
11 Over 70: Writers Who Persevere

**LOOKING BEYOND
THE CULT OF
LITERARY YOUTH**

By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

Every year—more like every month—
one of those annoying lists comes out:
“20 Under 40,” “30 Debut Novels You
Must Read,” “17 Debut Authors.” I groan
and think: What about older writers?



Antoine Cossé

Writers over 40 tend to be my favorites. This could be because I'm closer to 60 than 50, or it may be because older writers are better writers. (Ouch.)

In *Journal of a Solitude*, May Sarton—who wrote dozens of books, including poetry, fiction, children's books and nonfiction into her early eighties—quotes Humphry Trevelyan on Goethe: “It seems that two qualities are necessary if a great artist is to remain creative to the end of a long life: he must on the one hand retain an abnormally keen awareness of life, he must never grow complacent, never be content with life, must always demand the impossible and when he cannot have it, must despair.”

Despair is a common theme in many writers' lives, but that despair is usually linked to fears of growing older and losing one's mojo, or losing the interest of agents and publishers, or the ability to generate a living from writing.

Yet, many writers prove that writing works for the long haul and is suited to the marathon runner: Alice Munro, Toni Morrison, Margaret Drabble, Edna O'Brien, Russell Banks, Joyce Carol Oates, Isabel Allende, Roger Angell, Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy achieved cult status in his seventies with *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. Stan Lee, creator of Marvel Comics, who died last November at the age of 95, kept going till the very end. Margaret Atwood redefined herself and her work in her mid-seventies when *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, reached the small but powerful screen in 2017. (The sequel to the novel will be published in September 2019.)

Some writers don't even get started until they are past retirement age. Harriet Doerr launched her literary career at age 73 with the National Book Award-winning novel *Stones for Ibarra* and continued writing for almost 20 years.

Those pesky debut author lists irk me almost as much as the question I get from friends who are thinking about retiring or have retired: “When do you plan to retire?”

I'm sure I look befuddled when I say something like: “Writers and artists tend to go until they can't go on any longer” or “Retirement is for people who don't love their jobs. I love my job.”

They settle down for a minute, but like a cell phone solicitor, they're back, this time with, “You *should* think about planning.”

Alas, planning's never been my forte.

Fortunately, many writers who've gone the distance persevere and offer hope along the way.

Retirement

I'm gratified by writers who are as annoyed by the question of retirement as I am. Los Angeles poet Donna Hilbert, author of a new collection, *Gravity*, is one.

“One of the most annoying questions I field from non-writers is ‘Are you still writing?’” says Hilbert. “Might as well ask if I'm still breathing. As a poet, the product of my effort might not be apparent, but it's ongoing, with the same joy of discovery as when I began to think of myself as a writer and will continue as long as I can hold a pen.”

For many, the work continues—even, perhaps, with a bit less pressure and stress. Award-winning writer Lynne Sharon Schwartz says she never considered retiring. Two of her books came out last year and she's preparing a collection of her recent stories and essays, several of which were published in the *Best American Stories* and *O. Henry Prize Stories* series. She also teaches at Bennington Writing Seminars.

“I'm sure I could find plenty to do [if I retired],” she says, “but writing and pursuing my career is really the only activity I care deeply about.”

For some, a variation on retirement might be the lessening of the pressure of deadlines imposed by a publisher or by oneself.

Novelist Sue Miller says, “I can't imagine wanting to stop writing, though I can imagine the wish to be free of a deadline. So perhaps ‘retirement’ for me might be the sense that I don't necessarily need to try to publish what I'm working on, that it can be a private fictional puzzle.”

Ageism

Ageism is a topic that's hard to avoid in any line of work, in the arts, and in every aspect of our culture.

When my son was little, I talked with him about how Asian cultures and even our own Italian culture honor the older folks. (Time will tell whether any of it stuck.)

But ageism can inspire. Author and activist Alix Kates Shulman says, “Ageism, like sexism, racism and classism, is my enemy, which operates to get my juices flowing. Opposing it has expanded my purpose.” As Emma Goldman said, “The more opposition I encountered, the more I was in my element.”

