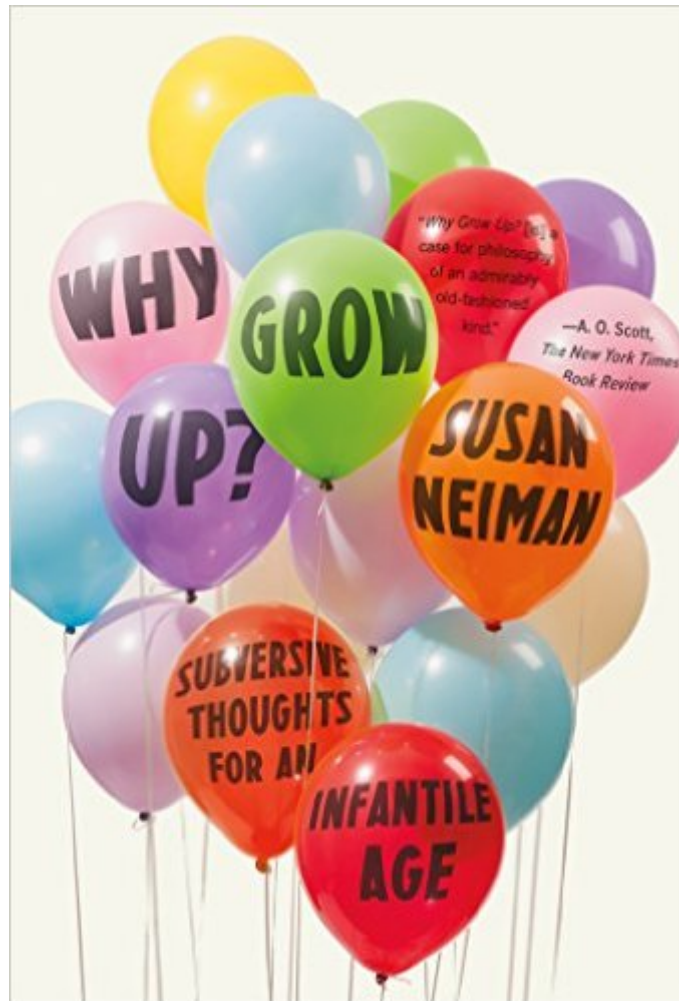


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Why Grow Up?: Subversive Thoughts For An Infantile Age



Synopsis

Our culture is obsessed with youth--and why not? What's the appeal of growing old, of gaining responsibilities and giving up on dreams, of steadily trading possibility for experience? The philosopher Susan Neiman argues that the absence of appealing models of maturity is not an accident: by describing life as a downhill process, we prepare young people to expect--and demand--very little from it. In *Why Grow Up?*, she challenges our culture of permanent adolescence, turning to thinkers including Kant, Rousseau, and Arendt to find a model of maturity that is not a matter of resignation. In growing up, we move from the boundless trust of childhood to the peculiar mixture of disappointment and exhilaration that comes with adolescence. Maturity, however, means finding the courage to live in a world of painful uncertainty without giving in to dogma or despair. A grown-up, Neiman writes, helps to move the world closer to what it should be while never losing sight of what it is. *Why Grow Up?* is a witty and concise argument for the value of maturity as a subversive ideal: a goal rarely achieved in its entirety, and all the more worth striving for.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Revised edition (April 26, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374536147

ISBN-13: 978-0374536145

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.7 x 7.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (13 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #340,526 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #162 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Criticism](#) #217 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Social Philosophy](#) #225 in [Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Developmental Psychology](#)

Customer Reviews

While this is a slim volume, it's one of the most fascinating & thoughtful books I've read in some time now. Philosopher Susan Neiman examines the current social-cultural glorification of perpetual adolescence, and its fear of actually growing up. There have been several other books dealing with this issue recently, but Neiman avoids their usual approach of analyzing current trends, preferring to look at what she considers the roots of the problem, which she sees as a response to modernity. She invites us to join her in reading the work of Rousseau & Kant, who would seem like opposites,

avatars of Romanticism & the Enlightenment respectively -- but as she's quick to show, philosophy doesn't divide so neatly. In fact, these two influential, shaping ideals of the Western world strike me as a perfect example of what Jung called maintaining the tension of the opposites, in that both intertwine in the making of modern thought to this day. And what precisely is the problem with not growing up? If I had to sum up Neiman's argument succinctly, it's that growing up is hard & requires us to go beyond comfortable & familiar but ultimately restrictive models of life -- and too many find that a daunting, even overwhelming effort, best not attempted in the first place. Moreover, it's obvious that consumer culture encourages such an attitude, the better to reduce the public to distracted drones, easily manipulated & used as a resource to be strip-mined & cast aside when empty. And of particular interest, Neiman explains how easily & eagerly the emotionally immature mind turns to fundamentalism of any & every stripe in its hunger for certainty. In making her argument, Neiman offers a spirited & convincing defense of the Enlightenment, which is far more than the "dead white male" caricature so many have made of it in recent decades. Her own political bent is clearly progressive: but the ideal she's examining & proposing is thinking for one's own self, especially when applied to one's own dearly & often desperately held beliefs. And in these pages, she asks us to consider exactly why many of us have come to regard what should be just the first step on the road to maturity as the ultimate goal -- remaining young in the worst way, by remaining childish rather than incorporating useful childlike qualities (wonder, curiosity, creativeness) into becoming grown up. Now, I'm hardly doing Neiman's argument justice in these few short paragraphs. But one of the many ideas I took away from her book is that the complexity & richness of genuinely growing up can't be reduced to a bumper sticker slogan, a Twitter comment, or a hashtag. What's required is an ongoing life of the mind, a willingness to give up reassuring illusions for a sometimes painful knowledge of the world -- and of ourselves. Most highly recommended!

