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BODY:

OLD AND ON THEIR OWN by Robert Coles. New York, W. W. Norton. 184 pp. \$ 27.50.

'Until 120!' says the well-wisher, but one wonders how many of us would really want the wish to come true. Our attitude to old age is not straightforward. We hope to remain in good health, and not drag out painful years as, little by little, we lose our faculties. Yes, we want to stay alive, but at the same time we are fearful of the price the passing years may exact.

In *Old and On Their Own*, child psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Coles takes a look at what it means to grow old by interviewing several people who have lived to a great age: one of his subjects was 99, and most of the others were over 80. Having read what these oldsters have to say about themselves and their condition, one marvels anew at the resilience of the human spirit. Shakespeare's stark summary of "second childishness" as being merely "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything," has never looked so inadequate.

Physical infirmities make themselves brutally felt. All of Coles's interviewees have to cope with some disability, ranging from blindness to confinement in wheelchairs. Even the less affected have to carefully plan ahead the simplest action, such as going to the toilet. Most have been through the shattering experience of the death of their spouse, and are left to face their own death alone. Their moods vary, with black despair never far away.

Yet each one, in his or her way, rises to the challenge. One woman, after taking refuge in alcohol after the death of her husband, finds a new lease on life by enrolling in a dancing school and becoming proficient at the foxtrot - this in her mid-80s. As she wryly puts it, she will soon be "graduating from the Astaire school - and who knows if there will be any dancing where I'm headed!"

Many are fortified against death by faith, often in a very direct way. "I do believe that there's a river waiting, and that I'll be able to get over it without some boat!" said one woman. Another enjoys lively sessions with the Almighty. "It's nice staying around, I'll admit, but there are days when I call out to the

Lord. The other day, I talked to Him so long, even I got worried! I told Him that I thought it was time for me to say good-bye and clear out of here!"

Others take pride in the sense of history their longevity gives them. One nonagenarian proudly says of himself, "You're talking about me knowing someone whose granddaddy was around when the country (the United States) was being born!" Many interviewees have more modest scope, but are conscious that their survival gives them knowledge of times few can now remember, even if that knowledge is confined to their family circle.

Attitudes to old age vary. "For Hilda and me, this life that we now have, it's not 'old age,' it's living long enough to realize that somehow we got through the worst." says one man. Another defines it differently. "Old age is being given a real close look by the Lord, before he decides what to do with you."

Coles conducts these interviews with sensitivity and insight, even if he occasionally allows himself too much rein in sharing his feelings and thoughts with us. The text is backed up with powerful black-and-white photographs by Alex Harris and **Thomas Roma**, showing oldsters in all their dignity and humanity.

But the most remarkable features of this touching and poignant work are the words of the elderly themselves, which at times acquire literary power. Here is just one example of many, an elderly man recalling a dangerous childhood sickness.

"It was then I asked her: 'Mom, could I die of this?' I could see her hesitate just a second, before answering me - and you know, with all the millions and millions of seconds I've lived through, in this gift of a long life, I can remember that one second better than almost all the other ones, maybe because it's the second that told me: you're here now, but one of these days you'll be departing, and you should know that, because that's the big truth of things!"