

REFLECTIONS

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LONGEVITY

The conventional wisdom has it that orchestral conductors are, in general, a long-lived bunch, and ascribes their longevity to the aerobic exercise that all that baton-waving provides. It's a theory that has come in for its share of dispute, and plenty of well-known conductors have failed to make it past their fifties or sixties, but there's no doubt that a good many members of the conducting profession have had extraordinarily long life-spans.

Leopold Stokowski, for example, was still actively conducting at ninety-three, boldly signed a five-year recording contract at the age of ninety-four—Stokowski was ever given to the bravura gesture—and died at ninety-five. Arturo Toscanini was conducting well into his eighties and died on the verge of his ninetieth birthday. Pierre Monteux lived to be eighty-nine, Bruno Walter to eighty-five, Walter Damrosch eighty-eight, Arthur Fiedler eighty-four, Eugene Ormandy eighty-six. And there are plenty of other examples of conductors who were still active and vigorous in their eighties and lived to see their ninetieth birthday—nearly all of them, like the ones I've just listed, born in the nineteenth century and thus reaching old age without the benefit of most modern medical miracles.

So conducting sounds as though it would be a good career choice, if you're interested in a long, healthy, and well-paid life and lots of applause. But I can think of another profession that appears to have an even better record for the longevity of its practitioners. A well-paid life? Well, not in all cases. A healthy life? Not necessarily. And the applause can sometimes be iffy. But for overall length of life, a group with durability well exceeding the average run of the symphonic lads, I give you—science fiction writers.

I've known most, practically all, of the leading science fiction writers of the past sixty years. I never met L. Ron Hubbard, I never knew Chad Oliver or Walter Miller or Fletcher Pratt, Henry Kuttner died before I ever had a chance to meet him, Edgar Rice Burroughs and H.P. Lovecraft were before my time, and Paul Linebarger ("Cordwainer Smith") was too reclusive, but that's just about the whole list of those I never encountered. I began attending science fiction conventions in 1950, when I was barely into my teens and practically the entire first generation of American science fiction writers was still alive, and so I had the opportunity of meeting such pioneering figures as Ray Cummings, Will F. Jenkins, E.E. Smith, Frank K. Kelly, Raymond Z. Gallun, Ross Rocklynne, Frank Belknap Long, and Edmond Hamilton. In later years I met—and in many cases became close friends with—nearly all the great figures who dominated science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s, Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov and James Blish and Arthur C. Clarke and Philip K. Dick and Theodore Sturgeon and so on and so on, along with some, like Daniel Galouye and Mack Reynolds and Alan E. Nourse, whose moment of fame came and went long ago.

Not one of them, so far as I know, ever was given to waving a conductor's baton around. For many of them, the only exercise they ever got was striking matches or lifting the next glass to their lips. They were, by and large, a hard-drinking, heavy-smoking crowd (with some abstemious exceptions, of course) and, by and large, they were pretty sedentary, too. And some of them died young, like Kuttner (forty-three), like Dick (fifty-three), like Cyril M. Kornbluth (thirty-four).

But—by and large—the class of science fiction writers outdoes the class of orchestral conductors when it comes to longevity. Just a few months ago, for example, two of our greatest figures (and two long-time friends of mine) reached the end of their

days at extraordinary ages: Jack Vance, whose eloquent style was an ornament to our field for over half a century, died just short of his ninety-seventh birthday, and the remarkable Frederik Pohl, who distinguished himself over seven decades as writer, editor, essayist, and critic, died two months before his ninety-fourth. They were both built of sturdy stuff, obviously, but neither one, as I had ample opportunity to observe, was given to a particularly ascetic style of life.

Vance and Pohl had both been named Grand Masters by the Science Fiction Writers of America. And if we consider the record of the twenty-nine Grand Masters that SFWA has chosen since the award was instituted, a remarkable pattern emerges, one that the League of Orchestral Conductors would surely envy.

Eight of the twenty-nine lived to celebrate their ninetieth birthdays. A ninth, James Gunn, is not only still alive at ninety, but was an active presence as a guest of honor at the 2013 World Science Fiction Convention in San Antonio. That's an astonishing percentage, better than one out of three. I don't think a comparable list of great conductors would show an equal number of nonagenarians. Jack Williamson, who began his writing career in the early days of the Hugo Gernsback magazines and was winning Hugo and Nebula awards for his fiction seventy-two years later when he was past ninety, heads our group, having made it to the age of ninety-eight. Then we have Jack Vance at ninety-six, Fred Pohl and Andre Norton at ninety-three, L. Sprague de Camp at ninety-two, Ray Bradbury and Philip Jose Farmer at ninety-one, and Arthur C. Clarke at ninety, with Gunn currently at ninety and still counting. Plenty of other Grand Masters reached goodly ages also—Harry Harrison (eighty-six), Clifford D. Simak (eighty-three), Anne McCaffrey (eighty-five), Fritz Leiber (eighty-one), Robert A. Heinlein (eighty), A.E. van Vogt (eighty-seven), Harry Stubbs ("Hal Clement"), eighty-one. One curious fact about the Grand Master roster is that for the first decade after the award was instituted—in 1975, by Jerry Pournelle, who was president of the Science Fiction Writers of America then—there were no deaths at all among the winners, though some, like Williamson and de Camp, were already quite old. I remember Pournelle saying to me, somewhere around 1985, "We may be giving *literal* immortality to the winners."

