaps we can take this one step further. True agelessness isn't about remaining, in the words of a US clothing chain, "forever 21", but about being free to move, or not, from one stage of life to the next without fear or reproach. As Hollowell puts it, "You don't say no to age boxes by being forced into different ones. You don't do anyone any favours by being 60 and trying to do the same things you did when you were 19." ●

OUR OBSESSION WITH YOUTH ISN'T JUST ABOUT THE WAY WE LOOK. IT'S ABOUT THE WAY WE ARE REWARDED FOR BEHAVING.