

## WORLD WITHOUT END

An examination of immortality and extended life in speculative fiction

Aging is not simply the accumulation of years; it is also the accumulation of experience. Those who are older differ from those who are younger in ways which are not only physical and, as people live longer, healthier lives, will this difference exacerbated? What if people's lives were enormously extended, even indefinitely extended?

Immortality and extended lifespan have been major themes in speculative fiction since *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Up to the present day, authors have speculated on both the cause and effect of extended life. Isaac Asimov pointed out, in an article in *The Stars in Their Courses*<sup>i</sup>, that it could very well be, quite literally, a universal disaster. Other authors, such as Robert Heinlein, Poul Anderson, et al, have conjectured that those whose lives were extended could suffer discrimination.

This paper will discuss extended lifespan and immortality in the speculative fiction genre, with particular reference to the work of Robert Heinlein, Poul Anderson and Larry Niven. It will examine the way in which differences between younger and older people are represented when the gap between them is widened. It will explore the social effects of people simply getting older, and the compensations which these effects create.

Extended life and immortality have been common ideas in literature for as long as literature has existed. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2700 BC), Gilgamesh travels to the immortal hero Utnapishtim to discover his secret of immortality, but fails in his two chances to achieve it. In the Old Testament of the Bible, people had greatly extended lives. Adam, Seth, Methuselah and Noah all lived for more than nine hundred years. Gods receive immortality as a condition of deity, even though, as in the case of Osiris, they can be killed. Jonathan Swift's Struldbrugs are immortal, although they continue to age.

Greek mythology abounds with immortals, although many of these achieved their immortality by becoming stars or going to the Elysian Fields. Tithonus was granted immortality, but suffered the fate of the Struldbrugs by continuing to age. Odysseus was offered immortality by Calypso, but refused it. Immortality seems widespread through other mythologies and religions, as well. When compiling the *Great Books of the Western World*, the editorial staff of the *Syntopicon* found in that "The philosophical issue concerning immortality cannot be separated from issues concerning the existence and nature of man's soul."<sup>iii</sup>

Prior to the nineteenth century, the devices by which life and youth could be preserved all related to some form of mysticism. The legend of the Fountain of Youth and its magical waters stems from Herodotus. The concept of a magical elixir of life was embodied in the eighteenth century novel *St Leon*, by William Godwin.<sup>iii</sup> The idea of equally magical Philosophers' Stone comes from the late Hellenistic.<sup>iv</sup> The stories of vampires originated in folk stories and mythology, and were reinterpreted by poets such as Ossensfelder, Goethe, Burger and Byron.<sup>v</sup> The image of the vampire which has developed through fiction, such as John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, and, more prominently, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, is of an undead being who remains eternally young, along with being suave and sophisticated, by drinking the blood of others. H Rider Haggard's *She* features the bath of life, a pillar of flame which makes those who bathe in it once immortal. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*,<sup>vi</sup> the eponymous character achieves extended youth by trading his soul for his portrait to age instead of himself. All these devices of literature relate to an unexplainable, supernatural force which can grant long life or immortality. Then, in the twentieth century, science fiction emerged as a distinct sub-genre, and one of its most frequent tropes was extension of life.

There are many claimants for the first to explore the idea of life extension and immortality in science fiction. It seemed a logical outcome of advances in medicine and technology that people would live longer, and perhaps live indefinitely. It would be futile to attempt to discuss all the science fiction stories to focus on longevity in a paper as brief as this; it would require a volume, at least. There are, however, science fiction works which can be considered seminal in the field, works by Robert A Heinlein, Poul Andersen and Larry Niven. These authors have raised fascinating questions about how humanity would function if people could live forever, and whether it would be worth it.

While others, including Robert Heinlein himself, had written of extended life and included it in their stories,<sup>vii</sup> it was with the publication of *Methuselah's Children*<sup>viii</sup> that he first made a direct literary investigation of greatly extended life and its consequences. The plot involves the Howard families, a group of people who, under the auspices of the Howard Foundation, have been encouraged to marry within their own circle. This is an attempt to breed for longevity, since the people encouraged to marry are descended from long-lived parents and grandparents. The setting is within Heinlein's "Future History," in the year 2136.<sup>ix</sup> The Howard Families, after

more than 250 years, have become very wealthy and their members seem to have borne out the idea upon which they were founded; they all live for a long time. They are at a crisis point because, after centuries of secrecy, they have allowed some of their members to reveal themselves, and they await the response to see if they should all do this. Into the middle of a meeting where they debate this steps the protagonist, Lazarus Long, the oldest member at 213 years of age, who takes control. The issue at hand is that the world at large has reacted badly to the knowledge that there are longer lived people among them. They believe that there is some secret treatment that the Howard Families are concealing. They plan to take all revealed members of the Howard Families into custody and force them to reveal a secret which does not exist. When the plan is implemented, Long takes all the family members who can be located in time to a great starship which has been constructed to take a colony to a far planet and steals it, commencing a series of adventures which leads, ultimately, to their return to Earth, where the secret of extended life has actually been discovered since they left. The belief that there was such a secret has led to research into extended life, and a solution has been found.

