Journal of Aging Studies 76 (2026) 101403

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

All fluff and no substance? The 'problem' of care in popular narratives, the cozy mystery and Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club*

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Care
Assisted living
Neoliberalism
Cozy mystery
Popular culture
Richard Osman

ABSTRACT

Age studies scholarship has increasingly interrogated the intersection of care for older adults and neoliberal market ideologies. This study explores how popular culture, specifically the cozy mystery genre, negotiates the language and optics of care for older adults in terms of costs and accessibility. Taken as a whole, the stories with ageing detectives offer invigorating alternatives to the traditional decline narratives by sustaining the protagonists as older detectives who still keep their autonomy, independence, and more important productivity by solving cases. While such representations offer exhilarating alternatives to ageist stereotypes, they also risk making older protagonists' value contingent on productivity and activity, while obscuring their potential care needs and the issue of access to care services from the reader. Through a close reading of Richard Osman's debut novel *The Thursday Murder Club*, this article explores the idealized depiction of later life care within the luxurious retirement village Coopers Chase. The analysis reveals that while the genre guarantees a sugar-coated and comfortable reading experience, it also allows for a reflection on how social changes impact the community, particularly regarding later life care. Ultimately, the article argues that the idealized depiction of the protagonists' later life care facilities exposes a key reality of care under the neoliberal ethos: enjoying quality of life and care in older age becomes a luxury, taken for granted only by those with the means to pay for it.

Introduction: locating the spectre of later life care

It goes without saying that the ageing of the population is one of the most significant demographic processes of our times. As more and more people reach pensionable age and live into their seventies, eighties, and nineties while needing expensive care, the concern about "shrinking … welfare resources" (Segal, 2014, p. 225) looms large, as does the worry about the effect of dependent older adults on the lives of their family carers. However, not all families have the means to hire help or resort to nursing homes to look after their older relatives. Assisted living facilities, let alone retirement villages, are often out of reach for most older adults or their families. As Chivers and Kriebernegg (2017) argue in their study on care home stories, while institutional care is required by many of the current older population, policy-makers use the common desire of ageing into old age peacefully at home to endorse it as an opportunity to reduce the costs of care for the family unit. As a result, many older adults are cared for at home, frequently by women, often members of the family or hired help from migrant communities. It is no surprise, then, that concerns about how to manage later life care are depicted in symbolic ways in many popular culture narratives. For instance, the first episode of *The Last of Us* (2023-), "When You're Lost in the Darkness" (Mazin et al., 2023), features the fear of caregiving and old age through the image of a zombified 'voracious granny', who, when infected by a brain-rotting-fungus, attacks her caring daughter. This harrowing scene does not only speak of the horrors of a zombie apocalypse, but it conjures up the spectre of later life care as a burden that consumes the family's carers, both physically and emotionally, and financially (someone needs to pay for the costs of caring). It is no surprise, either, that the protagonists of the series feel the need to stop the granny by shooting her dead. Or deader.[1]

While this study focuses on how later-life care is represented in the cozy mystery, the opening sequence of *The Last of Us* makes evident that within popular culture, the language and optics of care for older adults are predominantly negative, viewed as "burdensome and disconnected from ordinary emotional or familial bonds" (Burke, 2015, p. 29). This perception may be seen as selfish, another symptom of what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as 'liquid love' or the view of relationships as "an investment like all the others," (Bauman, 2003,p. 13) valued primarily for

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[1] We beg readers to note we are being ironic and we are commenting on the way the scene is portrayed and the effects produced by this portrayal.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2026.101403
Received 16 July 2025; Received in revised form 8 September 2025; Accepted 17 January 2026
Available online 24 January 2026

the benefits and returns they yield. In fact, the discourse of care as burdensome draws from early feminist approaches, which criticised the gendered attribution of care as an exclusively female task linked to domestic and unrecognised work. While care is still undeniably feminised and racialised, Carol Gilligan's (1993) seminal work became a cornerstone from which to theorise care as a positive moral value rather than a female 'burden' that should be eliminated. Although subsequently criticised for her essentialist connection between women and nurturing values, Gilligan's thesis laid the foundation for a later development of a feminist ethics of care and a contemporary understanding of care as a positive and essential value of human existence. From this point of view, care can be understood as not only the accumulation of practical tasks and activities, but also as "relational, emotional, intimate, and affective" (Elliott, 2016, p. 249) practices that ultimately afford positive values.

However, within the current neoliberal context, the integration of love and care into free market ideology has reframed care for people with disabilities and older adults as a commodity, something to be bought and sold according to market-policies (Moore, 2018, p. 2018). This shift relocates the relational and complex nature of caregiving into a primary economic framework. While love should never be reduced to a matter of costs and benefits, the reality is that caring for our loved ones is inherently complex, marked by ambivalences, emotional labour, and, often, significant expense.

