

Timeless insights into ageing explored in two new works



The joys of ageing gracefully are explored in two new books by Marcus Riley and Carl Honoré. Picture: istock

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- By TINA ALLEN
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Every human being on the planet has two things in common; we all breathe and we are all growing older.

Ageing is something we cannot avoid and it is also one of the hottest topics in nonfiction today due to the growing number of baby boomer authors. Two recent book releases combine a discussion of attitudes towards ageing with a self-help guide to navigating our later years.

Australian author and ageing expert Marcus Riley says we are living longer and there is the potential to live well. His first book, *Booming: A Life-Changing Philosophy for Ageing Well*, is devoted to helping us fulfil that potential.

In Western society we have come to expect three stages in life: education, employment and retirement.

Riley states there is the opportunity for a fourth stage, “booming”, as we reinvent ourselves in our 80s, 90s and beyond. He quotes a prediction that “half of children in Australia today aged 10 will live to 100”.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for female and male life expectancy are 84.4 and 80.3 years respectively, and Riley comments that these figures were previously 71 and 67.

Our new-found longevity means that instead of providing for ourselves for a decade or so after retirement, that figure is often extended by as much as 20 or 30 years.

Riley advocates a cold, hard assessment of how much money we will need to fund the quality of our lifestyle, where we will live and what our pastimes will be.

“Planning is the secret for keeping control,” Riley says. “Control over what we do, and what may be done for us.”

Having adequate financial and estate planning in place are the take-home messages of *Booming*, which is filled with practical advice for anyone nearing their retirement.

Riley is well placed to write this book after working in the industry for more than 20 years in a variety of executive positions, including the Global Ageing Network in Washington and an aged-care organisation in Queensland, BallyCara.

He tells the stories of older Australians he has learned life lessons from and an American social worker, Helen Hamlin, who wrote the foreword for his book and is the most inspiring person he knows.

Hamlin, 95, who Riley met at the United Nations in New York, says she believes that key factors to living a wonderful life include “having passions and being optimistic”.

They are part of an international group pressing for a Declaration on the Rights of the Older Person, which she is confident will happen before she “calls it a day”.

Riley tackles the distressing issue of ageism, which he defines as “stereotyping, discriminating against and abusing of people because of their age”. He is frequently exposed to examples of elder abuse — “ranging from bullying and physical violence, to neglect when someone is denied care and food, to the stealing of money”.

“Who among us can thrive when constantly being underestimated, pitied and patronised?” Riley asks.

Being careful of the language we use to refer to older people and the ageing process is one of many common themes explored in *Booming* and also *Bolder: Making the Most of Our Longer Lives*.

British author and broadcaster Carl Honoré has turned his reportage style of authorship from slowing down our high-pressure lives to showing us how to understand and even embrace ageing in his fourth book, *Bolder*.

“The notion that growing older sucks is woven into our vernacular,” says Honoré.

“We undermine compliments by tacking on the words for their age and call ... 50 the new 30, as if reaching the age of 50 is somehow a thing to avoid rather than aspire to.”

Sexism, homophobia and racism have all been called to account, but Honoré says we are “only just beginning to rebrand ageing”.

Part of that process, he says, is “loosening the link between looking good and looking young”.

He comments that television shows such as *Grace and Frankie* show older people falling in and out of love.

“Even beauty and fashion brands,” he says, “now use older women to hawk cosmetics, flooding the visual landscape with the lived-in faces of Charlotte Rampling, Helen Mirren, Jane Fonda ...”

Honoré says these actors are “role models for their peers and for younger people seeking a reassuring vision of their own future selves”.

That “icy, crushing moment” when you suddenly feel old comes to us all in the end, and for this author it was discovering at age 48 that he was the oldest player at a hockey tournament.

Honoré, who lives in London with his family, realised that “he could no longer put off thinking about his age and what it meant”.

Anyone who dreads the thought of ageing will find solace in this book, which is peppered with real-life stories from around the globe of the people Honoré interviewed.

In California, the author of a syndicated column on ageing successfully told him: “As you realise your time here is finite, those questions come up: Have I made a difference in the world, in my family, in my community?”

The bottom line, says Honoré, is that “as we age, we mind less but care more”. Other good news he discovered is that growing older rewires the brain in ways that can make us more creative.

On the east coast of Spain, Honoré met a group of “Graffiti Grannies” who were spray-painting walls in their town centre, while in Beirut he interviewed the 86-year-old star of the hit television show *Live Long*, which pokes fun at ageist assumptions.

Whether it be hockey night or carpet bowls, exercise seems to be the closest thing to a “magic bullet” for maintaining a healthy body and mind. However, he states, we must accept the limitations of our bodies and that eventually they will wear out.

Honoré says we cannot change the fact we are growing older. “What can change is *how* we age and how we *feel* about it.”

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her first book is Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon.

Booming: A Life-Changing Philosophy for Ageing Well

By Marcus Riley. Impact Press, 229pp, \$32.99

Bolder: Making the Most of our Longer Lives

By Carl Honoré. Simon & Schuster, 293pp, \$29.99