In Poul Anderson's *The Boat of a Million Years*<sup>x</sup> immortality is an inherent quality. Throughout history, some people, a very few, are born who do not age past maturity. They are immune to illness and heal completely from minor injuries, although they can be killed and do not regenerate limbs or heal from major injuries. They are born separately, in many different ages, and a large part of the novel deals with the quest of Lugo, a Phoenician from Tyre, to find other immortals. He achieves this, but the immortals are often reluctant to join him. Far smaller groups than in Heinlein they, too, are concerned about discovery. In most cases they hide their age and move when they believe it has become obvious that they do not grow older. One of them, Saygun, born in the time of imperial Rome, states it thus:

. . . sometimes, he marries and raises a family, which is pleasant – or if it happens not to be, will pass, so all he needs is patience. This does complicate his little deceptions, hence he spends other periods in tranquil bachelorhood, varied by discreet indulgences. He is never in any danger of being found out.<sup>xi</sup>

As in Heinlein, the immortals are concerned about revealing their presence to the wider culture: “The basic question is, shall we surrender to the government and reveal to the world what we are, or shall we continue our

masquerade, using new masks?”<sup>xiii</sup> However, in Anderson, the world, with the immortals’ help, discovers an immortality treatment and there is a smooth transition to a world filled with ageless people. But this leads, for the Survivors, as the natural immortals are known, to a further problem; ennui. As do the Howard Families in a later Heinlein work, *Time Enough for Love*, they leave on a long journey into space, where they hope to discover what has been, ironically, lost, their lust for life.

*Time Enough for Love* begins with an attempt to rescue Lazarus Long, the oldest human in the universe, from suicide. Long says, when asked to complete a rejuvenation treatment:

To what end, sir? When I’ve had more than two thousand years of trying everything? When I’ve seen so many planets they blur in the mind? When I’ve had so many wives I can’t remember their names? . . . No, son, despite all rejuvenation there comes a time when the only reasonable thing to do is turn out the light and go to sleep.<sup>xiii</sup>

This is a sentiment expressed, in a different way by one of Anderson’s immortals, Nornagest: “. . . each year went down into death and awaited the homecoming of the sun that would bring it to rebirth; he too could let go if he would, and drift away on the wind with the leaves.”<sup>xiv</sup> He then dies by deliberately slowing his heart, through deep meditation, to a halt. He does this because he has just received a Christian baptism, and he now hopes for resurrection.

In both the cases so far mentioned, the problem of ennui has been dealt with in two ways, death or adventure. Lazarus Long is stimulated to continue his life through the promise of time travel back to the early twentieth century to meet his mother and investigate the times of his birth. The Survivors embark on a journey that may last forever, always meeting new races and enjoying new challenges.

In the Larry Niven novel, *Ringworld*, the hero, Louis Wu, uses “boosterspice,” a drug derived from the genes of ragweed, and “As a regular user of boosterspice, he didn’t show his years. If he didn’t get bored first, or broke, he might reach a thousand.”<sup>xv</sup> Part of his boredom stems from the repetition of actions, over and over again and he fears he will not live to a thousand:

. . . not if I have to put up with any more cocktail parties, or Bandersnatch hunted, or painted flatlanders swarming

through an anarchy park too small for them by a factor of ten. Not if I have to live through another one-night love affair, or another twenty-year marriage or another twenty-minute wait for a transfer booth that blows its zap just as it's my turn. And people. Not if I have to live with people, day and night, all those endless centuries.<sup>xvi</sup>

He solves problem of his boredom and periodic ennui, and goes on 'sabbaticals' beyond the boundaries of know space to revive himself. His ennui stems from the "blanding" of the world in the future:

But the blending of the cities was real. Louis had watched it happen. All the irrationalities of place and time and custom, blending into one big rationality of City, worldwide, like a dull, grey paste. Did anyone today speak Deutsche, English, Francaise, Espanol? Everyone spoke Interworld.<sup>xvii</sup>

By leaving the Earth, Wu escapes this ennui by as is the case with the Survivors and Lazarus Long, experiencing things which are new and different, even if these things may threaten his life. It is significant that, for all these, challenges to existence become the means of continued existence.

In *Ringworld*, as in some other stories in the Niven "Known Space" series, health and youth are maintained by "boosterspice," but this is only one of the techniques Niven has proposed for longevity. Niven has explored many possible ways of extending life in his fiction. Transplant technology is featured in the "Gil the Arm" series of stories and *World of Ptaavs*,<sup>xviii</sup> where Lucas Garner, the president of the Strudbrugs' Club and the oldest man in the world, has lived for more than 170 years with the aid of transplanted organs. Garner is also head of the World Police. Transplant technology is also explored in Niven's *A Gift from Earth*, where an entire society is dependent on a few who control the transplant facilities for their health and extended life. In *A World out of Time*, there are several modes of life preservation which are examined. The protagonist, Jerome Branch Corbell<sup>xix</sup> is originally a "corpsicle;" someone who had an incurable disease who was frozen in the hope that a cure might be found in the future. He is revived, in a fashion, after his brain is melted to record the electronic patterns of his personality, and to gather the memory RNA concentrated within it. The memories and the RNA are used to recreate his personality and memories in the brain of a condemned criminal, and so Corbell Mk II comes into being. Interestingly, he is asked why he chose to become a corpsicle, when the process was uncertain. He replies that it was a good risk; he was dying. Significantly his interrogator says

