

The Other Side of the World: A 'Young' Book by an Old Writer

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Posted: 11/14/2012 4:20 pm

My friend Jay Neugeboren has just published his 19th book, a novel entitled [*The Other Side of the World*](#). His 20th book, also a novel, will be published in February. That's four books in five years. Not bad for a man over 70! Not bad at any age, right? And just a bit more proof -- as if it's needed -- that older people still have a lot going for them.

This new book, although clearly the mature work of a person who has mastered his craft, is otherwise a "young" book. I hate to put it that way because I think that this way of thinking about people -- old is decrepit, enervated and finished with life while young is alive, energetic and adventurous -- is inaccurate and ageist. But I want to drive home the point that this book not only reflects the productive potential of old people, but also their potential to engage life in a way that our society thinks of as young.

For starters, the book has lots of sex. Downright dirty sex, in fact, even though the details of sex acts are usually treated with discretion, like a movie before there were R ratings. For example, one of the central characters is a woman writer, whose first novel is about a mother, father and daughter who were engaged in a *ménage à trois*. The incest is a bit shocking to the main characters of *The Other Side of the World*, but not unimaginable. For them, group sex of unrelated people is an ordinary part of life. Falling in bed with strangers, some paid, some not, is also taken for granted.

It's noteworthy that this old writer writes about sex like a young man. I was particularly struck by the difference between the way he and Philip Roth, for example, handle sex in recent novels. In Roth's [*Everyman*](#) the main character is a guy in his 70's who betrayed his artistic talent -- if he ever had any -- for the rewards of advertising, both money and models, and is now sick and alone with nothing to show for his life and no one to love him. For him, sex is a memory. [*Exit Ghost*](#) features a famous writer who is incontinent and perhaps impotent who has fantasies about love and sex with a younger woman whom he meets in passing -- sad fantasies of a frightened, old man who is no longer capable of sweeping a woman off her feet and onto her back. In contrast, *The Other Side of the World* is alive with sexual possibilities that don't read like just fantasies of a dirty old man.

(This reminds me, Jay's writing has been compared favorably to that of both Roth and Updike. "Neugeboren," a reviewer said, "might not be as famous as some of his compeers, like Philip Roth or John Updike, but it's becoming increasingly harder to argue that he's any less talented.")

In any event, Jay's book is at heart a love story about two people in their 40's and not particularly about older people. But it does include older people; and with the arguable exception of a woman who has major memory loss, none of them is decrepit and truly over the hill. One is a writer and a professor, the father of the main male character in the book. He is portrayed as erudite, caring and even a bit wise. He's a tribute to the potential to age well. There are also a couple of other older men/fathers in the book who are disgusting people. Jay does not let the old off the moral hook just because they are old. What a relief not to be portrayed as a saccharine platitude!

I find it particularly engaging that *The Other Side of the World* implicitly takes on some fundamental moral issues. Via incest, prostitution, exploitation, abandonment of one's family and even murder, it tests the limits of amorality. Although Jay tells me that he wasn't thinking about them, I felt the presence of [Camus](#) and [Gide](#) and saw shades of youthful existential experiments as I read this book.

And there's also an implicit cry to preserve what is left of the Earth's virgin lands. The "other side of the world" refers to Singapore and especially Borneo, which the main character of the novel loves for its large remnants of untamed nature. He is saddened by Borneo's loss of innocence at the hands of capitalist enterprise, even though he is one of the agents of wealth wielding the scythe of progress. He knows it's complicated. The book is "young" enough (there I go again) to arouse anger about the rape of the land but "old" enough not to deny that continued economic growth may depend ("sustainable development" notwithstanding) on the continued exploitation of the natural wealth of our planet.

I've read a number (not all) of Jay's 19 books. His fiction always seems to me not only to tell interesting stories about interesting people remarkably in their own voices, but also to stir up issues with lots to think about beyond the good tale.

So -- at the risk of appearing to be a huckster for my friend -- I recommend that you buy *The Other Side of the World* and other of Jay's books. You won't be disappointed.

And in this book you will get a wonderful example of why old people -- like Jay and me and millions more -- should not be written off. Most of us still have, to steal a thought from Robert Frost, a few "miles to go before we sleep."

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