Another concomitant issue in the care of older adults is the insufficiency of state resources or public facilities to alleviate the emotional and financial stress placed on family carers, a challenge that is growing increasingly urgent as more and more women, who traditionally assumed the role of at-home carers, are accessing the workplace. As Kathleen Woodward explains, in the past feminists were concerned with "issues of reproductive rights and child care, equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work, and sexual and gender identity. *But not with ageing*" (Woodward, 2012, p. 31; original emphasis). Similarly, Calasanti (2006) and Twigg (2004) address the consistent marginalisation of old age within the feminist ethics of care discourse and the reluctance to "engage with the aging body" (Twigg, 2004, p. 60). These critical voices bring to the fore the effects of systemic ageist structures in Western cultures and the double devaluation of care and ageing, and advocate their prioritisation in political agendas. In fact, feminists have been pioneers in recognizing interdependence and mutual care as part of human nature. Within a context of neoliberal politics and ideologies that postulate a vision of human nature as self-serving, autonomous and individualistic (Wrenn & Waller, 2017, p. 495), the works of Joan Tronto (1993, 1996), Eva Feder Kittay (1999), Virginia Held (2006) and Niall Hanlon (2012) promote care and dependency as "the foundation for theorising and shaping our social institutions," (Woodward, 2012, p. 21). As Tronto (1996) argues, it is by including care in the political arena that we might recognize that citizens are not self-sufficient and, therefore, live in different states of dependence and in need of mutual care. The necessity of developing comprehensive care policies is, in fact, becoming increasingly pressing, taking into account that "the ever-rising 'silver tsunami' of old people" (Segal, 2014, p. 155) becomes bigger as people live longer lives and become more dependent.

This article draws on a feminist ethics of care to explore the representation of later life care within a growing Western neoliberal context. Through the lens of popular culture—and specifically the cozy mystery genre—Osman's novel *The Thursday Murder Club* (2020), with its active and likable older amateur detectives, serves as a compelling case for examining how later life care is depicted in terms of costs and accessibility to assisted living facilities. The representation of older adults in popular narratives oscillates between the opposing frames of decline and successful ageing, which classify older adults according to their perceived levels of dependency (Gullette, 2004). Indeed, dependency becomes the decisive factor in shaping their representation: those portrayed as independent or 'successfully ageing' are cast in a positive light, whereas the very old and physically frail are often depicted negatively, receiving the harshest portrayals. While the frail and care-needing granny in *The Last of Us*, for example, is turned into a monster, Osman's novel stands out precisely for its positive portrayal of active older adults and the apparent burden-free condition in which they live. The shocking contrast between the zombified granny and the amusing older detectives relies not only on discursive differences but also on the specificalities and limitations of two different popular culture genres. Thus, we argue that genre, not just content, becomes a crucial component in the critical analysis of age narratives within popular fiction.

The stories we tell ourselves and those that need to be told: 'storying' old age and care in popular narratives

As many Western governments shift towards right-wing, neoliberal policies and abdicate responsibility for the wellbeing of vulnerable groups, including older adults, storytelling has become a vital tool to raise awareness about age/ing and the complex issues surrounding care in later life. This growing need has been the object of scholarly inquiry by cultural and literary gerontologists such as Anne Marbury Wyatt-Brown (1990), Hanna Zeilig (2011), or Leni Marshall (2015) for several decades. In line with Kathleen Woodward's defence of stories as essential for living and to engender concern about older adults, Sarah Falcus et al. (2023) write about the importance of literary and filmic narratives "to supplement and challenge a public discourse on ageing that sees it mainly as a political and demographic 'problem' in many countries of the world" and to countermine "alarmist demographic projections and accompanying cultural narratives of risk, decline, and burden" (2023: 1) surrounding old age.

While promoting positive, anti-declinist representations is an effective strategy for challenging age-related prejudices, it is equally crucial to educate the public about the complexities and challenges, both physical and economic, that ensue from old-age caring practices, and how these can affect our present or future lives if systemic social reforms are not pursued. Yet the stories that circulate about age, at least in popular narratives, fail in this respect. Either they do not challenge the binary narrative of decline versus successful ageing that is used to categorise older adults along dependency lines (Gullette, 2004), or they do not pay attention to the personal and economic ramifications of decline in the lives of older adults or their carers in a context where state welfare support is lacking. This is particularly worrying if we take into account the relevance of popular narratives in both representing and creating reality, a potential that we often underestimate. As Charles Soukup and Christina Foust write, "[S]ince we're often taught to simply 'enjoy' (consume, uncritically) pop culture, we don't often see its effects or its potential to make life better or worse—not only for individuals or communities, but also for larger social groups (and perhaps even our culture as a whole)" (Soukup & Foust, 2024, p. 5). As more and more people around the world see "their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms," (Appadurai, 1996, p. 53–54) it becomes obvious that popular narratives can picture alternative realities and even "become a basis for agency and social mobilisation" (Parasecoli, 2008, p. 3). However, the representations of old age in popular narratives seem to be constrained by a neoliberal agenda that is not conductive to social change.

