Foreword

It is surprising that twenty-three stories about old people should make bright reading. Being conventional, I started through *Full Measure* in my persona (that buttoned cassock of the personality): I was a high-minded learner about old age, all set to be compassionate and all willingness to be instructed.

Of course, no one is remiss in practising compassion or docile learning, yet what a waste it would be to approach this particular anthology with only those churchy virtues! The best way to read *Full Measure* is leisurely, richly, to sink into it the way we sink ourselves into adventure stories. Here are twenty-three stories full of psychological and physical danger, and we can read them for the action, for the particular occasions of the forty-odd characters, for their ingenuity or valor or bad luck or ghastly decision making. I found myself taking note of their doings; the way a midshipman might read letters from recent graduates now out on the great waters. Whatever these characters are coming to, beset by, licked by, or able to alter—all that lies ahead. I found myself fascinated by how well or how poorly these story people took hold: I made role models out of some of them.
Literate people of course resist expressions like “role models,” but the idea of modeling oneself on others means we trust our willpower and intend to use it. If we choose to model the tiniest aspect of our behavior on someone else’s it means we have decided to shape our lives ourselves. That is a realistic, cheering thought.

An example: thousands of writers who have spent part of their childhood in intellectual pursuit while their brothers and sisters were simply being sociable report having taken Little Women’s Jo as their role model. Since Jo gave all those solitary hours to scribbling little stories in the attic, she validated devotion to a skill (writing, in this case) which doesn’t pay off in the short term. How obvious it sounds! Yet sociologists have told us that if children don’t see other children or adults making short-term sacrifice for long-term goals they usually miss developing the ethical muscle to make sacrifices themselves. We are a simpler species than we pretend: we don’t find it glamorous to say, “I learned by copying.”

For a moment let’s consider this possibility: what if thousands of rigid, egotistical professors, given to making others adopt their all-encompassing thought systems, were to read Joyce Carol Oates’s “A Theory of Knowledge,” and learn by copying? If we resist admitting to role modeling as older children or teenagers, we are likely to resist it all the more strongly when thinking of role modeling for seventy- and eighty-year-olds. Professor Weber was the essential type of people who fail to develop their feeling side; it made him the more frantic to sell his ideation to others. Then—within this story—he makes two huge changes in his style. First, he learns to do what psychotherapists and social workers call Active Listening: he actually hears a child’s need to be saved. He doesn’t do it unconsciously, either: he knows he has become sensitized in a new way. Second, having listened, he believes in the child’s need. He doesn’t pooh-pooh it, nor take the child’s signals merely as signs of lower-class behavior—the kind of “denial” so favored by chill, advantaged people. Weber acts. Despite his frailty, he struggles across farmland to the barn where the child has been tied down and tortured. He saves him. It is a marvelous instance of someone’s learning too late to abandon what T. S. Eliot called (in “East Coker”) our intellectual “equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.” What is the precise feeling to aim at? It is to confess that someone’s scream is indeed a scream, and that a scream is a scream for help. Just as I have always found it distressing that Mozart wrote beautifully so young—that James Joyce finished Dubliners in his twenties—it is proportionally cheering that this Professor Weber, and the rest of us, can come to consciousness and bravery in our old age.

Not everyone in Full Measure learns psychological or physical heroism. Some of the characters are piteous or offensive or both, yet their stories are oddly lively. We are in the presence of people who are being as inventive as they can. Some of them are merely canny, but they keep their eyes open, and are as hospitable to life as they can manage. Inventiveness and enthusiasm in everyday life are everyone’s goals, with changes in the game rules as we age. What matters is being up for the game, whatever the rules. There are some children—we all know one or two—who burst into tears when they learn that in Monopoly you may not pick up the silvery shoe and fly from Go to Go to Go, avoiding all the rent-charging landfalls. Most children have more fibre: they like the game rules because limitations mean challenge, and challenge means adventure.

What are the rules for the old-age game, then? As you go along this track, you get some kit: you gain savvy in practical things; you learn the flare of connecting things with ideas. You learn to connect past ideas with present ideas. You learn to ask, given these past and these present ideas, what changes are possible? You get a kinder humor.

