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Author Carl Honoré: stop whingeing about ageing, start winning at getting older



Jill Margo

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It's beautifully cool in Rockpool. Outside Sydney is sweltering but inside Australia's most exquisite dining room, you'd never know.

As the usual lunch guests have not yet returned from their summer holidays, the photographer and I take our time, sipping sparkling water and deciding on any number of tables.

We haven't quite finished setting up when a tall, confident Carl Honoré strides in. He's wearing a bespoke blue suit and as he lifts his arm to remove his hat, there is a flash of brilliant green.



Carl Honoré arguing against hiding one's age, over lunch at Rockpool Bar and Grill in Sydney. **Peter Braig**

Later he tells me he specially chose that emerald lining and then shows me a third colour hidden in his jacket.

He's full of surprises. This is the [Canadian journalist and author who famously wrote *In Praise of Slow*](#) in

2004 and is sometimes referred to as the "Godfather of the Slow Movement".

That book was about the inevitable losses of a life lived in fast forward and the riches that could flow from the right amounts of slow. An international best seller, it was also about the power of saying "no". Some people may remember his 2015 ABC show *Frantic Family Rescue* in which he advised three Australian families on how to reduce the pace of their hectic lives.

Now, he has ageing in his sights and was in Australia to promote his latest book *Bolder: Making the Most of our Longer Lives*. It's about how the 20th century unleashed [a longevity revolution](#) and how our attitudes to ageing have failed to keep pace with this demographic bounty.

The book is a rallying call to stop whingeing about ageing and start wringing out every drop of whatever time is left. While it is bursting with suggestions about how to get these drops, it also advocates for serious structural change.

Fluid way of life

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Honoré argues that the idea of being educated between the ages of five and 21, working for 40 years and **then retiring on a pension at 60 is completely outdated** and scatters so much accumulated expertise.



Honoré has an unusual tip for people when they think they are in the last third of their life - it's to do some reverse engineering. **Peter Braig**

He imagines a much more fluid way of life where people dip in and out of education and the job market and never formally retire. This is an ideal that impoverished young people trapped in the gig-economy, might not choose to pursue.

Our menus arrive and Honoré, who is passionate about food – which is why he chose Rockpool Bar and Grill – engages the waiter on the subject of fish.

He doesn't recognise the names and is feeling

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adventurous. She suggests he begin with pippis with Serrano jamón and white beans. A glass of cold white from Portugal's Luis Seabra, will go well with it.

I opt for a salad of watermelon with barrel-aged fetta and mint, and stay with water.

Honoré hosted ABC TV show Frantic Family Rescue in which he advised three Australian families on how to slow down their hectic lives. [sellis#64;fairfaxmedia.com.au](http://www.fairfaxmedia.com.au)

There is no lull. In conversation Honoré is a verbal magician, conjuring concepts with no new idea too complex to capture.

An avid reader as a child, he read "off-piste", selecting an author and then devoting his summer holiday to that writer's collected works.

Today he speaks five languages and learned well from his mother who he describes as a ferociously able linguist.

"She's the 'sultan of syntax' and whenever I sit down at the keyboard, it's her voice I have at my shoulder, telling me to repair that split infinitive."

In his early 50s, Honoré is certainly not short on

zip and seems curious about everything around him. **Peter Braig**

Finding right language

For him, language is a good place to start revising our grim narrative of ageing. This is the story we tell ourselves, we tell each other and our culture tells us.

Just look at adult birthday cards. He says it's hard to find one that doesn't mix good wishes with pity and persiflage. Negative phrases such as 'for your age' and '60 is the new 40' are now woven into our vernacular.

And the "still syndrome" – still working, still having sex – has become routine, as have "senior moments" that suggest approaching feebleness.

"We need to get rid of the bad language, just like we are trying to get rid of racist and sexist language," he says.

Britain's Prince William in conversation with Sir David Attenborough, who in his 90s is still making documentaries. **Gian Ehrenzeller**

Finding the right language to reflect ageing as a privilege rather than a punishment, will be difficult.

While the book is upbeat, Honoré insists it is not Pollyanna-ish and that it keeps in mind the downsides of growing older.

Easy to read, the book canters along. Here's a glimpse:

"To hear time's winged chariot hurrying near can be an existential bummer of the first order ..."

or

"No matter how much kale you eat, or how many hours of Pilates you do, your body will gradually work less well over time and your brain will lose some zip."

More than a number

In his early 50s, Honoré is certainly not short on zip and seems curious about everything around him.

In my decades as a journalist, I can't remember another interviewee ever asking me about my life, my job and what I think of things. He does!

Honoré suggests rather than striving to look young, one should strive to look good. **Peter Braig**

Then the pippis arrive and their broth sends him into ambrosial bliss. I give him a piece of watermelon to try.

After being salted and dehydrated in a slow oven, its texture has been transformed. We agree it's sensational.

So why did Honoré, who seems at a personal peak, write a book on ageing. Who did he have in mind?

"Myself," he says. "It was a kind of self-soothing. I needed to feel better about ageing."