On the one hand, there are the stories that promote a 'them' against 'us' mentality by exacerbating our fear of what Julia Rozanova et al. call 'disposable lives', or bodies that "outlast brains, support systems and bank accounts" (Rozanova et al., 2016, p. 9). The rhetoric of older adults who 'overstay their welcome' and live on despite their loss of health, social networks, power, status, and economic resources can be seen, for example, in gothic or fantasy tales like the film *I Am Legend* (2007) or the television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019). With their rotten teeth and skeletal bodies, the Darkseekers and the White Walkers in the film and television series, respectively, are depicted as almost-indestructible walking corpses, barely alive (or alive-looking) when they should be dead and buried and not 'living' among us, in a symbolic representation

of hordes of older adults overwhelming the system by their 'refusal to disappear'. Like the granny in *The Last of Us* or the overbearing older mums in examples like the film *Joker* (2019) or the TV series *Mindhunter* (2017–2020), as well as other taxing and tiresome older adults in dramedies that realistically focus on the strain on the members of the family who have to look after them,[2] these characters are part of what Lynne Segal identifies as a "fully orchestrated mainstream media festival designed to direct the resentment of younger generations towards the older" (Segal, 2014, p. 48).

On the other hand, there is a growing number of narratives featuring older leading characters that present idealised images of ageing. A notable example is the increasingly popular genre of 'love in later life' films like *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *It's Complicated* (2009), *The Good House* (2021), or *Love Again* (2023). While these stories may depict some ageing-related challenges, their older characters typically embody the ideals of independence, good health, active social life, and youthful looks. In doing so, they align with the discourse of 'successful ageing', which emphasises individual responsibility to keep healthy and socially and economically active (Katz, 2013, p. 34), while concealing the signs of ageing as much as possible. Although these stories may not endorse the neoliberal discourse surrounding the "'Graying Nations problem': too many old people, sickly, unproductive, costly, selfish" (Gullette, 2017, p. xvii), they nonetheless reinforce a narrow standard of what it means to age well. By downplaying the effects of cognitive and bodily decline as natural processes of ageing into old age, these narratives prevent their readers or audiences from recognising the actual complexities of ageing, while also establishing a dangerous dichotomy between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' (i.e., failed) ageing experiences.

The marked binary of old-age representations in popular culture thus reflects the role of genre in shaping age discourses, as well as the need to attend not only to a text's content but also to the specificities of its narrative form. Indeed, scholars such as Strawson (2004), Woods (2011), and Brooks (2022) express discomfort with the growing tendency to project narratives and narrativity as the primary vehicles for understanding and examining both individual and universal experiences. While acknowledging the potential of narratives to understand reality, Angela Woods contends that "[n]arrative is not, and never has been, innocent" (Woods, 2011, p. 75) and as such literary criticism can benefit from "highlight[ing] the normativity of narrative per se" (Woods, 2011, p. 76). According to the author, the examination of the genre's narrative and the acknowledgment of its characteristics, aims and limitations are crucial for the critical study of its content, plot and characters, and ultimately, its discourse. In the case of the cozy mystery, for instance, the genre's particularities demand active protagonists able to act and perform as detectives regardless of their old age. As a result, Osman's depiction of his older protagonists inevitably embodies an age discourse that mirrors successful ageing, if only because of the degree of activity and self-sufficiency that the detective genre demands. It is then by discerning content from genre that a narrative can be fully contextualised and analysed without the danger of diluting it into an object of belief or a universal explanation of reality.

The ageing detective and age in detective fiction

Detective fiction plays a role in this 'blinding' effect of care-related issues, particularly because ageing detectives are typically portrayed in ways that ensure that they never become 'a burden'. This has been the case from the genre's inception as age is not a deterrent for characters like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, her direct successor, Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury)—the protagonist of the television series *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996)—or the protagonist of the series *Father Brown* (2013-present), loosely based on the short stories by G.K. Chesterton. Increasingly, we find more realistic examples that dramatise the passage of time with detectives who have to grapple with "creaking joints, hearing loss, poor eyesight, declining mental powers and the existential dread of retirement" (Alter, 2025). Long-running TV series with actors or actresses who age with their characters and series of books that follow the exploits of their protagonists as they approach retirement and beyond also help to "normalise the ageing process, insisting on the characters' continuity despite wrinkles, white hair, and other physical signs of age" (Harris, 2023, p. 116). There is even a new tendency that Marla Harris categorises as the 'dementia detective novel' with detectives that experience cognitive impairments (Meeks, 2020; Orr, 2020; Sako, 2019; Wearing, 2017).