Others respond to ageism with a sense of humor. “If you don’t have a face lift, it’s more difficult, if not impossible, to lie about your age,” says biographer Patricia Bosworth. “So now I don’t. But I don’t shout it from the rooftops either. You can figure it out if I say I graduated from Sarah Lawrence in 1955. But what matters is what I’ve accomplished—or tried to accomplish in 50 years of writing.”

To some, ageism remains a concept rather than a practical concern. “I was never confronted with ageism from publishers, editors or agents (or even readers),” says fiction writer and poet Hilma Wolitzer. “After all, I had a novel published in my early eighties...The ageism I encounter is self-imposed, or maybe it’s just aging.”

And maybe any increase in ageism is a misperception. Some think it’s never really been any different, that publishers have always inclined to the latest and youngest.

Author Jay Neugeboren says, “Surely publishers would sooner publish a first novel by a 30-year-old writer than a 75-year-old veteran writer, no matter how distinguished the career, but this was always more or less true. Unless your recent book or books have sold exceptionally well, it’s a rough market for a new book, no matter its quality. This is less so for nonfiction than fiction.”

Yet literary agents say that age doesn’t figure into whether they take on a client or not.

New York City literary agent Vicky Bijur says she doesn’t mention age when she submits a book to a publisher and doubts that any other agent does “unless the author’s extreme youth is a selling point.” She has clients over 70 “whose powers are undiminished if not stronger than ever.”

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Claire Roberts, founder of Global Literary Management, also in New York City, says, “In taking on a client, the most important thing for me is how I feel about the author’s work. If the manuscript is strong, if I can see the readership for it and if I know editors who would love the book too, those are the key elements for me. Older writers have many books successfully published, and I would never dismiss a work out of hand due to the author’s age.”

Los Angeles literary agent Betsy Amster concurs: “I never consider an author’s age when I take them on. It *can* be hard to keep authors’ careers going over time because publishers make so many decisions based on their sales track, which often trends down. I don’t think that should stop anyone though!”

A changing industry

One of the upsides—and I suppose downsides—of a long career is having a front row seat to the changes in the publishing business. “Publishing has utterly changed,” says Paul Theroux, who published his first novel in 1967 at the age of 26, and his most recent, *Mother Land*, in 2017. “I remember when it was hardly a business, more a series of friendships—

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lunches, letters, long phone calls. That ended in the mid-to-late 1980s, when marketers and trend-spotters took over, and small publishers were absorbed by the corporate giants, the big money people and the bluffers. This was the end of any true risk-taking in publishing, oddly enough.”

Neugeboren says since he started publishing half a century ago, “The market for novels is less friendly... harder to get my books into print, but I do manage to get them there... Three of my recent novels went to more than 30 publishers before finding homes, and then received splendid reviews and decent sales. Then again, two decades ago, my most commercially successful book, *Imagining Robert*, was passed on by 41 publishers before it found a home, yet went on to be a *New York Times* Notable Book, the basis for a PBS documentary, a Book of the Month club selection, etcetera.”

Improving with age?

“Many writers have only one book in them, no matter what their age,” says Vicky Bijur. “I know of fiction writers in their late seventies who make a decision not to continue publishing novels, even if a publisher would buy them, because they feel they are no longer at the top of their game.”

Paul Theroux adds, “After publishing four novels I applied for a Guggenheim and was turned down. I applied again a few years later and was turned down again. I was dismayed but I learned a valuable lesson: a writer does not really need a Genius Grant or a fellowship, or a position in a university, and indeed may for various reasons be impeded by such things. I have never gotten any free money. If you write well, and keep at it, and occasionally resort to reportage, you can make a living. Many writers fail for obvious reasons—because they write badly or are bereft of ideas. The one-book author often complains to large audiences of how hard it is to write a second book. Does it not occur to that person that he or she has nothing to say?”

