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## Telling Tales About Dementia: Experiences of Caring

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**Lucy Whitman (ed.), *Telling Tales About Dementia: Experiences of Caring*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2010, 224 pp., pbk £14.99, ISBN 13: 978 84310 941 9.**

HEATHER WILKINSON

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presented by transactive memory (people remembering together), conflicting accounts and the unravelling of contributions from group interviews. He uses his own transcripts to illustrate how to handle these difficult issues. Finally, a reflection by Pam Schweitzer on her 25 years of recording the memories of old Londoners and the re-creation of these reminiscences into plays and performances. Her pioneering work became known as Reminiscence Theatre. Over many years she worked with indigenous Londoners and their memories of war and the introduction of the welfare state; and then with a wide range of 'minorities' – ethnic, religious, disabled and disaffected. The core of this remarkable work has been its capacity to give voice to the unheard and dignity to those who felt un-regarded.

For all its brevity this is a significant volume and one from which gerontological researchers can benefit greatly. It should provide a spur to closer connections between two important research traditions.

## References

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Lucy Whitman (ed.), *Telling Tales About Dementia: Experiences of Caring*,  
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2010, 224 pp., pbk £14.99, ISBN  
13: 978 84310 941 9.

Central to all our lives and our identities are 'our stories', and what they mean to us. In this collection of stories of caring for a close partner, relative or friend with dementia there is a sharing of a wealth of experiences, both positive and negative. Such a sharing of stories through the use of narrative is important for a number of reasons: stories can make explicit and bring to life key messages and experiences; they allow us to share, explore and explain caring relationships; and creating and sharing a narrative can be a beneficial process in itself – the therapeutic effect of sharing.

*Telling Tales About Dementia* contains 30 short but powerful chapters (including one poem) divided across three sections with the headings 'Living with Loss', 'Despatches from the Battlefield' and 'Keeping in Touch, Letting Go'. I felt that these section headings tended to echo the many negative experiences described within each section, at the risk of losing some of the most positive experiences. Most frustratingly in the section on formal care (Despatches from the Battlefield) it is these heartrendingly negative stories and examples that stay with the reader, despite some wonderful examples of good practice. That the balance of experiences reflects negative experiences across the spectrum of 'caring spaces' (acute care, respite care, care homes and so on) leaves us with an ongoing challenge in the current climate of recession and austerity. I am reluctant to highlight any one

story over another. What is clear is that the voice and strength of the carer is a crucial part of the resistance to poor care and to the challenge to improve both understanding and provision of care.

One of the real strengths of the book is the diversity of relationships included – that we all care in some way: straight or gay, black or white, young or old. Against this context of diverse relationships there are also some clear commonalities. A strong theme across the stories is the insight given to the emotions and emotional work involved in a caring relationship. There is also deep acknowledgement of the caring journey itself – the challenges and rewards, the sadness and loss, but also the learning and giving that comes out clearly from many stories. This book is very moving, not just in the sadness, but also in the strength of the caring relationships – something we all hope for as individuals and that as a society we rely on.

This book will speak to other carers who will empathise with or learn from different chapters. However, the narratives across the chapters also provide strong lessons and experiences that both increase understanding and highlight key issues for a much wider audience – particularly for formal carers, service developers, policy makers, commissioners and anyone with an interest in improving the experience of living with dementia for both the person and their close friends and family. Central to this is the importance of relationships in all their complexity and form: the book illustrates this fundamental importance beautifully.

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Judith Phillips, Kristine Ajrouch and Sarah Hillcoat-Nallétamby, *Key Concepts in Social Gerontology*, Sage Publications, London, 2010, 248 pp., pbk £19.99, ISBN 13: 978 1 4129 2272 2.

The phenomenon of an ageing society may sometimes come across as a product or outcome of contemporary Western society. However, in this book Phillips *et al.* point out that ‘new’ realities of old age and ageing ‘have been ever-present, but have received minimal attention from social thinkers’ (p. 122), suggesting that in fact ‘gerontology is an ancient subject but a recent science’ (p. 1). This ‘concise encyclopaedia’ on social gerontology captures in a brilliantly and scholarly way different theoretical and historical debates found within this multi-faceted and dynamic discipline. The book offers an alternative way of thinking about ageing, laying out different long-standing debates, and presenting the process of ageing through a kaleidoscope of social, political and economical layers, showing how they influence each phase and turning point in the lifecourse.

Fifty concepts are discussed in turn within this book, which together illustrate the multidisciplinary of gerontology, and how the flexibility of this subject is its strength. The authors demonstrate how social gerontology has the ability to bring together different perspectives from a range of disciplines including social, biological and psychological; and the intersectionality between them. Reference is