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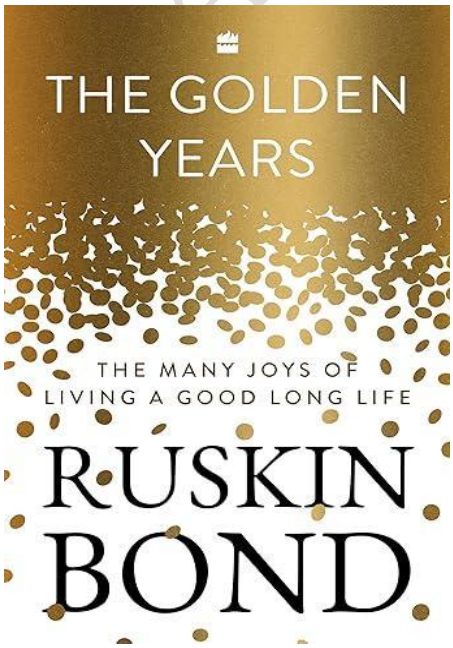
Book Review-1

Ruskin Bond, The Golden Years: The Many Joys of Living a Good Long Life. Harper Collins India, 2023, P- ISBN No - 978-93-5699-061-6

WALKING DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

A Review of Ruskin Bond's The Golden Years:

The Many Joys of Living a Good Life



How to write a review on such a book? This was not exactly the question that troubled me when I finished off the last line and shut the book. Rather, I was more perplexed, thinking — would I be successful in finding suitable linguistic equivalences to transcribe my experience of reading Bond? Having mulled over the confusion for a while, I began to grope in search of certain creative phraseology and kept on arranging them randomly through various permutations and combinations. However, the riddle had finally been puzzled out with a list of convincing words and phrases: experience, memory, cognitive thinking, flow of words, penning them down onto paper, and creation of a literary piece — these keywords would be enough in succinctly synopsising what the writing process of Ruskin Bond adheres to. Bond himself confirms, "As a novelist and storyteller, I have always drawn upon my memories of places that I have known and lived in over the years. More than most writers, perhaps, I find myself drawing inspiration from the past—my childhood, adolescence, youth, early manhood…" (Bond, *Journey Down The Years* 1). Therefore, for an author like Ruskin Bond, whose mechanics of writing are mostly tinged with personal memory scapes and subjective experiences, there is no better way to commence reviewing his book without quoting his comment on it:

> *The Golden Years*, that's the name of my latest book, at this time, [....] I suppose, you could call it a self-help book and it's called The Golden Years because it's really to some extent about the last twenty, thirty years of my life, my sixties, seventies and eighties, and it's addressed to other people who are growing up and growing old and sometimes worried about the future and whether old age will be a pleasant experience, I guess it isn't always, but it can be, and it should be, and in my case, I think I'd say the last twenty years of my life have probably been the best professionally, personally and in many ways… (Ruskin Bond's Special Message On His New Book *The Golden Years*, 0:00 - 1:15)

Ruskin Bond's recently published book, *The Golden Years* (2023), which is neither a novel nor a children's book but rather a collection of sixty small and impressive essays, records his nostalgic experiences, funny anecdotes and philosophical viewpoints. Most of the essays are highly autobiographical told from the perspective of an I-narrator. Bond's stylistic endeavours to arrest the attention of his readers are bolstered by his tryst with the 'dear reader technique', a narrativizing

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strategy that prominently came into fashion with the publication of *Tom Jones* and became immensely popular after George Eliot had written *Adam Bede*. Whilst preaching his moral vision about life, Bond frequently breaks the fourth wall and directly exhorts his readers: "I recommend it to you, dear reader" (Bond, *The Golden Years* 36) to 'pull them into the text' for gaining their confidence and to form an author/reader covalency; therefore, the act of reading gradually gets transmuted into a literary *tête-à-tête*, producing a discursive site where an aesthetic poise between the readers' attention and the author's intention can be attained.

These personal essays are not interconnected, but collectively, what they form is an organic whole which unwaveringly showcases an amalgamation of the author's penchant for his old age and the reminiscences of his juvenilia. The collection occasions an octogenarian's metaphorical journey into his youthful days, making a correspondence between several opposites — past and present, childhood and old age, boredom and rejuvenation. Through some of these essays like 'The Lonely Times', 'Granny's Way', 'And the Gardener', Bond not only cheerfully ruminates on his past days but also makes candid confessions regarding his life and family members; he even frankly expresses his complex relationship with his parents during his childhood, which exhausted him, both mentally and psychologically. His childhood was not blessed with parental love and care, rather, he "discovered what it was to be lonely when, at the age of six, my mother put me in a residential convent school, kissed me goodbye and went away. I felt completely abandoned.'' (Bond, *The Golden Years* 44). To a great extent, the present collection of essays is essentially a condensed and abridged version of his truthful autobiography, *Lone Fox Dancing,* which also addresses the similar issue of childhood melancholia engendered by isolation and pangs of separation: "I had a lonely childhood growing up in a broken home and a boarding school in the hills." (Bond 1)