Sue Miller doesn’t think writing necessarily gets better with age. “Certainly, we’ve all been aware of writers who we wished had stopped earlier, the later work seemed such a falling off. But if you’re a writer, what are you to do? (Though Roth seems to have enjoyed the not-writing of his last years.) But there are always wonderful exceptions to the rule—Penelope Fitzgerald comes to mind instantly.”

Patricia Bosworth says, “I believe you can keep going as a writer if you think you have something more you want to say, something you long to share. I. B. Singer once said, ‘The more memories you have, the more you have lived.’ Right now I’m researching a book about racism and sex and politics just before the Cold War and the time I lived through and observed as a little girl. This excites me, keeps me going. It’s the most challenging, complicated, difficult project I’ve ever tackled. I like to think I’ll be able to pull it off because I am a slightly better writer, and yes, I am wiser, too.”

Redefining the writerly self

Hilma Wolitzer, a self-proclaimed late bloomer, has lately found herself writing poems.

“They’re a lot shorter than novels, but not really easier,” she says. “Some have been published and others not. I hadn’t dealt with rejection for

ages and waiting six months to hear about a poem at 88 isn't easy... I don't think I have the same frenetic energy that stoked my early work (or some of those handy nouns), but I'm still awakened at night sometimes by the lines of a poem."

Other changes have to do with productivity and energy.

"Having just finished a novel," says Sue Miller, "I can say that I was aware of it taking more conscious concentration, more willed attentiveness to the whole, than has been the case in the past. And it certainly took longer to write than I've been used to taking."

In the last decade Lynne Sharon Schwartz has also started publishing poetry and has three collections out. The nature of her short stories has changed. "It seems a new voice has emerged," she says. "Not exactly surreal but somewhat removed from reality—an ironic, skeptical and wryly comic voice. I love this new development; it feels like a kind of freedom. As if now that I don't have to establish a reputation, I can do whatever I like, explore and experiment."

Some writers are busier than ever. At 80, Beverly Lowry is often on the road. She's working on her 11th book, "a nonfiction book requiring interviews, courthouse and library archival research, travel. I just returned from a 350-mile each way trip to various locales in Mississippi... I work hard to keep in shape both physically and mentally, so that I can do what I most want to do, which is deeply think and write and think."

After illustrator Ed Sorel's 25-year association with *The New Yorker* ended, he turned his attention to books.

"I still regard myself as essentially an artist, but one who sometimes writes. *Mary Astor's Purple Diary* landed me on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, with a rave from Woody Allen. That encouraged me to continue writing for adults. I'm now at work on a memoir that will reproduce some of my political satires and will also expose some of the criminal activities of the last 13 presidents. I'm fortunate to have Ann Close, my long-time editor at Knopf, still on hand to help me. I also do a monthly page in

the *Times Book Review* called 'The Literati.' Yes, I'm 90. And, yes, I intend to continue to write and draw. If my children ever found out that I didn't have any more deadlines, they'd ask me to take their children off their hands for a day. No thanks."

And then there is his friend Jules Feiffer, who also turned 90 this winter, and whose overlapping careers as a cartoonist (*Village Voice* and *Playboy*), playwright (*Little Murders*), screenwriter (*Carnal Knowledge*) and children's book author turned out to be an extended tune-up—proof that your creative life can get better with age and blossom in unexpected ways. In his eighties, when his hearing was increasingly a problem and "the notion of doing more theater touched on the ridiculous," he moved to Long Island and started writing a three-volume noir graphic novel, fulfilling his childhood dream of becoming a professional cartoonist. The first volume made *The New York Times* bestseller list. A few months ago, *The Tablet*, an online lefty Jewish magazine, offered him a regular spot as a cartoonist: Feiffer's *American Follies*.

"It's as much excitement as I've had in a very long time," he says. "In my dotage, everything I've been doing is more exciting than anything I've done in a very long time, and it's all very accidental. I've lived a life of entire improvisation and it's a wonderful life." **AG**

Barbara DeMarco-Barrett is a writer in Southern California. She is the host of Writers on Writing on KUCI-FM and teaches at Gotham Writer's Workshop. Her work appears in USA Noir: Best of the Akashic Noir Series and her book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within* is in its 11th printing.