

The Germans, as you might expect, have a word for it. 'Torschlusspanik' – literally, 'gate-closing panic' – conjures the quiet terror of ageing. The realisation that your options – professional, economic, reproductive – are winnowing down irretrievably. Although it felt throughout the long, drawn-out moment of your life that you had all the time in the world – you miscalculated. Your course is set, your most vital years behind you.

If age is a tightening noose, most of my generation first feel it cinch as the feckless, solipsistic drift of our 20s collides with the demands of the next decade: to start a family while we're biologically able, then knuckle down earning enough to keep them fed and watered. Our parents' generation, who may have worn those burdens a decade earlier in their lives, might marvel with some resentment at the way we've managed to luxuriate in this extension of our teens. But then, some of their contemporaries never really called an end to the party themselves.

The latter are what journalist Catherine Mayer, in the first comprehensive study of their breed, calls 'amortals'. Botoxed, professionally and emotionally licentious, and without the slightest regard for what anyone makes of their behaviour, this growing tribe manages to slip age's noose altogether. Like a 60-year-old in a miniskirt, we may admire their moxie, or find them ridiculous and grotesque. But, Mayer contends in her new book, *Amortality: The Pleasures and Perils of Living Agelessly*, they are the heirs to our confusing new world of age confusion.

Dressed in suitably ageless edgy black couture in the London offices of *Time*, Mayer, the magazine's bureau chief, runs through her argument. While the 50-year-old counts herself as an immortal, she regards the phenomenon with ambivalence. Rather than a manifesto, her book explores how society is transforming in ways that are good, bad and neutral.

Mayer's theory begins with the observation that our ideas and expectations about age are outdated. They're recent social constructs, stemming from a brief moment in the middle of last century, when the 'teenager' was dreamed up as a post-war marketing concept. Now, she writes, "the ages of man have started to elide".

By training ourselves to stop viewing each other through the reductive prism of age, and by paying attention to our capabilities and desires instead, we will enable ourselves to become more fulfilled, engaged citizens, and alleviate any anxieties we may feel about having to act our age. We will empower older people to live as vigorously and "youthfully" as they like, warding off premature dotage through self-sufficiency and, in the process, help to mitigate the impending demographic crisis as the boomer population reaches retirement age.



I'm gonna live forever

Amortals, they're out there. Living life on their own terms, ignoring the hands of time. **Tim Hume** meets a member of the ageless tribe

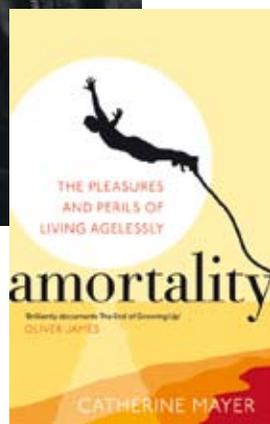
Mayer's book paints a vivid picture of our era of "age confusion", likening our atomised, media-saturated world to a garish global Las Vegas. Although we're living older – by 2050, over-60s will comprise one-fifth of the world's population, and 37 percent of Europe's – the grey tsunami is completely invisible in a youth-obsessed media. At a certain age, female television anchors and actors largely disappear from view: only five percent of characters on US daytime TV are over 60.

"Ageism isn't tolerated. It's woven into the fabric of our institutions," writes Mayer. "I find it startling that, at 50, if I submitted a CV I would go further down the pile because of my age," she explains.

With experience unvalued, and youth fetishised, everyone's free to be a big baby. Many of Mayer's hypothetical professional rivals would exist in a cossetted bubble, living with their parents into their late 20s. A popular trope among Gen-X journalists is describing the baffling role-reversal that parenthood entails, given that their upbringings in the cosy milieu of Spielberg's 1980s led them to identify as children deep into their 30s. Otherwise-professional 40-somethings carry on like self-obsessed 16-year-olds on Facebook and Twitter, sharing their diary entries and mirror-faces with the world. Meanwhile, out of mind, and hopefully earshot, seniors are enjoying a Viagra-fuelled sexual revolution. >>



Catherine Mayer



In a world where women in their 60s are giving birth, people are confused. How do you act like a grown-up? "It's very hard to know what you would invest with cultural status and significance," says Mayer. "The idea 'when I grow up I want to get married and have children' is a very weak message nowadays."