Taken as a whole, the stories with ageing detectives offer invigorating alternatives to the decline narratives that associate old age only with loss and parasitical dependence on public funds. In fact, the ageing detective persists against all odds, often alone, and even, as seen in dementia detective novels, with a failing brain. Thus, the genre sustains the older detective as a protagonist on the basis of his or her productivity; that is, his or her capacity to follow clues and make sense of apparently unsolvable puzzles, even through the fog of an addled mind and in spite of an ailing, inefficient body. In these stories, all in all, the older detectives fit into modern societies because they do not violate the contract we enter into with the (capitalist) system at birth: to exist for as long as we are future-oriented and profit-producing, autonomous, and independent.

A genre for older protagonists to thrive: the cozy mystery

The cozy mystery is a subgenre[3] of detective fiction in which, as in Osman's novel, older protagonists thrive. However, the cozy mystery does not seem to adequately respond to the need to tell stories about age that both challenge declinist, ageist views about the journey into later life, and, simultaneously, address the issues we need to face as a society, especially those related to care for older adults. In fact, there are limits as to what stories about age and ageing the genre can tell, even though older protagonists proliferate, as is made evident by the rising number of cozies with older adult protagonists.[4] This is mainly due to the characteristics of the genre itself, which polices what can and cannot be included within its boundaries. Like the classical detective story (also known as whodunit, clue-puzzle, golden age, or traditional mystery) with which the cozy mystery has points in common, the genre avoids "gruesome depictions of violence, gore, and sex. Instead, it focuses on the puzzle the crime presents and how it can be solved, based on the belief that the world is ruled by casualty and can be deciphered through reason" (Vester, 2015, p. 31). In cozies, the lives of the protagonists, their jobs, friends, romantic interests, hobbies, or pets are as important as the mystery. Furthermore, cozies are often part of a series, they are characterised by humour, and they almost unfailingly deliver happy endings and provide "fantasy narratives … with values needed to create a safer, more humane democracy" (Knepper, 2021, p. 18).

In spite of its success, the cozy genre has been maligned by critics

[2] Examples include the films *The Savages* (Tamara Jenkins, 2007) or *The Father* (Florian Zeller, 2020) or the TV series *This Is Us* (Dan Fogelman, 2016–2022) and *After Life* (2019–2022).

[3] Even though the cozy mystery is indeed a subgenre of detective fiction, for clarity, we refer to it as 'genre' throughout.

[4] These would include examples such as Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club series (2020-: *The Thursday Murder Club* (2020), *The Man Who Died Twice* (2021), *The Bullet That Missed* (2022), *The Last Devil to Die* (2023) and *The Impossible Fortune* (2025); Robert Thorogood's Marlow Murder Club series: *The Marlow Murder Club* (2021), *Death Comes to Marlow* (2023), *The Queen of Poisons* (2024) and *Murder on the Marlow Belle* (2025); J.M. Hall's Liz, Pat and Thelma series: *A Spoonful of Murder* (2022), *A Pen Dipped in Poison* (2023) and *A Clock Stopped Dead* (2024); Deanna Raybourne's Killers of a Certain Age series: *Killers of a Certain Age* (2022) and *Kills Well with Others* (2025); or Jesse Q. Sutanto's Vera Wong's series: *Vera Wong's Unsolicited Advice for Murderers* (2023) and *Vera Wong's Guide to Snooping (on a Dead Man)* (forthcoming).

ever since Marilyn Stasio accused the genre of lazy plotting, stereotyped characterisation and facile entertainment in her 1992 review for the *New York Times* "Murder Least Foul: The Cozy, Soft-Boiled Mystery". The genre is light fare, with plots that can be read quickly. Thus, for some it is inconsequential, formulaic, beach reading, "all fluff and no substance," (Harris, 2024, p. 19) "not literature or at least not real crime fiction" (DeBellegarde, 2024, p. 44). Yet, this is precisely what readers enjoy about the genre, since cozies provide a sense of reassurance as, on their pages, evil does not linger and "whatever intrudes in the community [is] identified, controlled and dispersed," (Betz, 2021, p. 112) so the novels seem to be designed to remind readers that "despite all its challenges, and sometimes because of them, the world is worth loving" (Budewitz, 2024, p. 95).

