

A Journey of Age and Spirit

OLD AND ON THEIR OWN

By Robert Coles

DoubleTake/Norton. 184 pp. \$27.50

MILES TO GO

Aging in Rural Virginia

By Susan Garrett

Virginia. 187 pp. \$22.95

By STAN HINDEN,

who writes the Retirement Journal column
for The Washington Post Business section.

After reading Robert Coles's mini-portraits of 11 elderly Americans in "Old and On Their Own," it is hard to believe that anyone would look forward to extreme old age. Coles's in-depth interviews make it plain that what awaits most of us—if we live long enough—is illness, frustration and loneliness.

Coles is a social psychiatrist and author who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for his book series "Children of Crisis." In changing his focus to the other end of life's spectrum, he interviewed people ranging in age from 75 to nearly 100. The common thread was that they were living independent lives, despite the burdens of illness and age.

Coles sought to discover what factors contributed to "the quiet perseverance" that gave the elderly the will to live on their own. Among other things, he found, they had kept a sense of humor despite physical decline and the loss of family and friends. In addition, their long lives and experiences helped them adjust to change and maintain emotional balance.

Coles talked with people in different circumstances. A sampling: Nellie, 95, arthritic and nearly blind, measures the passage of time by the changing shadows the sun creates in her rooms. Talking to the shadows and traveling through her imagination, she is prepared for death. "I wasn't meant to live this long," she says. "I've lived way beyond what I ever dreamed was possible." George, 99, wheelchair-bound, looks forward to his 100th birthday, hoping Willard Scott will show his picture on the "Today" show. Yet he worries that, once he reaches that birthday, he will have nothing more to wait for. An eager and voluble man, George describes himself as "down but not by any stretch out."

Coles often asked his subjects, "How is it going today?" in an effort to learn "how challenges are met, dangers confronted." While he got glimpses of how the elderly cope with their faltering bodies and shut-in lives, he also got an

earful about their personal and family histories. Many of those stories, which had a genuine ring of history, were more interesting than some of the other insights Coles was seeking. In a broad sense, "Old and On Their Own" is a tribute to the strength of the human spirit and the will of elderly people to survive. Death may be near, but they still look forward to tomorrow.

In "Miles to Go," Susan Garrett takes us into the lives of the elderly poor in five rural counties in central Virginia. It is an enlightening but uncomfortable journey. The health, housing and family needs of these people are many, but the resources available to help them are limited—and often snared in the red tape that characterizes government programs.

Garrett focuses on a \$1.1 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to the School of Nursing at the University of Virginia. The goal was to demonstrate that a community could reach out to its frail elderly and alleviate many of their problems—while allowing them to remain in their homes instead of going to nursing homes or hospitals.

From 1991 to 1995 Garrett worked in the Rural Elder Outreach Project (REOP) as a volunteer and observer, charting the project's successes and failures. Its heart was a small team of nurses and social workers who traveled the back roads of Virginia to call on the ailing and to deal with their physical and mental health problems, their ramshackle housing and their lack of money for food and medicine.

Garrett offers a series of grim portraits of the aged men and women whom REOP was serving. The heroines of the story are the nurses and social workers who patiently tried to understand and solve their elderly patients' knotty problems. The program served 172 patients and their families. Since there was no federal, state or other money to continue REOP, it did not survive, although some of its workers went into other local agencies.

Did the program succeed? The answer seems to be both yes and no. The program helped many people in difficult circumstances, but at a high level of effort and cost. Garrett's unpretentious chronicle leaves the reader wondering why a rich nation can't do better for its aged rural citizens. If for no other reason than that, "Miles to Go" is a valuable contribution to the literature of poverty in America.