Striding sure-footedly through this disordered landscape are the amortals, who don't give their age a minute's thought, much less act it. "I cannot think of anything I would not do now that I would have done 20 years ago, nor can I think of anything that I'd think I'm too old to try," says Mayer, whose credentials as an immortal are impeccable. Born in the US (the crucible of mortality) to a family in the entertainment business (the most powerful vector of mortal ideas), she forged a career in journalism (an industry in which practitioners float impulsively from one curiosity to another, an essentially mortal trait).

"I'm very lucky because I've drifted into things," she says. She is married to a rock musician (Andy Gill, guitarist for post-punk legends Gang of Four),

one of the most amortal vocations. Despite this, she distances herself from some of mortality's extreme manifestations. "Women having babies in their 60s – part of me thinks there's something we're doing wrong there."

Mayer is childless, a point she addresses in the book "because I thought people might think I had an agenda – that this was a problem for me and I was trying to make myself feel better about it". She says, "I'm happy to have made that decision."

But most people do want to procreate, creating one of the biggest roadblocks to Mayer's vision of amorality. You can't lead a completely age-oblivious life if you ever intend to breed, for obvious reasons.

Yet, having researched fertility technology, Mayer is confident that science will eventually come close to trumping the biological clock. "In 10 years time, the process of egg or ovarian tissue banking will be so advanced that it will really give people a lot more flexibility," she says.

Which raises the second substantial roadblock to mortality: that it's a profoundly class-bound phenomenon. The majority of Mayer's case studies are able to break free of social or biological norms by dint of wealth or fame. For many, the cost means IVF and other fertility treatments are beyond reach, just as the fluid, perennially freelancing sort of work life favoured by amortals is not an option for those outside the creative, entrepreneurial or leisure classes.

Mayer acknowledges this, but counters that as mortal ideas are transmitted throughout society by celebrities, they will have a greater cut-through with the masses than with the upper-middle class, which is less receptive to entertainment culture. "Because of that, mortality is reaching further into the poorer sections of society than you would believe."

It's hard to feel buoyed at the prospect. In her book Mayer gives umpteen examples of impressive, worthy individuals who, through an mortal mind-set, have stayed young at heart and led morally engaged, socially constructive lifestyles. But you don't have to look far in celebrity culture to find hordes of counterexamples: self-involved narcissists leading weightless, disengaged lives, interested only in their own enrichment.

I'm reminded of a podcast I'd been listening to on the way to our meeting, of an interview with Louis CK, an American comedian who talks a lot about fatherhood and family life. He said: "There's this feeling people have that single people are cool and worldly and connected and deep, and that parents are shallow... But the fact is the opposite. People that are living single – that's a carefree life. That's

a shallow life. Being a parent is a very profound, deep, dark line to walk." After a long riff on the hellishness of parenting and the sacrifice it entails, he explained that being a father has ultimately given his life meaning. "I was really starting to not be sure why I was around [before] I had kids."

Amortals do sometimes have children (Elton John gained a son through a surrogate this year, before admitting that, at 64, he may be too old for it). But the parenting impulse typically involves subordinating personal and professional fulfilment, in a way that's at odds with the mortal ethos.

Is mortality ultimately a reaction to baby boomers reaching retirement age, as the first of their cohorts turn 65? Isn't it green-lighting more self-indulgence from a generation that already rewrote the rules to suit itself?

"You can't put the genie back in the bottle," says Mayer, pointing out that she's not encouraging selfishness per se. Although they have been the major drivers of the phenomenon, not all boomers are amortals, and not all amortals are narcissists. The vast majority are "products of a society that... normalised certain narcissistic traits as it decoupled from the past".

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"I cannot disagree that the social changes we've experienced have involved losses of good things," she says. "We've lost community. We're an increasingly narcissistic society. But there's also the potential to try to seek out a way of life within this new environment we inhabit which still entails caring about other people and the world and being politically and socially engaged."

The interview ends, and there's no time to debate which way things are more likely to pan out. Mayer has to rush off to another meeting. This time she will be the interviewer. She's excited – the subject is one of the global avatars of mortality, who wouldn't grant her an interview when she was researching the book, presumably because there was little in it for him. Now Hugh Hefner, 85, is reopening a Playboy Club in London, and he's more than happy to speak.

"To begin with, I fought racism, then sexism, now I'm fighting ageism," he tells Mayer, who sits knee-to-knee with the deaf old playboy so he can hear her properly. Dressed in black pyjamas, he shares the essentially mortal credo that has been the secret to his success. "One defines oneself in one's own terms. If you let society and your peers define who you are, you're the less for it."