The cozy does indeed provide a sheltered, comfortable space. However, this is not all there is to the genre. To start with, not all cozies turn away from serious social issues. Most stories reflect how social changes impact the community. Furthermore, cozy mysteries can be layered with imagery and commentary that complicate the idyllic ethos of the stories. Also, even when the stories look at the world through rosy-coloured spectacles, they can still encompass social criticism or advance positive discourses that undermine sexist, patriarchal, ageist or racial assumptions about people and society. Still, the genre has to prioritise comfort and resolution over a deep engagement with complex ills afflicting society, thereby limiting its potential for substantial critique or deep engagement with discomforting social problems, including those related to care for older adults. An analysis of Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club* (2020) brings these contradictions into sharp relief.

Age/ing and care in Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club*: A close reading

The Thursday Murder Club is Richard Osman's debut novel and the first of a series that already has five instalments. The novel follows the exploits of four pensioners, Elizabeth, Joyce, Ron, and Ibrahim, who live in a luxurious retirement village, Coopers Chase (previously a convent that housed the Sisters of the Holy Church), near the fictitious village of Fairhaven in Kent. They meet every Thursday to discuss cold cases for fun, but, when the novel starts, they have the opportunity to investigate three real cases, especially the murder of Ian Ventham, Coopers Chase's owner; the death of his lead builder, Tony Curran; and the identity of an unidentified corpse buried at the Garden of Eternal Rest, the cemetery for the sisters of the former convent. Elizabeth leads the group and manages to get involved in the police investigation, conducted by a middle-aged divorcee, Detective Chief Inspector Chris Hudson, and his rookie assistant, Police Constable Donna De Freitas.

The novel's presentation of its older protagonists is exhilarating. Funny, healthy, active, and comfortably well-off, Elizabeth, Joyce, Ron, and Ibrahim impersonate the qualities of successful ageing. They adhere to the mechanisms for remaining in the Third Age promoted in the media, that is, "a healthy lifestyle that rests on two pillars: active social engagement in economically productive activities including unpaid volunteer work …, and consumption of anti-ageing and youthfulness-boosting products that range from food to skin and body care to clothes to fitness to leisure" (Rozanova et al., 2016, p. 5; Gilleard & Higgs, 2007). The gang do not do volunteer work, but they stay busy solving crimes and helping the police in their investigations. Even though they do not use products to look younger, (except for Ibrahim who takes care of his body through constant fitness activities), and in spite of their consumption of wine, beer and other alcoholic beverages and cake (often alcoholic cakes), their lifestyles allow them to stay young and sprightly, displaying "a grace and swiftness" one would not expect "from … people deep into their pensionable years" (2020, p. 105).

Their lifestyles, professional backgrounds, exercise regimes, intelligence, curiosity, energy and/or sheer joie de vivre ensure that the four of them make a striking impression and look younger than their age, especially Ibrahim—"Hair thinning, but still there. No paunch, and just the one chin" (2020, p. 11)—and Ron—whose frame "hints at the physical power he must once have had. The chassis is still all there, like a bull-nosed truck rusting in the field" (2020, p. 28). The gang are active, participate in the village's meetings and events, and, above all, they have their Thursday Murder Club, which gives them purpose, adventure, and thrills, even though it also impacts their lives at a more fundamental level. The club gives them an opportunity to bond with their mates, to create a sense of cohesion, to feel they belong, and to escape loneliness, apprehension, and/or boredom. For Elizabeth, the club is an outlet for her worry over her husband, Stephen, who has early-stage Alzheimer's. Even though she can still manage him at home without help, she knows this is just a short-term situation and things will have to change soon. Joyce and Ibrahim are widowed and miss their spouses, as well as their children: Ibrahim's daughter lives in Canada, so she and her family only visit once a year; Joyce's daughter lives a train ride away, but she is too busy to visit her mother on a regular basis. Ron's son, Jason, visits every other day, but Ron misses his old days as a trade union leader whose opinions mattered. When Donna, the Police Constable, refers to them as friends when she first meets them, they say they are not, so when she wants to know what they are, they concur: "We're the Thursday Murder Club" (2020, p. 12). The truth is, though, that being the Thursday Murder Club is what turns them into a support unit of friends:

> There was a jolly atmosphere, and I can understand the reasons why. We each of us understand we're in a gang and we understand we are in the middle of something unusual. We understand also, I think, that we are doing something illegal, but we are past the age of caring. Perhaps we are raging against the dying of the light, but that is poetry, not life. There will be other reasons I have missed out, but I know on the walk down the hill we felt giddy. Like teenagers out too late. (2020, p. 233).

