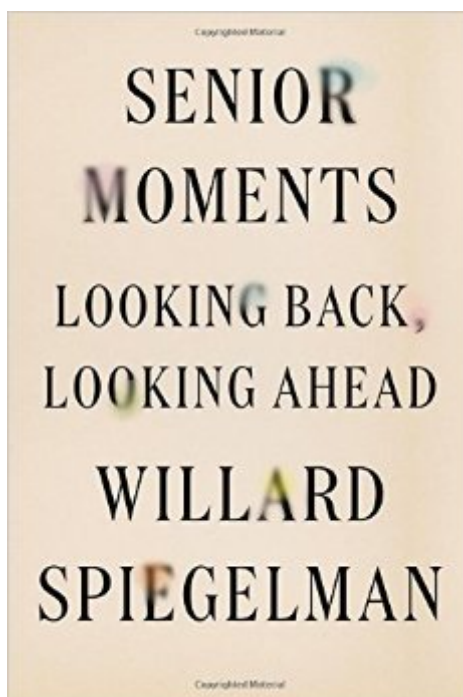


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Senior Moments: Looking Back, Looking Ahead



Synopsis

A moving collection of essays on aging and happiness. Drawing on more than six decades' worth of lessons from his storied career as a writer and professor, Willard Spiegelman reflects with candid humor and sophistication on growing old. *Senior Moments* is a series of discrete essays that, when taken together, constitute the life of a man who, despite Western cultural notions of aging as something to be denied, overcome, and resisted, has continued to relish the simplest of pleasures: reading, looking at art, talking, and indulging in occasional fits of nostalgia while also welcoming what inevitably lies ahead. Spiegelman's expertly crafted book considers, with wisdom and elegance, how to be alert to the joys that brim from unexpected places even as death draws near. *Senior Moments* is a foray into the felicity and follies that age brings; a consideration of how and what one reads or rereads in late adulthood; the eagerness for, and disappointment in, long-awaited reunions, at which the past comes alive in the present. A clear-eyed book of memories, written in eight searching and courageously honest essays, *Senior Moments* is guaranteed to stimulate, stir, and restore.

Book Information

Hardcover: 208 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (September 13, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374261229

ISBN-13: 978-0374261221

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.8 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (1 customer review)

Best Sellers Rank: #19,643 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Gerontology](#) #66 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Aging](#) #87 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Essays & Correspondence > Essays](#)

Customer Reviews

Like Winnie, of *Happy Days: A Play in Two Acts*, Willard Spiegelman prefers to look on the bright side. Mind you, Winnie has a harder time of it, trapped under the hot sun in the rising quicksands of time, eventually unable to reach so much as the purse that holds her toothbrush, lipstick, a music box, and the revolver she never fires. Whereas our Willard trips it lightly through the valley of the shadow of death, pretty much at his pleasure. As he often reminds us, everything comes down to

sameness and difference— a truism as applicable to art as to life. A previous volume, *Seven Pleasures: Essays on Ordinary Happiness*, catalogued Spiegelman's enjoyment of activities highly recommended also to the reader, to wit reading (preaching to the choir there?), walking, looking, dancing, listening, swimming, and writing. His latest collection, *Senior Moments: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* covers much of the same ground, this time from the perspective of a self-professed "senior eccentric," happy at 70 in hearing he judges excellent (take it on faith), undiminished zest for walking (on one occasion from end to end of Manhattan in a single day, peering in on a talk by the Dalai Lama in passing), and an unquenchable appetite for exotic cuisine haute and not so haute (but unlikely, after consuming one ear from a taquería on wheels, ever to order a second). He no longer devours big books but picks up volumes old and new, dips in, puts them down, and drifts off to sleep. Facebook and Twitter have no hold on him. A German might call him a *Lebenskünstler*: one who has mastered the art of enjoying life. Born in Philadelphia, Spiegelman was educated at Williams and Harvard, where he skimmed the cream of available honors. Straight out of graduate school, he joined the English faculty of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where he remained, accumulating kudos, until his recent retirement as Duwain E. Hughes Jr. Distinguished Professor of English. For the most part, he lived alone and liked it; domesticity with his partner of several decades, a fellow academic on the East Coast, was never in the cards. But that was okay. Much as Spiegelman relishes company, ultimately he loves solitude more, whether in a crowd or actually on his own, roaming the world or his capacious memory palace. *Numquam minus solus quam cum solus...* Just now, he is in the process of settling in Manhattan. "You are reminded, in the city," he observes, "of your utter irrelevance to the greater scheme of the universe." And that to him is a comforting thing. In *Senior Moments*, as in *Seven Pleasures*, bits of personal history are forever jostling against us on art of all kinds, very much including the visual. Edward Hopper thought *Nighthawks*, that surreal and enigmatic scene in a diner, a representation of "the loneliness of a large city," but Spiegelman argues otherwise, to persuasive effect. More often, though, he draws his references from poetry, which is his principal research interest. (Winnie quotes poetry, too.) Don't be surprised to find living (or recently deceased) poets wandering through his pages, large as life, indistinguishable from lesser mortals. From an estimable list of academic publications, it is the titles *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry* (Princeton Legacy Library, 1989) and *Majestic Indolence: English Romantic Poetry and the Work of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1995) that give perhaps the strongest hints of his sensibility. Fittingly, he has recorded a pair of lecture series for the Teaching Company's "Great Courses."