That did not, alas, turn out to be the case; only nine of the twenty-nine are living as I write this. But some of the nine living Grand Masters are moving up into the high senior range, too. Brian W. Aldiss was eighty-eight at last reckoning. Ursula K. Le Guin is eighty-four. Gene Wolfe, the most recently anointed of the group, is eighty-two. (Don't look at me, though. I've been a Grand Master since 2004, but I'm not even eighty yet, last time I checked.)

The objection may be raised that one of the requirements for being picked as a Grand Master is to have had a lengthy career, which, by definition, means that the accolade can only go to senior citizens. And, indeed, most of those picked were already in their late sixties, or even older, before the trophy came to them. But a writer of science fiction or fantasy does not need to have been a Grand Master in order to attain a lengthy old age. Frank Belknap Long, a master of weird and fantastic fiction who made his first sale in 1924, was still active as a writer as late as 1986, when he was eighty-three, and lived on to the age of ninety-two. Another once-famous writer for *Weird Tales* and other magazines of fantasy, E. Hoffman Price, born in 1898, remained robust and outgoing almost until his death at eighty-nine. Nelson S. Bond, a major figure in science fiction in the 1940s but rarely spoken of now, lasted to ninety-seven. (When he was in his nineties Bond attended a Nebula Awards ceremony in Santa Fe, and astonished everyone with his youth and vigor. I have a vivid memory of watching him jump aboard a bus like a lad of sixty.) Richard Matheson, a writer of Grand Master quality who somehow never got the award, died in 2013 at the age of eighty-seven. Wilson Tucker, author of such highly regarded novels of a generation ago as *The Long Loud*

Silence and *The Year of the Quiet Sun*, stayed around to ninety-one. The British SF writer E.C. (“Ted”) Tubb, born in 1919, lived to be ninety. His countryman Sam Youd, who as “John Christopher” wrote the celebrated novel *The Death of Grass* and much more besides, did the same. And I could list even more whose life spans rivaled those of the greatest conductors.

Other present-day members of the SF clan seem to be here for the long run, too. Ben Bova (eighty-one) turned up at the 2013 San Antonio convention with his new wife. Jerry Pournelle (eighty) is still an active member of the hard-science camp of writers. Daniel Keyes, who wrote the classic story “Flowers for Algernon,” is eighty-seven. Katherine MacLean, who wrote so many fine stories in the 1950s and 1960s, is eighty-nine. That excellent writer Frank M. Robinson is eighty-eight. Kate Wilhelm is eighty-six. Carol Emshwiller is several years past ninety; a new book of her short stories was published not long ago. No doubt other names will come to mind the day after I turn this column in.

Is there a reason for any of this? The aerobic exercise derived from baton-waving may explain the longevity of conductors, but that is anything but a proven fact, and in any case science fiction writers, who on the average seem to outlive the orchestral leaders, are not, as a group, much given to physical exercise. (There are some notable exceptions.) Is it all just a strange coincidence? Or is there something about thinking about the world of the future that has the innate capacity to extend one’s life span? I would not even presume to guess.

I never did dream of conducting the New York Philharmonic. All I ever wanted to be was a science fiction writer, and I achieved that. What I didn’t realize, when I sold those first few stories to *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Amazing Stories* and *Imagination* back there in the mid-1950s and proudly took my place in the roster of SF professionals, was that I might be signing on for unusual longevity also. Not that I’ve lasted anywhere near as long as some of my colleagues. The day I turned seventy-five, a few years ago, I happened to be speaking with Jack Vance and mentioned that it was my seventy-fifth birthday, which, as a one-time boy wonder, I found a little startling. “Ah, Silverberg,” he said scornfully, “you’re nothing but a kid!” And to him I was. He was ninety-four at the time.

It’s all relative, isn’t it? To Jack Vance—and to Fred Pohl also, I think—I probably remained, to the end of their days, that new lad Silverberg who had suddenly turned up with a lot of stories in the magazines around 1956. If I can manage to stick around a little longer, though, I may eventually join the ranks of the really senior figures of the field. Meanwhile, though, I’ve done at least as well as most of the symphony conductors, and I don’t even have a baton.