In spite of this positive view of the protagonists, Osman does not idealise old age. The members of the gang have aged well, but this does not mean they act "in ways indistinguishable from those of their children's generation" (Blaikie, 1999, p. 73–74). Neither does it mean that they are derided or shamed into ageing 'agelessly' by 'servicing' their bodies efficiently (Featherstone, 1991, p. 183) in a society where we are expected to be responsible for our health and even for policing age out of our bodies. As Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs explain, "much as a fat person is encouraged, through endless dietary and exercise regimes, to realise the slim person within, so agedness has become like fat, something to be sloughed off to reveal the 'ageless' self within" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2014, p. xi). In Osmans' novel, the particularities and peculiarities of being old are fully embraced and dramatized, including the drawbacks and impediments that accompany the process of ageing, so there is no sense in the novel that the older protagonists are unencumbered by minor or major ailments. In fact, being old is likened to a weathered house, "Roof coming off … Things creak that didn't use to creak. Dodgy plumbing" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, p. 290). These ailments or conditions are experienced as losses. Ron, for example, worries he is losing his ability to raise the roof as he used to do in his old days: "He's drifting now. Maybe they'd see through him, maybe his tricks were yesterday's tricks? He has certainly lost a yard of pace" (2020, p. 147). Bernard Cottle, a secondary character who Joyce is romantically interested in, bemoans his lack of strength when he is unable to lift a spade: "When did he get so weak? What happened to his body? It was never much to write home about, but to think he could now barely lift a spade?" (2020, p. 269). Not even the indefatigable Elizabeth is immune to self-doubt while investigating, wondering what would happen "if she couldn't work her magic? If her magic was just a memory?" (2020, p. 296).

Having friends and/or being active does not preclude feeling lonely. As mentioned before, Joyce and Ibrahim miss their children, as well as their spouses. Yet, Bernard's loneliness is the most poignant, probably because his love story must have been a difficult and brave one, as his

wife was Indian and they married at a time when interracial marriages were frowned upon. Also, because she died soon after they moved to Coopers Chase and it has not been so long. Thus, he feels as if "someone reached in and took out [his] heart and [his] lungs and told [him] to keep living. Keep waking up, keep eating, keep putting one foot in front of the other" (2020, p. 281). Loneliness, in fact, seems to be one of the most common malaises at Coopers Chase, to the extent that someone even says: "I'd welcome a burglar. It would be nice to have a visitor" (2020, p. 9).

Not all aspects about ageing Osman highlights are sad, but in his effort not to romanticise old age, the resulting picture gives a somewhat stereotypical impression of older adults as annoying, eccentric, outdated, or slightly wacky. However, even though his characters may be seen as quirky and exasperating, in general terms, the representation Osman provides in the novel is nuanced and sympathetic, encompassing the energy, solidarity and acumen of the protagonists, as well as the handicaps and hurdles of old age. Osman, therefore, humanises older adults and writes against the declinist vision of old age as a form of pathology. Yet, there are some problems in this representation in the novel. The cozy mystery, after all, is a genre that is devised to guarantee comfort and to deliver happy endings. It does not mean it is indifferent to social concerns or that it cannot tackle painful issues, as Osman does when he allows the ghosts of loss, death, or dementia to haunt Coopers Chase. Yet, the novel does not contemplate everything that ageing involves. It keeps some aspects related to age minimised, underexplored, distorted, or directly ignored, including that ageing into the Fourth Age, following Gilleard and Higgs (2010) conceptualization, entails greater fragility and loss, and thus greater dependency and need of care, which the system does not provide. According to Wrenn and Waller (2017), the neoliberal politics and ideologies of our current Western society have led to an ethics of personal responsibility in which a "person's situation is entirely determined by his/her individual actions" (2017, p. 498), causing a systematic erosion of collective and the state's responsibility towards its citizens' needs. Thus, the novel aligns with what Stephen Katz (2001) calls the anti-welfare agenda of neoliberalism, not because it refuses to accept that older adults need care, but because it does not consider the resources needed to cover the cost of care, the availability of care for people without means, or the responsibility of the government for providing such care. In other words, what most of us know about care, especially of assisted living (its cost, the lack of public funds for public facilities, the conditions of life in these facilities, etc.) is not contemplated in the novel.

Instead, we are given Coopers Chase, everyone's retirement dream, a complex that provides independent flats, a bowling green and common facilities, amenities and services, including: a swimming pool, a Jacuzzi, a sauna, a gym and exercise studio, the Jigsaw Room for gentler activities and associations, a library, a lounge with a flat-screen TV and a 'contemporary upscale restaurant' (2020, p. 15). Coopers Chase is "not the worst place to live" (2020, p. 12) because apart from what it has to offer, it is also a community:

> [O]ne of the beauties of Coopers Chase [is] that it [is] so alive. So full of ridiculous committees and ridiculous politics, so full of arguments, of fun and of gossip. All the new arrivals, each one subtly shifting the dynamic. All the farewells too, reminding you that this [is] a place that [can] never stay the same. It [is] a community and … that [is] how human beings [are] designed to live. (2020, p. 209).