catalogue: How to Read and Understand Poetry and The Lives and Works of the English Romantic Poets. Among the luminaries he quotes for the continuing-ed audience (or possibly misquotes, just a little) is Marilyn Monroe, who is said to have said she read poetry "to save time" (the very reason, be it noted, that people give when they've taken an instant dislike to someone). The instructional "didactic, often donnish" strain is both Spiegelman's forte and his Achilles heel. Banality, he would have us know, has a lot to recommend it; habit, he adds eight pages on, has a great deal to recommend it; and the list goes on. He splits hairs distinguishing talkers (good) from monologuists and epigram makers (less good) from speechifiers (terrible). He likes to clinch paragraphs with bits and bobs from the poets or pop tunes. "Here is God's plenty!", Spiegelman exclaims at a high-end mall, pinning Dryden's enthusiasm for The Canterbury Tales on Gump's, the department store. He ponders, as if for some tourist from another planet, the ideal number of guests at a dinner party "no gods please!" and the annoyances of other people in art galleries. I imagine that his malapropisms in foreign languages landed more merrily viva voce than on the page. Regardless of the source, contrarians may balk at the generalizations of which Spiegelman is enamored. Is it true, as Sir Francis Bacon had it, that "reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man"? The evidence in Senior Moments is inconclusive. How exact is he who writes, "Seek not to know for whom the bell tolls," mangling Donne without attribution? "Dallas is, in ways that New York is not, America itself," Spiegelman writes. Just as Africans are African, in the missionaries' chant of The Book of Mormon, "but we are Africa!" Of course, exactitude "truth, actually" is seldom the point of what amounts to a topic sentence. The thing is to get the ball rolling. "The eyes are always open abroad," Spiegelman claims in a chapter on Japan. "So are the ears." Maybe so, maybe not, but his sparkling observations of a culture in which students "equate professionalism with tedium and expect their teachers to maintain a pomposity appropriate to their venerability," go a long way towards proving his point. Not that his senses are less acute at home. Years after the fact, he conjures up two ladies who lunch at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the entrance to a special exhibition they eyeball (Spiegelman's apt word) a pair of bronze Ming vases that stand four and a half feet high. "Gorgeous," said the first. "But where would I put them?" asked the second. This was the entirety of their exchange. "For these ladies and their like," he goes on to say, "no butter melting in his mouth, all art aspires to the condition of the living room." Touché. Among Spiegelman's finest pages, I think, are those devoted to

family members of his parents' generation, in particular his mother, who looked like Vivien Leigh, didn't need a dog because she had three children, and declared of a snobbish acquaintance, "The next time I see her, I won't know who she is before she doesn't know who I am." An arc on preventive building maintenance on the baked clay soil of Dallas builds step by inexorable step to the epiphany, "We watered our houses. Now and then, from nowhere, Spiegelman drops in a paragraph that seems in its entirety a perfectly chiseled poem in prose. This one, for instance: "Here is a formula for staying young well beyond the days of youth: grow old in a place where you do not think you belong. You will feel like an adolescent, because adolescents always consider themselves outsiders. Then, after decades, just as you have gradually habituated yourself to your surroundings, pack up and leave. It is time for another, perhaps the final, beginning." "Talk," Spiegelman insists in closing, "is our essence." Thus it is down to the final flicker of consciousness, when all that remains "and these are the very last words of the book" is "the poet's ongoing, gently garrulous babble." As a summation of Spiegelman's ordinary, happy theme and method, that last phrase speaks volumes. What is it Winnie tells us? That the time will come when words must fail.

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