Just as he wrote the slow book because he wanted to slow down, he wrote this to understand what it means and where he will be in 20 years.

"I started with a very toxic view of the 'number'. The bigger the number, the worse I thought it was going to be. But that's patently untrue. In writing this book I realised the number doesn't tell the real story."

While the book is built on reportage, his wide appetite for reading is on display as he passes seamlessly from Chaucer to the Boston Consulting Group.

Staying romantically alive

Bolder was written after three years of travelling the world to see how age is regarded in other cultures, to learn about the politics of ageing and to understand the states of mind of those who have done it successfully.

It delves into issues from the importance of maintaining technical competence, to looking good to staying romantically alive.

The chapter on love begins with the late Mexican novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, who famously said, "People are wrong to think that we no longer fall in love when we grow old – we grow old when we stop falling in love."

In his travels Honoré learnt that passion is not the preserve of youth. As one woman explained, "The body might age but the heart beats the same until the end."

While he urges readers not to hide obvious signs of ageing, he promotes the idea that they should present themselves in the best possible way.

A meeting with David Evans, the star of the Grey Fox Blog, left a deep impression on him. "Tall, trim and dapper, Evans strides in as if fresh from a GQ photoshoot, his outfit a sharp take on the

modern man about town..."

"...Evans makes 63 look attractive because he is utterly at ease not only with his grey hair and lined face, but with the idea of ageing itself."

Honoré muses that loosening the link between looking good and looking young may be the hardest challenge facing the longevity revolution.

Technological boon

Although attitude matters more than birthdate, he says people allow "their numbered self" so much power, they find themselves pretending.

"In desperation they lie on Tinder thinking they will get more right swipes. And what does it get them? They meet a woman who discovers they are 20 years older and it doesn't go down well. They need to change the chip in their head."

Regarding chips, he views technology as a boon for ageing.

"It can give us wings in later life, making it possible to engage with the world in ways that transcend our ageing bodies".

He doesn't find it amusing when older people, playing to the grim narrative, present themselves as digital fools. "I'm not saying hide weakness,

but to have it as a default setting is not right."

His research has showed that self-deprecation perpetuates itself. "All the science shows the more downbeat your view of ageing, the worse you are going to age."

Power of words

Our mains are delivered. Honoré marvels at the way they are arranged on the bare wooden table. "Like a Scandinavian *Vogue* photoshoot," he says. To go with his King George whiting and my Rock flathead, we have a shaved zucchini salad and delicious crispy fried eggplant agrodolce.

He asks for a glass of Grosset riesling. I stay with water and ask him about his parents.

"They are two utterly different souls who met at the University of Edinburgh and have been very happily together ever since.

"My mother is as Scottish as Miss Jean Brodie and my father is completely Mauritian."

He was a Greek and Latin language scholar, but the way to get out of Mauritius was through science and he became a pathologist.

They provided a rich intellectual background and

around their table, their children explored food and language.

Honoré understands the power of words to rotate the world so it can be seen in a different way.

He also understands how clichés – like the classic one about old dogs and new tricks – can be destructive.

Mental exercise

After exploring some neuroscience and some renowned examples – Marie Curie learned to swim in her 50s, Tolstoy learned to ride a bicycle in his 60s – he shows it is never too late to take on new things and improve on them.

When asked at the age of 91 why he kept practising, cellist Pablo Casals replied: "Because I am making progress."

The book has an abundance of illustrations showing creativity is not limited by age: at 79 Verdi premiered his finest comic opera *Falstaff*; at 91 Frank Lloyd Wright completed the Guggenheim Museum in New York; and Sir David Attenborough is still making documentaries in his 90s.

It's a phenomenon summed up in the words of the poet and memoirist, Maya Angelou: "You

can't use up creativity, the more you use the more you have."

Before our shared dessert arrives, I push him for a fresh tip on ageing, one that's not in the book. Without hesitating he produces a little mind exercise.

When you enter what you think may be the final third of your life, imagine yourself at the very end and think what is going to put a smile on your face.

"What are the stories you want to tell? What is going to make you say, 'I'm so pleased I did that'.

"Then work back. Reverse engineer it."

Outside the heat hits us. Honoré puts on his hat, and looking every bit the modern man about town, strides off.

Rockpool Bar and Grill, 66 Hunter Street, Sydney

Pippis, \$34

Watermelon salad, \$26

King George whiting, \$58

Rock flathead, \$47

Zucchini salad, \$12

Eggplant agrodolce, \$15

Glass of Luis Seabra, \$23

Glass of 18 Grosset, \$16

Mango splice, \$24

Two sparkling water, \$21

Total \$276



License article

Jill Margo writes on Lifestyle specialising in Men's Health, Women's Health, Fitness.

Based in our Sydney newsroom, Jill edits the Financial Review's Men's Health section and has won two Walkley Awards and widespread recognition for her coverage of men's health issues. *Connect with Jill on*

[Twitter](#). Email Jill at jmargo@afrc.com.au



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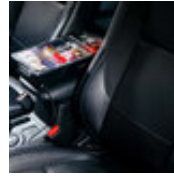
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