I love this book--it's serious, thoughtful, and genuinely illuminating. I appreciate the insights it offers into the plight of people coming of age today, having little to grow up into by way of meaningful work or anything out there in the culture to connect to, other than products to buy; which explains their reluctance, the Peter Pan syndrome. "Those who rule society promote our dependency," says Neiman, describing the "infantilizing processes" that offer us a "range of toys" while "ideas of a more just and humane world are portrayed as childish dreams to be discarded in favor of the real business of finding a steady job that fixes our place in the consumer economy." I also appreciate learning something about some of the philosophers I managed to miss out on in my education, whose ideas Neiman presents with clarity

and passion. This is a book that dares to say something important about ways we live and might live better. Thank you, Susan Neiman! And thank you FSG, for restoring some faith that some publishers publish something other than junk.

Susan Neiman has two focuses in this book. First, she wants to give a fairly commonsensical idea of maturity -- being "grown up" -- a philosophical grounding, and then she wants to make clear the extent to which the current state of our "western" culture makes maturity difficult to achieve. Her chapter on education, work, and travel -- all necessary for maturity, in her view -- is an analysis of how each of these has been corrupted or lessened in significance in the current state of our culture. That might sound like pretty anodyne analysis, but Neiman acutely connects the deplorable current trends to earlier analyses by philosophers like Kant and Rousseau, who saw in their times (the period of the 18th Century Enlightenment) what now look like the seeds of our current conditions and who also understood the mental tendencies that can lead people to become distracted by change or novelty instead of purposefully thinking about how to judge these trends maturely. Thus she can connect these earlier writers with later cultural critics with a philosophical bent like Nelson Goodman and others. The idea that our culture infantilizes us is not, of course, original with Neiman, nor is her insistence that the infantilized products of a culture are very vulnerable not just to commercial manipulation as "consumers" of the latest trendy things but also, and more dangerously, to political manipulation by ideologues whose success depends on the intellectual passivity of their followers. Neiman's account of what it means to be grown-up is rooted in a philosophical understanding that goes back to Kant (and sees Kant as responding to deficiencies in the accounts of human development by Rousseau and Hume) and his location of the source of mature human mental functioning in the postulates of practical reason and in the exercise of judgement. She supports the Kantian vision with accounts of human development by modern developmental psychologists, and in doing so her intent seems to be to establish the prescience of Kant about human development -- she quotes quite a lot from Kant's treatment of pedagogy -- and to assure her 21st Century readers that the idea of maturity that she's advocating isn't retrograde or discredited. My own view is that she makes her case. She particularly focuses on the importance of the development of trust in early childhood, because it's on that basis that a child begins to be able to handle the awareness that the world as it is -- the "is" -- is not as it should be -- the "ought" -- so that when the child comes to adolescence and begins to notice things like unfairness, suffering, and even parental imperfection, he or she can negotiate them without being tempted to regress into a childish passivity or develop into a cynical adult who sees no point in trying to make the world over

in the image of something better and who sees other human beings as no more than impediments to his personal projects or instruments that might be useful to him in the pursuit of these projects. The idea of maturity as involving a sense that ideals are worth pursuing as well as a "realistic" awareness of the limits that the world and the culture puts on our efforts is, as I suggested earlier, not new, but Susan Neiman's philosophical grounding of that insight is valuable, and the more so because she manages to write "philosophy" in a way that is clear, appealing, and often witty, without diminishing the seriousness of what she's talking about. Kant thought that "ordinary" people had the cognitive equipment to think philosophically, and implicitly Neiman is working on that humane and rather optimistic assumption too. Recommended.

Neiman does an excellent job describing why America does such a lousy job educating and offering its youth a decent future. The book IS very subversive. Not only have we stolen their future, but we don't give them much of a present existence. Neiman's analysis is thorough and balanced. Her arguments are well presented.

Deceptively interesting and very well written. The title does not really reflect the contents which is less about the 'Peter pan theory' and more to do with how people cope with the changes in society in order to survive. It's more of a contemporary sociological Darwinian construct. The writing is excellent and it's extremely well researched.

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