



Not long before his death in 2009 at 76, John Updike wrote “The Writer in Winter,” an essay that was not, as the title might suggest at first glance, about a wordsmith toiling away in the snow.

The “winter” on Updike’s mind was that final stretch in a writer’s life when questions might arise about just how much longer a productive career might be possible. He was worried about whether he could still be the writer he had been. “Among the rivals besetting an aging writer,” Updike confessed, “is his younger, nimbler self, when he was the cocky new thing.”

I thought a lot about Updike this year as my desk slowly filled with new books from writers older than Updike was when he died.

Lance Morrow, Roger Rosenblatt, Phillip Lopate, and Annie Proulx brought out new books in recent months, and they’re all in their 80s.

John McPhee, the dean of American nonfiction, published a book recently at 92. Phi Kappa Phi member David Madden (The University of Tennessee, Knoxville) was 90 this year when his *Momma’s Lost Piano*, a speculative work about the life of his mother, hit bookstores. Madden, a prolific author for many decades, tells me he has other projects in the works.

The prevalence of titles by authors in advanced age comes at a time when society in general is rethinking the limits of aging. Our leading politicians these days are breaking traditional age barriers, and it’s no longer uncommon to see actors and singers performing in their 80s. Can writers still keep up the pace as the birthdays mount?

The work that older authors have produced in recent publishing seasons is a mixed bag, but that would be true of any set of writers who bring out new stuff, regardless of their age.

Among writers who are still at their desks well past the typical retirement age, a few patterns emerge. Getting older sharpens the tendency to look back, so books from seniors often have a retrospective theme. Morrow’s *The Noise of Typewriters* and McPhee’s *Tabula Rasa*, both journalism memoirs, are cases in point.

But age can also inspire writers to try something radically new. Now that he no longer must satisfy the conventions of commercial magazines where he once plied his craft, Rosenblatt has become more experimental as an essayist. *Cataract Blues*, his new memoir about regaining his sight, often employs jazzlike literary riffs.

Meanwhile, Proulx, who’s best known for her celebrated novel *The Shipping News*, tackles a much different enterprise with *Fen, Bog & Swamp*, her recent nonfiction book about threatened wetlands. Proulx had the stature to champion a book like this, which obviously wasn’t destined to be a bestseller. Another advantage of being a writer of a certain age is that you sometimes have more latitude to write on a subject of your own choosing.

Too bad that Updike died at 76. He would have been 91 this year, an age when it’s no longer quite so unusual for writers to be at their keyboards.



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