The book opens up with an essay entitled "Why Stop?" foregrounding Bond's endless love and passion for creative writing even at the age of eighties, a time when most people are convinced by the fact that they have nothing more to offer to society. Because of modern scholarships about gerontology and body studies, Bond's treatment of old age stands in stark contrast to the popular belief of a youth-oriented society where the conception of an ageing body is marred with certain negative cultural associations like physical decay, dilapidation and intellectual disability. Ageing is a taboo, and old people are marginalized. But Bond promulgates a romantic vision that old age triggers one to revisit one's past days and enables one to enjoy the little joys of childhood in terms of games, hobbies and eating habits, including chocolates, delicacies and lollipops. So, one must not lament over elderliness but rather 'spoil' oneself by shaking off the cocooned shell and, subsequently, embracing every single day with boiling enthusiasm. What Bond posits is a counter-argument that age is not a barrier even for a writer; on the contrary, old age brings creative fertility. He does not even hesitate to declare that a writer should grow old because, "For writers, the nice thing about growing old is that it gives us more to write about—all those years of love, friendship, adventure, achievements, a changing country, a changing world, changing ways of life, history in the making. There may have been dull moments, but most of the time, something was happening—and things continue to happen today" (Bond, *The Golden Years* 1). Bond seemingly envisions creative writing as a device that offers a greater amount of pleasure to the writers only — a joy of artistic creation; neither 'art for art's sake' nor 'art for life's sake', he rather advocates for a *novum terra* which hinges on the philosophy of 'art for artist's sake', for he pens, "if no one else enjoys what you have composed, never mind, you have done it for yourself and your pleasure." (Bond, *The Golden Years* 1)

However, a significant number of the essays, including 'Maidenhair', and 'Quiet Places' depict Bond's ordinary and mundane experiences, gathered through multiple day-to-day habits like walking, observing, enjoying the sunrise and drinking the lustre of nature — all of which consume his loneliness and make him energetic; he often seems to be preoccupied with such varied tangible souvenirs as radio, maidenhair fern which work as memory triggers, and generate a motivating force behind his nostalgic flashbacks and constant oscillation between past and present. So, does the book subscribe only to

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authorial qualia? The answer is no. *The Golden Days* incorporates a branch of essays like 'Our Five Senses', 'Longevity', 'Kindness Is All …' which conspicuously prepares a universal ground for moral discourse. He lends support to the famous Horatian dictum *utile dulci profit combined with delight.* The book, therefore, strikes a fine balance between didacticism and the aesthetic realisation of literature. Besides trapping the readers within a cobweb made up of a chain of linguistic signifiers, Ruskin Bond, like the neoclassical writers, has philosophised literature by offering a plethora of constructive moral qualities. Bond's mission emulates what Joseph Addison sought to achieve in *The Spectator* — an attempt to "enliven Morality with Wit and to temper Wit with Morality."

Bond's journey, as an author, is rooted in the eco-mystical dimensions of the spatiality of hillscapes; his lucid yet fascinating language scarcely fails to attract his readers; the nub of his compositions is embedded within a symbiotic relation between (wo)man and of Nature. The essays viz "Early to Rise", "The Joy of Walking", and "Twilight" create narratives which explicitly discuss Bond's kinship with nature in an anthropocentric frame of setting and represent a synchronisation of flora and fauna, a symphony of myriad unknown birds, and a perfect harmonisation of serene natural objects. Aligning himself with the romantic writers, Bond supernaturalises the natural and offers an extraordinary touch to the ordinary objects of nature. In an interview, Ruskin Bond openly talks about the beginning of his engagement with nature, "So, it was only when I came to live in the hills in the mid-sixties, 1960s that I became closer to nature […] and I became very familiar with the surroundings and the little forest that was near the cottage, quite a mixed forest of oak trees, maple, walnut. And then further down open hillsides, wildflowers. Amazing – the variety of wildflowers, and then, of course, the villagers too." (Ecographies: Ruskin Bond on Forests & Nature, 5:42 - 6:32)

However, the book places the author on a time carousel that generates an entanglement between clock time and psychological time, capturing fragmentary moments from the entire life of Ruskin Bond. The collection formulates a body of work which, in its entirety, is structured as a literary masterpiece, — The first few essays constitute an introductory unit, depicting the author's notions regarding writing and old age, followed by essays which collectively construct a narrative chunk that illustrates his childhood, adulthood, his growing up as a writer and his truthful experiments with nature; side by side, the flow of the narrative is stripped with an array of moral virtues which Bond has accumulated throughout his life. The narrative achieves completeness when Bond makes a narratorial homecoming by reinforcing the thematic juxtaposition between old-age and creative writing in the very last essay, entitled, 'I'm on My Way!' In the first essay, Ruskin Bond persuades writers to grapple with their writer's block and continue with their act of writing, defying the grip of ageing; in the last essay, he establishes himself as a pertinent example of the same, a person for whom life is synonymous with his practice of taking up "a new pad and a new pen, and sing[ing] out: 'I'm on my way!" (Bond, *The Golden Years* 168).

In a nutshell, this is what the book is all about. Bond starts one of his books, *A Book of Simple Living* (2015), with an interesting question: "What have I learnt after eighty years on planet Earth?". *The Golden Years* is probably an answer to it. Not only does the book appear to be a colourful conglomeration of fragmented memories, enabling him to reproduce particular incidents from his life, but it also is a storehouse of deep philosophical sermons accumulated by an old man over more than eighty years. The book prepares a site where the experience of an author and the inquisitiveness of readers can collide and converge. Bond denounces the popular perception of old age and presents his worldview of a contented life, which can only be achieved through a fine medley of happy relationships, positive friendships and moral virtues. But interestingly, his friends, well-wishers and companions, whom he pays a literary tribute and claims to be major determinators in shaping his life, are not exclusively of his own: Mr Jones, Mr. Bomley, Dhuki, Mr. Mann — all of them do exist in everybody's life in various forms and figures. So, although the book starts on a subjective note, it marches towards an Eliotian impersonality.

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