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LIFE | JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

The Best Books of 2016 for People of a Certain Age

Among them: a guide to staying fit, an immersion into the 1960s and a writer takes stock at 60

By **DIANE COLE**

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Life's next chapter is yours to write.

So suggest an array of new books that explore possibilities for engaging your mind, body and spirit in your later years. Here are this year's picks for the best of them.

Transforming midlife losses into gains



Humor, historical perspective and advice on reducing health-care bills are all included in our picks for the year's best books for older readers. *ILLUSTRATION: EVAN TRUSEWICZ/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In quick succession in her early 50s, journalist Barbara Bradley Hagerty faced the loss of her profession as a National Public Radio correspondent due to a paralyzed vocal cord, and the devastating death of her beloved mother. In “Life Reimagined: The Science, Art and Opportunity of Midlife,” Ms. Hagerty chronicles how she seized these crises as a chance to redefine herself and re-envision what might come next.

She shares in detail the mental and physical challenges of tackling a new career, and allows us to mourn our own losses and regrets as she reviews and invests with new meaning lessons gleaned from her mother’s resilient spirit. Ms. Hagerty’s account of her transformation is laced with the latest research into healthy aging from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, physiology and sociology, and includes numerous interviews. At one point she makes a case for what she calls “intentional frivolity.” Three cheers to that!

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Diary of the year

Is turning 60 “the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?” Author Ian Brown asks all of the right questions in “Sixty: A Diary of My Sixty-First Year,” an account that is by turns witty and poignant. I laughed aloud as Mr. Brown recounts losses of hair, lapses of memory and regrets (the long-promised novel he still hasn't written). With a wry touch, he admits to forebodings of mortality, confessing, “I spend an embarrassing amount of time every single day thinking about who is younger than me, and who is older.” He waxes existential at times, sometimes too much so. But he also knows how to keep it light: While discussing

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how he should spend whatever time he has left, he admits he should have thought more about this when he was 20 and still frittering it away.

Mr. Brown, a Canadian, is grateful for his happy marriage of 26 years and humble in the face of his children (one of whom was born severely disabled). He is also acutely aware, perhaps due to a tendency toward the curmudgeonly, of the person he doesn't want to become—"the cranky old man." The challenge, he writes, is "staying open." As for the benefits of observing and recording one's life day by day in a diary: "Someone ought to keep his eyes open," he concludes. "Otherwise, you could miss a lot along the way."

An all-American milestone birthday

This centenary year of the National Park Service is the perfect moment for "A Thinking Person's Guide to America's National Parks." Edited by Robert Manning and others, the essays and often breathtaking photographs in this volume expertly examine the more than 400 sites of natural beauty and historic importance that make up the national park system. Readers will find plenty of reasons to visit some places again and to discover others. As I turned the pages, I relived my explorations of the Ancestral Pueblo cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde in Colorado, my awe at witnessing the geological wonders of Yellowstone and

Yosemite, and the weight of history I felt at Harpers Ferry and at Gettysburg. My quandary now: What to see next.

‘I spend an embarrassing amount of time every single day thinking about who is younger than me, and who is older.’

—Ian Brown, “Sixty: A Diary of My Sixty-First Year”

Relive the decade that looms so large

If you’re reading this article, chances are that you lived through at least part of the drama-filled 1960s. Whether you were too young then to understand the era’s complexities, or old enough to want to revisit or clarify what really happened, you’ll find plenty to contemplate in “The 60s: The Story of a Decade,” from the *New Yorker*. An anthology as captivating as it is comprehensive (about 700 pages), this book brings the era back to life through a wide-ranging selection of pieces that appeared in the magazine during those years.

As I read now-classic essays by Rachel Carson and James Baldwin, I was struck by how timely they remain. Contemporary reports on the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War and Israel’s Six-Day War brought the era back as vividly as a newsreel. Roger Angell’s piece on the New York Mets’ astonishing 1969 World Series victory made me shed tears anew over my hometown Baltimore Orioles.

Much more fun, for me, were the arts pieces that introduced *New Yorker* readers to such talents as the Beatles and Bob Dylan. Among my other favorite pieces: Pauline Kael on the movies, fiction by John Updike and John Cheever, and poetry by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Adding to the mix, current *New Yorker*

writers such as Malcolm Gladwell reintroduce readers to staff writers who were their predecessors.

The keys to balanced health...

“We are often led to believe that aging is something that simply happens,” begins Mark E. Williams in “The Art and Science of Aging Well: A Physician’s Guide to a Healthy Body, Mind and Spirit.” Dr. Williams, in this information-packed overview, both encourages us and shows us how to make ourselves as fit, and the years ahead as fulfilling, as possible. “Does memory have to decline with aging?” he asks. “Absolutely not! Like anything else, the more you neglect memory, the worse it gets.”

PREVIOUSLY IN ENCORE

- It’s Time to Rethink the Bucket List Retirement (March 2016)
- How Technology Will Transform Retirement (November 2015)
- To Age Well, Change How You Feel About Aging (October 2015)
- Make the Most of Longer Lives (June 2015)
- A Guide to Not Retiring (March 2015)
- Online Tools for Retirement Planning and Living (January 2015)

His prescription: Enriching mind and body through lifelong learning, exercise and new experiences, such as travel, volunteering, teaching, mentoring and participation in your extended community of friends and family. Such activities, he says, stimulate

the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a substance that helps preserve one’s memory by encouraging nerve cells to grow and connect. His philosophy is at once realistic and positive. “Old age is no refuge from an empty life,” he writes. He points to the ways you can make it both full and fulfilling.

...and balancing the medical bills

How do you pay your medical bills? Or, more to the point, how do you get your health insurance to pay? That is the subject of Frank Lalli’s invaluable guide, “Your Best Health Care Now: Get Doctor Discounts, Save with Better Health

Insurance, Find Affordable Prescriptions.” An esteemed journalist and editor, Mr. Lalli eight years ago was diagnosed with cancer. Fortunately, effective treatment was available; unfortunately, the price tag for his wonder drugs was \$204,000 a year. Determined to find a better resolution, he became a self-styled “health detective,” using his considerable skills as an investigative reporter to track down ways to lower his bills. He succeeded by doing what he instructs his readers to do: asking questions.

Chapter by chapter, he details how to find the best insurance policy, depending on your situation; explains what you need to know about Medicare and the Affordable Care Act; and provides specific tips for cutting red tape and getting the best health care you can. There’s preventive advice, too: Have a full physical each year, Mr. Lalli says, to build a baseline of knowledge about who you are and to establish mutual trust with your doctor before an emergency strikes.

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