

On Being Really Old  
Robert S. Griffin  
[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

I read a book and saw a film on old age I'd like you to know about.

The book is *A Carnival of Losses* by Donald Hall (Houghton Mifflin, 2018). It's a collection of very personal short writings Hall wrote near the end of his life—he died in 2018 at 89—describing what his day-to-day existence was like.

As I think about it, let me add Hall's earlier book on this same topic, *Essays After Eighty* (Mariner, 2014), to my recommendation. I'm bearing in on eighty myself and could really relate to what Hall was describing in both books. I so respect his remarkable candor, and his talent—what a wonderful writer he was, and to the very end.

From Hall's Wikipedia write-up:

Donald Andrew Hall, Jr. (September 20, 1928–June 23, 2018) was an American poet, writer, editor, and literary critic. He was the author of over 50 books, including 22 volumes of verse, children's literature, biography, memoir, and essays. Hall was described as “a plainspoken, rural poet,” who “explores the longing for a more bucolic past and reflects an abiding reverence for nature.” In 2006, he was named Poet Laureate of the United States.

Here's a link to a biographical article about Hall written just after his death. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/donald-hall>

Some reviews of *A Carnival of Losses* from the Amazon page on the book:

Hall lived long enough to leave behind two final books, a memento titled *Essays After Eighty* (2014) and now *A Carnival of Losses: Notes Nearing Ninety*. They're up there with the best things he did.” Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

Donald Hall writes about love and loss and art and home in a manner so essential and direct it's as if he's put the full force of his life on the page. There are very few perfect books and *A Carnival of Losses* is one of them." Ann Patchett.

It's a beauty, brimming with stories, confessions and faded snapshots in time in which Hall muses about life, settles a few scores, and brags a little about his accomplishments. It's odd that a book whose subject is loss could be so uplifting. And yet it is. Hall may be telling us what it's like to fall apart, but he does it so calmly, and with such wit and exactitude, that you can't help but shake your head in wonder." Ann Levin, Associated Press.

The film I'm recommending is "Old Goats," a 2011 indie (independent, non-studio-produced) made for, no kidding, \$5,000--the average cost of a Hollywood movie is \$70-\$90 million. A couple of nights ago, I streamed another film on old age, "Youth" with Michael Caine, 2015, this one a European production with a budget of \$12 million. While I think "Youth" is a worthy effort, I found "Old Goats" to be more artful, truer, and more memorable--what a remarkable achievement with no money and non-professional actors by the Seattle-based writer and director, Taylor Guterson.

I streamed "Old Goats" on Kanopy, a streaming service I get free with my library card. You might check to see if your local library has Kanopy. It has a superb collection of films.

From the description on Google Play, where you can rent it:

"Old Goats" is the hilarious and heartfelt story of a trio of spirited senior citizens on a quest to make the most of their sunset years. Friends Bob, Britt and Dave are each confronting aging in his own unique fashion: straight-laced Dave rebels against his wife's plans for their new retirement, hoarder Britt struggles with online dating after decades alone on his houseboat, and lively ladies' man Bob juggles a hyperactive social schedule and a fanciful

memoir about his adventurous past. Rife with equal doses of attitude and charm, this slice-of-life comedy finds off-beat humor in the everyday foibles of life and love after retirement, and provides a refreshing perspective on "the golden years" proving it's never too late to chase your dreams.

As I read through this Google Play blurb just now, it struck me how it contrasts with my take on the film. I'd change "quest to make the most of their sunset years" to "find something worth doing at this time in their lives," and "hilarious and heartfelt" to "touching and human," and I wouldn't describe these three protagonists as "spirited" — "still plugging along" would be more like it. From Bob, Britt, and Dave "confronting aging," I'd go with "coping with being old." For "off-beat humor," I'd make it just "humor" — the film is truly funny, but I don't see what is off-beat about the humor. I'd replace dealing with the "foibles of life and love after retirement," with "deciding what to do when no one in the wider world cares what you do, and living with, at best, affection rather than love." And rather than "never too late to chase your dreams," I'd make it "never too late to find something to do during the day that engages you."

All to say, I found "Old Goats" to be a much more sobering and downbeat take on "the golden years" than the Google Play blurbist. But at least, these three old guys in "Old Goats" had each other. At the end, Donald Hall didn't have anybody. He spent his days sitting in an easy chair looking out the window and then, in the evenings, watching Boston Red Sox baseball games on television.

Reading over I've written, I'm concerned that I'm coming off gloomy here. Indeed, there is much that it is positive, and even inspiring, in both Hall's book and "Old Goats." I wish I were up to getting into that on this Sunday afternoon in August, but I'm not. I'll just leave it with the suggestion that,

no matter what your current age, you check into Hall's books—include *Essays at Eighty* along with *A Carnival of Losses*—and “Old Goats.” They might prove to be enjoyable experiences in themselves, and provide you with some insight and direction about what's either coming up for you if you haven't reached old age yet or what you're dealing with currently if you have already gotten there.