Human beings should indeed be entitled to live like this. However, only those with resources can afford Coopers Chase, which, after all, was conceived as a business and intended for the rich. When the owner, Ian Ventham, started with the care home business, he provided run-of-the-mill nursing homes, but he noticed something peculiar. His clients died, which gave him pain only because he had to look for new clients. Thus, he decided to take his business upmarket, realising that "the richer the client, by and large the longer they … live" (2020, p. 25). Ian's profit-oriented mentality, cynicism, and duplicity make him a dreadful man. In fact, he is the prototypical murder victim in cozies: the mean capitalist "whose greedy schemes threaten communities" (Knepper, 2021, p. 38), so he deserves to die.

The residents do not like Ian Ventham, but they like Coopers Chase. Above all, they fit the profile that the development is intended for. They are all (upper-)middle-class professionals who can afford the facilities. And those who cannot, as is the case of Joyce or Ron, have children who can: Joanna, Joyce's daughter, is a successful hedge fund manager. Jason, Ron's son, is an ex-boxer who makes a lot of money out of publicity and reality shows. Ron used to be a union leader and derides capitalism. In his prime, he was known as 'Red Ron', "a veteran of picket lines and police cells, of blacklegs, blacklists and bust-ups, of slow-downs and sit-ins, of wildcats and walkouts" (2020, p. 29). Yet, he does not see the irony of living among those he had rallied against and enjoying the benefits in comfort and well-being money can buy. Joyce also says she is not one of 'them', the rich and the powerful, but has no qualms whatsoever about living among them.

In *The Thursday Murder Club*, all in all, care is not a burden the protagonists or their families have to worry about, not because they are protected by the welfare state, but because they are covered by their bank accounts, or those of their families. Caregiving is not a burden even in extreme cases of dependency, as is the case with Elizabeth's husband, Stephen, who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, or her best friend, Penny, who is bedridden and comatose because of the disease. Dementia is one of the greatest societal challenges of our times, "experienced as a personal fate, negotiated as a challenge to established relationships and family ties, and discussed as a major problem for policy makers" (Swinnen & Schwedam, 2015, p. 9). Dementia is read as effacement for those who suffer it and as a liability for those who have to look after the afflicted, so, as Goldman explains, it is experienced as horrifying and, when represented, it is "mediated through … literary modes such as the Gothic and the discourse of apocalypse," (Goldman, 2015, p. 74) just like the old granny in *The Last of Us*. In the novel, dementia is constructed as "the bogeyman that stalk[s] Coopers Chase" (2020, p. 89), "worse than losing a leg or a lung" (2020, p. 90), and narrated through the language of loss. Stephen's life, for example, is regulated by a series of 'nos'. He cannot go to London to meet his agent, not even shopping, to restaurants or to the pool. Elizabeth lives fearing he will soon disappear inside himself, and wonders how much she has ahead of herself before she follows the same path and there are "no more trips, no more games, no more Murder Clubs. Before there [is] no more you" (2020, p. 90). For Penny, it is too late. There is "[n]othing left of her;" (2020, p. 345), the only thing that remains are "the quiet electronic beeps" by her bedside, "like a lighthouse blinking far out to sea" (2020, p. 356).

The disease is monstrous, but dementia does not turn people into monsters in the novel. Thus, neither Stephen nor Penny is seen as an encumbrance. First, because both are loved by their spouses. Elizabeth spends as much time as she can with Stephen and falls in love with him again every time she sees him happy. Penny's husband, John, never leaves her side. And second, once again, because they have resources and the complex includes a nursing home, Willows, where Penny lives now. Willows is another service provided for the residents of Coopers Chase. However, no references are made to the conditions of public care, or about the availability of facilities for patients living with dementia, or about what happens when families are not able to afford help, or when the spouses or the children who look after the dependent are old themselves or poor, or both. Willows may appear as a threatening presence that can be seen from the flats' windows, a dreadful reminder of what lies ahead for the residents if they have long lives. It looms large as a presence, its lights always on. Inside, everything carries "an appalling weight" and the sprigs of flowers people bring in are "powerless against it. … Willows [is] a prison from which no escape [is] possible" (2020, p. 275–276). But at least it is there, ready for the residents when care at home is no longer possible. It is symptomatic that Elizabeth wonders when (not whether) Stephen will go to Willows (2020, p. 355).

