

KIRKUS REVIEWS

Coles, Robert
**OLD AND ON THEIR
 OWN**
 DoubleTake/Norton
 (192 pp.)
 \$27.50
 Apr. 1998
 ISBN: 0-393-04606-0

A series of lengthy and for the most part unrevealing interviews with men and women from 75 to nearly 100 years old, that tells the reader more about the author's attitude toward aging than it does about being "elderly."

Psychiatrist Coles (*The Youngest Parents*, 1997) achieved his reputation with revealing interviews of children that led to such celebrated works as *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. He has recently moved on to a fascination with the technique of documentary writing and photography. A grant from the Commonwealth Fund attuned him to aging in place, specifically nine men and women who have lived at least three-quarters of a century and remain in their own homes, not in nursing homes. His charge is to explore how these subjects deal with their lives. Most of them are waiting for death, starting with a near centenarian who sees only "shadows and more shadows," ending with a couple who've had "sixty-five years of a rocky, troubled life together." To his credit, Coles struggles to put aside his psychiatrist's tendency to diagnose depression, for instance, in men and women who seem caught up in memory and are unwilling to engage the world. He tries but does not always succeed in getting out of their way, letting them define their own lives. One 83-year-old widow stands up boldly for her choices: After her husband died, she began to drink, she stopped drinking to take dance lessons at Fred Astaire (because she loves dancing, not to fill empty time), she now has Parkinson's but will stick with Astaire until she graduates—"and who knows if there will be any dancing where I'm headed!" The substantial section (41 pages) of duotone photographs by Alex Harris and Thomas Roma is essentially without context: The images tell us—perhaps sufficiently—that age has many faces.

Raw material, badly in need of the kind of shaping and informed interpretation that Coles admires in the works of documentary writers like James Agee and George Orwell.