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needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



One for the ages

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Thirty-six.

Fifty-nine.

Twenty-four.

Seventy-two.

What's the perfect age to write a book? It's one of the many questions about writing that no one has ever asked me, but the world deserves an answer. The optimum age, my research shows, is the same as the best age to buy a winning Powerball ticket. And if you want someone to publish the book, someone other than you, then your chances of figuring out the perfect age decline further—you would have better odds asking for a clear explanation of cryptocurrency from random passersby.

Since when have insurmountable odds, simple logic, and a virulent dose of impostor syndrome ever stopped someone who wants to write a book, no matter what age? Your honor, the defense rests, but let's continue anyway.

While the perfect age is unknowable, the perfect range is not. A writer whose work is guided by a magical combination—risk-taking of youth and experience of later years—falls on a spectrum that I boldly suggest is older than eighteen and younger than eighty-five. I've looked for expert opinion on this issue and don't have confidence that anything I found is worth a reference. I do know that I'm proud of a few things I wrote in my twenties, but many other things I wrote then make me gag in embarrassment. Write what you know, they say, and I didn't know much then. And a few things I wrote later in life are better than what I wrote a long time ago because the only way to get good at this is to spend a few decades making writing mistakes and reading a lot. Even so, some writers seem to skip or hide a painful apprenticeship. They reach adulthood and pop out what becomes a classic novel. They are mutants.

The following snippets are anecdotal hints rather than proof of a causal relationship between an author's age at time of publication and success. It also depends on how you measure success. All this sounds like I know something about statistics, which is hilarious, so read on with suspicion like any good editor would do.

Norman Mailer was twenty-five when *The Naked and the Dead* was published, and James Jones was twenty-nine when *From Here to Eternity* arrived in bookstores. Could be that those World War II combat vets drew on hellish experiences to overcome the tra-la-la of youthful writing.

Rabbit Run was published when John Updike was twenty-eight.

The Great Gatsby hit print when F. Scott Fitzgerald was twenty-eight.

The Royal Shakespeare Company says *The Taming of the Shrew*, considered one of the master's first works, was probably written before 1592, the year he turned twenty-eight. He knocked out a little thing called *Hamlet* when he was probably thirty-six.

James Joyce was thirty-four when *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* came out, which was a few years before publication of *Ulysses*, the greatest unread English-language novel.

What a bunch of showoffs.

And consider these folks on the other end of the typewriter ribbon. They are older but not publishing miracles:

Raymond Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep*, was published in 1939, the year

he turned fifty-one. But it's not as if he hadn't written anything before he offered us the magnificent Philip Marlowe. See his long list of short stories.

Remember . . . *And Ladies of the Club*? Helen Hooven Santmyer was eighty-seven when it was published in 1982, but she had spent decades writing and tinkering with what became (after cuts and trims) the 1,200-page opus. Maybe her strategy was to combine youth's vigor and age's sagacity in one tour de force. Or maybe she holds the world's record for bugging publishers with a manuscript. She had written a couple of novels to far less acclaim when she was much younger.

Toni Morrison's novel *Home* was published in 2012, the year she turned 81. That is remarkable but not unexpected when you consider that the first of her celebrated novels was published in 1970.

Which brings this rumination to a related question. Should artists call it quits at some point? Does time run out arbitrarily on an artist's career?

I'm glad I asked.

In the house where I live, the two inhabitants, a wife and a husband, often have a discussion related to this point. The wife, upon reading certain news reports involving Diane Feinstein, Charles Grassley, or others, proposes that there should be a national discussion about mandatory retirement ages for elected officials. And upon seeing performances by one-time rock stars who are now desiccated remnants of life in the fast lane, she can be counted on to observe that some people just don't know when to quit. She has a point of course, and it is also applicable to pro sports – Michael Jordan, Brett Favre, and Muhammad Ali come to mind. The husband agrees that some older rock musicians hang on too long but asserts that others offer worthy performances of past work. After all, as Chuck Berry informed us, it's got a backbeat you can't lose it, any old way you use it. But the husband still occasionally wears clothing he's had since high school, so he is often considered eccentric even in his own home.

A few nights ago, the wife and husband were watching *The Doobie Brothers: 50th Anniversary at Radio City Music Hall*, which is being streamed on PBS. Many of the original bandmates performed.

Husband: I wish Michael McDonald had been included in this.

Wife: He is.

Husband: Michael McDonald? Where?

Wife: The guy playing keyboards.

Husband: That's not Michael McDonald.

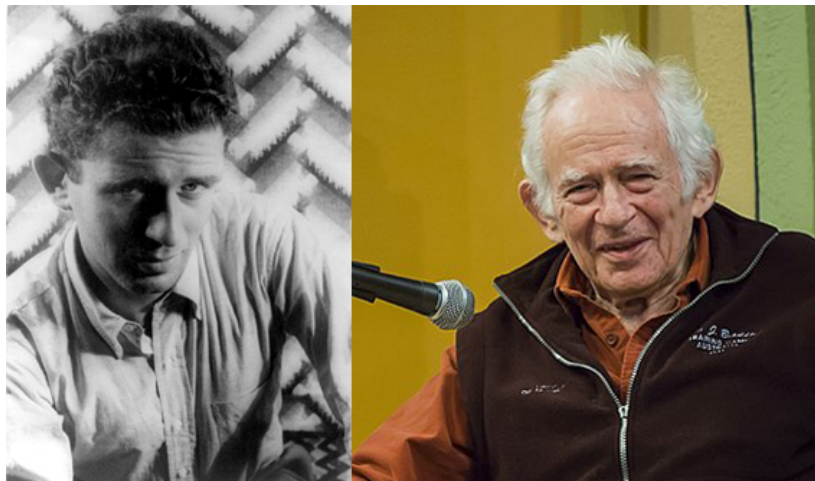
Guy Playing Keyboards: (sings) He came from somewhere back in her long ago
...

Husband: Hey, that's Michael McDonald.

The husband could be excused, perhaps, because this Michael McDonald looked like the fault line he had been living on had cracked. But there was no mistaking that controlled-strain-with-a-side-order-of-gravel voice. The husband and wife enjoyed listening to the rest of the concert.

So back to books: Could it be that written art has a universal reason for existence and we will never find an optimum age for making it? Most writers wouldn't mind worldwide adulation in exchange for a lifetime of dedication to craft, but few obtain it and fewer expect it. Authors write books to express emotion, connection, and insight. The right words united in the right way energize and surprise readers. A talented writer's sentences free something in us that needs to emerge. Beauty and inventiveness are a gift.

Nowhere does it say that only people of a particular age can make such an offer.



Norman Mailer in 1948 and in 2006.

Travels with Johnny

This featurette returns, once again borrowing its headline unashamedly from Steinbeck. I took these photos of Yosemite National Park in November, a time

when the park's 1,169 square miles are practically tourist-free.

The quotes from John(ny) Muir can be found [on this Sierra Club website](#), and in his books, of course.



Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.

The Yosemite, 1912.



Winds are advertisements of all they touch, however much or little we may be able to read them; telling their wanderings even by their scents alone.

The Mountains of California, 1894.



The voice of the fall was now low, and the grand spring and summer floods had waned to sifting, drifting gauze and thin-broidered folds of linked and arrowy lace-work.

The Yosemite, 1912.



The snow is melting into music.

John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir, 1938.



Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.

Our National Parks, 1901. (This is especially good advice in those times when the world appears to be upside down.)



As if you needed another reason to love Yosemite, it has a branch library. One of my alter egos, Literal Boy, reminds me that the library doesn't actually lend branches, although you can find many nearby.

Merry Christmas
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