Reviews

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This book is a welcome exposition for those interested in the contribution of the arts to dementia care, and for those with an academic interest in the study of memory and cognition. Davis Basting draws on a wealth of practical experience of creative working with people with dementia and their families, which ensures that the book is rich with vivid examples of real people and real stories throughout. The book has three parts, respectively: ‘Understanding Our Fears About Dementia’; ‘The Stories We Tell About Dementia in Popular Culture’; and ‘Moving Through Fear: Stories About Dementia that Inspire Hope’. The central theme is that although the ‘tragedy’ model is still dominant in many academic texts and the mainstream media, the experience of dementia is more than the stories of loss and pain. The book also questions the assumption that memory is the only thing which defines our identity and gives meaning to our lives. I am not sure that by the end of the book the author has convinced herself or her readers that we can entirely ‘forget memory’ as a vital ingredient of human uniqueness, nevertheless the title does provoke concerted thinking about it.

The first sections of the book take rather long to make these points although academic readers may enjoy the detailed reflections on memory and on the stereotypes associated with ageing. In the second section, there is a fascinating exploration of the portrayal of memory loss in modern films and television dramas, including *The Bourne Trilogy*, *Memento*, and *Finding Nemo*, as well as in films and programmes with an explicit dementia story such as *Do You Remember Love*, *Iris*, *The Notebook*, and *Boston Legal*. The ‘Dory’ fish character in *Finding Nemo* seems to present one of the more positive images of memory loss because she is a lovable heroine who has a disability which has to be managed, but this does not diminish her unique contribution to life. The most enjoyable part of the book for arts therapists and those working directly with people with dementia in day or residential settings will undoubtedly be the final section, which explores ten arts-based approaches in the United States of America. Each chapter details a different approach: they include the Story Corps, a national oral history project that is creating and performing plays with people with dementia in the ‘To whom I may concern’ initiative; the TimeSlips creative storytelling project; a song writing project; and visual arts and dance approaches. There are also interesting chapters on the autobiographies of people with dementia and a photographer’s residency in a care home where he took nearly 3,000 photographs. The accounts of these approaches give enough information to inspire those who are interested in these areas to think about developing their own projects.
The chapter which gave me the most food for thought, ‘Duplex planet: the art of conversation’, describes an approach which I had not tried in my own group work. It shares the work of Greenberger, an activities director in a nursing home. His approach takes a sharp turn from the oral history approach, in that he is more interested in fragments than whole stories. He asks original and unconventional questions to provoke responses, such as ‘What’s better, coffee or meat?’, ‘How close can you get to a penguin?’ and ‘Who is Frankenstein?’ The great strength of this approach is that there is no right or wrong answer, no particular demands on memory and a strong emphasis on inviting opinion and insights in the here and now. In all the described arts initiatives, there is a strong connecting theme of giving time and creative space for people who have dementia to express themselves through words, music, movement or images. For those of us interested in developing these approaches for a wider audience, I think there is more work to be done to explore the particular qualities that practitioners leading this work require. The chapter on ‘song writing’ gives an example of a musician, being trained by Friedman, who had his apprenticeship stopped because he proposed to include in his own songs a line offered him by a person with dementia. There is a need for those working in this field to be without too much ego and dominance in order to put the person with dementia ‘centre stage’. There is a need for good facilitators more than performers, good listeners more than talkers, and the essential qualities of observation, attention and absolute respect for each individual.

As Davis Basting reminds us in the conclusion, ultimately memory is not just an individual entity but has a strong social dimension: ‘To forget that is to ignore one of the best “cures” for memory loss – creating a net of social memory around a person whose individual control of memory is compromised’ (p. 161). Arts therapies undoubtedly hold a vital key for enabling relationships to be restored and for people with dementia to find a voice through many different media. Forget Memory is a welcome and scholarly contribution to keeping the arts and dementia high on the agenda.

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Political support for people with dementia in the United Kingdom (UK) peaked in February 2009 with the publication by the Department of Health of Living Well with Dementia: A National Dementia Strategy. More widely, throughout the European Union, in July 2009 the European Commission adopted a Communication and Recommendation on Alzheimer’s disease and other neurodegenerative diseases that included giving priority to sharing best practice in care and ensuring the