On the down side, you receive noticeably less respect from most forty- and fifty-year olds. They can tell that you are
retreating from their shallow, muscly, profitable projects! You receive audible scorn from teenagers, who still use words like "old geezer" and "old bag," because the way teenagers ward off fearful scenarios (such as old age for us all) is with scorn. What else? You get increasing pain, which in turn makes it hard to stick to your goal of not being querulous.

Some of the people in Full Measure do a marvellous job of the old-age part of their lives. Others, especially Miss Verney in Jean Rhys's "Sleep it Off, Lady," are brave and funny about some of their projects, and hopelessly feckless about others. I shall never forget Wallace E. Knight's hero in "The Resurrection Man," because he passionately devises a way to kill and bury himself before enduring the full wrath of a terminal illness. He has enormous mechanical ingenuity—a quality common to protagonists in nineteenth-century fiction, but now rare except in spy and detective fiction. The Resurrection Man's story is pure adventure.

We might miss the interesting qualities of character in these stories because our literary habit is to think of individual character as the focus of fiction about the "real" part of life—ages eighteen through sixty. When we read about people who are aged 7 to 17, we tend to discount some of their individuality. That is because we stereotype youth: we think of stories about youth as amalgams of environmental influences which will shape the characters' later, "real" life. For every reader who has gone through A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man paying attention to Stephen's individual personality there are likely hundreds who read the book as informal sociology—as a study of a severe, anti-expressive environment. Too bad. In the same way, one can read about characters aged 61 to 100 as if they were only case studies to do with old age, not people.

Dorothy Sennett, however, by virtue of putting together this astonishing anthology, and explicitly in her Preface, begs us not to stereotype old people. The question is: can a book actually stop people from stereotyping? Full Measure is a hearty, funny, serious, tough book—but can it actually stop its readers from stereotyping?

We know how much and how little literature can do. It points out victims, gives us some clear images of their sufferings, and leaves us with either of two responses: if we are sensitive, we feel shamed and a little blamed. If we are insensitive, we feel "the slight flutter" that Chekhov mentioned, in "Gooseberries"; we pause in our constant attending to our own affairs long enough to feel a little ethical flutter, a little frisson—and that's all. When it comes to making ethical change, the classic tools of fiction are first, focus, and second, shame and blame. They are pretty good tools. We think of Dickens, of Woolf at her best, and of Lawrence when he is on solid footing, and of all the muckrakers of all time. Generation after generation of writers offer their Horrible Examples. Readers, generation after generation, acknowledge the given injustices and cruelties, and then return to their ordinary indifference.

The secret social-skill finding here is that shaming and blaming does not work at all. Even peace workers, who love shaming and blaming more than most groups, who tirelessly parade their accusing signs in front of armories and arsenals, who regale us with virtuous exclamations like "I just can't understand how people can . . . !"—even they are trying the new, twentieth-century "interpersonal skills." Peace workers attend an ever-increasing number of workshops in which they deliberately learn from social workers and therapists how to set up conversations between adversaries in which the goal is to break down stereotyping habits, and replace them with "shared meanings," empathy, "partialization," and dozens of other cognitive procedures designed to halt inaccurate abstraction and subjective inference. I have deliberately used these social-work terms because they are the language of a new body of skills for change. They are not simply new horrible jargon for the Socratic method, as literary conservatives sometimes maintain: they are the new, if horrible, jargon for new, marvellous social change.
Dramatic use of these anti-stereotyping workshops has been made by the Center of Psychological Studies in a Nuclear Age, under the aegis of the Harvard Medical School at Cambridge Hospital. The Center actually takes high-level Soviet, American, and Third World physicians and others, puts them into workshop groups which spend whole days learning and practicing therapeutic process.