Overall, the novel creates a burden-free zone for the residents. It also

offers readers a comforting story that avoids exploring the potential problems that both carers and care receivers with fewer resources might have to face. Creating this burden-free space does not only imply disregarding upsetting truths about assisted living facilities. It also means actually supporting the elimination of 'burdensome' people in a veiled discourse which aligns with the pro-senicide arguments Margaret Morganroth Gullette exposes in *Ending Ageism or How Not to Shoot Old People* (2017). According to Gullette (2017), dementia has come to signify 'no longer being human' within the successful-ageing paradigm that includes those who remain active, healthy or productive at old age. This, together with the neoliberal concern about the monetary costs of care, explains the 'murderous impatience' of home care aid or family carers who invoke dignity as an excuse to shorten the lives of "old and sick people, especially those with some cognitive impairment" (2017, p. 142–144). There is something ghoulish about the number of voices arguing life-prolonging treatments are only ways of prolonging suffering (one need only look at the increasing number of countries implementing assisted dying programs, such as Canada's Medical Aid in Dying (MAID) introduced in 2016), or the number of published articles advocating euthanasia, which Gullette reads as the "death fantasies" of midlife children fervently praying "for a parent's swifter death" (Gullette, 2017, p. 142). In *The Thursday Murder Club*, children do not need to pray. First because they are wealthy; and, second, because euthanasia and suicide make stellar appearances in the novel to relieve the older adults from their pains. Bernard, the affable and nostalgic secondary character, is overwhelmed by the loss of his wife and commits suicide. John, Penny's husband, puts her out of her 'misery' before he goes home to kill himself after he is revealed to have committed a crime he is going to be punished for. Furthermore, he had helped someone else out of his pain before, a very sick farmer named Matheson, who, with no family, no one to help him on the farm and money running up, welcomed a swift exit from his mortal coil. It is written off as "the end of the screaming and the end of the pain" (2020, p. 347). It is also one less soul in need of care.

These deaths might be read as Osman's stylistic decision to grant affable and kind secondary characters a merciful death, while fulfilling the 'death quota' conventionally expected in a mystery novel. However, the common denominator of old age and dementia that frames this decision becomes significant in terms of age discourse. The apparent ease with which some secondary older characters are eliminated from the plot seems to project their dispensability when they are not useful or active. The stark contrast between the independent and lively older protagonists and the disposable quieter, dependent, or grieving secondary older characters foregrounds the novel's successful ageing discourse, suggesting that solving murders functions as a safeguard against decline and death, and further consolidating the cozy mystery's status as a reassuring genre that avoids engaging with the complex realities of elder care, steering readers away from anxieties about its financial, emotional, or practical burdens.

Concluding remarks

Age/ing and care in later life are two of the most serious concerns in our society. Yet, a combination of factors has contributed to framing caregiving within popular narratives as onerous and the older adults in need of care as monstrous, a burden both for the families and for the state. Thus, it is increasingly necessary to tell alternative stories that challenge negative representations of ageing, while also shedding light on the complexities of care. Ideally, such narratives could help raise awareness of the need for state-sponsored support systems to ease the strain on family carers within profoundly fraught family settings. Given this context, stories like Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club* offer a welcome breath of fresh air, one that disperses the spectre of monstrous old grannies and cadaverous Darkseekers or White Walkers conjured up to stoke fear of the so-called 'silver tsunami' poised to devour all our future pensions, collapse healthcare systems, and drain both our energy and our bank accounts. *The Thursday Murder Club* is exhilarating because it acknowledges the actual ailments, vagaries, and quirks of old age while also avowing its worth, its joyfulness, and at times, even its grace. Its importance lies, then, in that it gives a positive vision of ageing, an alternative to the declinist and defeatist vision of old age as the edge of the last age of man, or woman.

However, despite their narrative differences, *The Thursday Murder Club* is embedded within the same neoliberal ethos that animates *The Last of Us* and other texts that portray age and/or care as monstrous, revealing shared ideological underpinnings that transcend genre. In *The Thursday Murder Club*, grannies and grandpas are adorable, but they are valuable as long as they are functional for the advancement of the detective plot. Those living with dementia are loved and treated with dignity, but they are also dignified with mercy-kills, so they are relieved of their pain, of course, but they also relieve the system from having to provide for them. Finally, Osman's novel delivers the mandatory happy ending all cozies require. However, it is a happy ending that evinces the same truth about old age as other texts which provide less positive renditions of older adults: "any source of optimism in old age requires a platform of economic security and wellbeing" (Segal, 2014, p. 274). In *The Thursday Murder Club*, the reality of later life care, the cut-backs in care facilities, or other strenuous implications of care are not an issue. Osman's pensioners are protected by the genre, their bank accounts, and Joyce's daughter, Joanna's, intervention. Her hedge fund acquires the complex after Ian Ventham's death so that her mother, her friends, and all the residents can continue to enjoy the care and protection of Coopers Chase, which, of course, remains a business for the hedge fund; that is why she buys it. In other genres, pensioners, like the old granny in *The Last of Us*, are shot dead.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

M. Isabel Santaulària Capdevila: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Àngels Llurda-Marí:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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