Since social workers and therapists are onto new skills, we will learn them, too. We may spend some time bristling about it, first; then we will learn. Literature has much to offer in return: when it is not precious or fashionably fragmentary—when it takes on the big subjects—it can handily package a lot of human experience for social scientists. If teachers and students in graduate schools of social work were to use *Full Measure* as a text, I would suggest they read the book through once for pleasure and once for professional insight. When starting the second reading, they might make a list of the forty-five or forty-six elderly characters in the book. To the right of this list there would be three columns, respectively entitled Very Good Personal Qualities Which Actually Improve with Age, Special Efforts Which People Must Make When They Are Old, and Circumstances Which Enhance or Degrade Life Quality. For example, Professor Weber, in Oates's story, would have his new humility and swift life-saving work listed in the first column. Dr. Morris, in Bernard Malamud's "In Retirement," needs, for his Special Efforts Old People Must Make, simply to stop hustling after young women. Every one of the twenty-three stories in the book offers items for the third column—circumstances which help or damage our lives.

Most people studying therapy and social-work skills are two, if not three, generations younger than the clients they expect to serve. That means they need all the vicarious, mentally-imaged experience of middle age and old age they can lay hand to. They can't learn nearly so fast from their student-interviews with clients as one might think: literally hundreds of quarter-hours are wasted in generalizations, and in inaccurate, prematurely drawn conclusions. It takes most interviewees—as anyone knows who has collected oral histories—ages before they tell the actual details of their lives—those details which are the true source of meaning for themselves and for those working with them. An example: we are supposing that a middle-aged son of a dying mother is trying to discover his own change of feeling. Here is the kind of interview he might have with a student social worker:

Interviewer: Let's see. You said that this last visit seemed different to you somehow. Can you say a little more about that?

Client: Yes, she was different. Just really different. (Pause) Or anyway, I felt different towards her. I mean, what with the way she used to be so much. The way she always was with me when I was a kid. That all seemed different—felt different anyhow. Oh, I guess all it means is she is older and sicker.

It might take an inexperienced interviewer *hours* to develop that man's conversation to anything so specific as the following—taken from Richard Stern's story, "Dr. Cahn's Visit":

For the first time in his adult life, Will found her beautiful. Her flesh was mottled like a Pollock canvas, the facial skin trenched with the awful last ditches of self-defense, but her look melted him. It was human beauty. Day by day, manners that seemed as much a part of her as her eyes—fussiness, bossiness, nagging inquisitiveness—dropped away. She was down to what she was.

The paragraph illustrates a surprising subtlety in many middle-aged caretakers of the very aged: these middle-aged children go
on being angry at their parents, perhaps, but they also make out a kinder underlayment to their parents' personalities. Richard Stern speeds up our ability to ask:

"Yes, I was feeling the same old such-and-such but what else was I feeling?" It is the great anti-stereotyping query.

Literature is the business of providing scenes so that readers can vicariously live them, but the fact is, beyond that, writers generally don't know how to make adults change. Readers read all the wonderful truths and say, "Oh, how accurate that is! I can relate to that, all right! Oh, how true of life that is! How he or she wonderfully points out virtues and evils!" but people don't change so quickly from all that reading as people change from learning twentieth-century interpersonal skills. Therefore, I hope that social workers will use these stories in their group dynamics classes, in their dyads and triads, in their role-modeling exercises, in their comparisons of text learning and practicum learning. We are all of us convinced that Yeats was right:

An aged man is but a paltry thing
A tattered cloak upon a stick—unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

The question is: exactly how do we take in the fact of physiological loss and convert some of our conscious sense of that loss to spiritual gaiety? For such transformation we need both the genius of literature and the genius of therapeutic process—best of all, used together.

We'll want our humor, of course. Here we are, scared to get so old as Saul Bellow's Hattie, whose skin doesn't feel so much like her own skin any more as it feels simply like a container of her real self. What's more, Bellow tells us, her skin feels "much slept in."

That is going to take some humor—living in a skin much slept in, trying hard to keep growing up, trying to maintain what decency we have and to acquire a little more, trying to learn more gaiety for every loss—while all the time we are floating closer to a universe that is more and more laid bare to us.

Here is a book of fellow travellers.

CAROL BLY