“If you had something to believe in, perhaps dying wouldn’t mean so much.” This echoes the sentiments of Nornagest in Anderson, who chose to die after he had found something he believed was larger than death, and also those of Lazarus Long, who believes that there is something after death, but does not know what. It also brings up the interesting characters of Pearson’s Puppeteers in the Niven universe, highly intelligent aliens who are obsessed with preserving their lives because, as one of them says “My species has no immortal part. Our scientists have proved this. We are afraid to die, for we know that death is permanent.”<sup>xx</sup>

Corbell escapes this repressive future society by stealing, as do the Howard families, a spaceship. His intention is to travel at near the speed of light for some years, thereby taking advantage of the relativistic time dilation effect, and return to the Earth when the repressive society has collapsed. He will wait out the years in a cold-sleep tank, preserving his life in a similar fashion to freezing, but without the destructive consequences. This too is a way of extending life, by extending the experiences of life without extending its span of years. Unfortunately, Corbell is followed into space by the personality of his interrogator on Earth, Pierce, transcribed into the on-board computer. Again, the personality is preserved, for as long as it can be transmitted from one computer to the other, a form of immortality.

Corbell succeeds in his goal to return to Earth, three million years later, when, despite the cold sleep and medical treatment, he has aged drastically. What he encounters on a vastly changed Earth are two more forms of immortality. The first is a form of arrested development. Children are given a treatment prior to puberty which causes them to stop growing and aging – young forever. This, however is a replacement for an older form of immortality treatment which was lost in a war, the Dictator treatment. Corbell is inadvertently exposed to this, but does not discover this is so until he begins to grow younger. It forms the mystery of the latter part of the novel, and the solution is that the Dictator immortality is an extension of the technology of matter transfer booths. These were used for transportation, but special ones were altered to only transport the:

Inert molecules from your cells! Chemical medicines won’t reach that stuff, but the ‘phone booth does. It takes the just those dead molecules and does the instant-elsewhere trick with them. Just the stuff that builds up over ninety years of life.<sup>xxi</sup>

More so than do either Heinlein or Anderson, Niven explores the social consequences of extended lifespans. The major problem is overpopulation, solved in Anderson by voluntary birth control and expansion into space, and by the same means in Heinlein. Niven uses the same devices, but shows that there are problems with them, and that birth control would have to be rigorously enforced.<sup>xxii</sup> Other writers have used a different solution; to limit age. In Cordwainer Smith's "Instrumentality of Mankind" stories, life span is limited to 400 years.

Niven also forecasts that, if organ transplant becomes more widespread, crime will follow in its footsteps. The more it is used the greater the opportunity for crime will become, and he has written his stories of organlegging set in just such a world.

All the writers mentioned have all also brought forward the idea that one might simply become bored with living so long. In Anderson, Heinlein and Niven, the result of extended life is a graying of existence; one place is much like another and everything is under rigid control, even if the control is benevolent. Anderson postulates that immortals would find stimulation and interest in sophisticated computer modeling and games, except for the Survivors, who prefer the real world. Heinlein simply ignores the problem, putting his faith in space travel, except that even that, after a time, becomes jejune. Niven sees a solution in control allied with gradual expansion, and the ability to get away from the dullness in such things as "anarchy parks."

But would immortals necessarily develop the intellectual resources to cope with their greater age? Gerald Kersh, in the short story *Whatever Happened to Corporal Cuckoo?* shows us a character who has lived since 1507. A soldier who fought at the battle of Turin in 1536, he was wounded and given a "universal digestive" by the surgeon who attended him, which stopped him aging and made him heal quickly from any wound. However, when we meet him in the twentieth century, he has remained a soldier, since that is all he knows how to do, and in five hundred years he has progressed from private to corporal. "I mean it fixed me, just like I was, and am, and always will be. See? A footsoldier, ignorant as dirt. It took me nearly a hundred years to learn to write my name, and four hundred years to get to be a Corporal."<sup>xxiii</sup>

The prospect of immortality is inextricably linked to problems. Changes in society, alienation, envy, isolation, boredom, but most of all the difficulty of coping with change as it happens. If one lives for a thousand years how quickly can you adapt? For two thousand? Even now, when people

are living for decades longer, there seems to be an exacerbation of the generation gap. Courses are held to educate older people in the intricacies of the internet and computers, things which did not exist when they were growing up. Older people seek for things which were commonplace when they were younger, and are unable to find them. They very landscape changes around them, rendering what was familiar unfamiliar. How difficult would coping be, then for someone who has lived for hundreds of years? It would seem that physical immortality requires a great deal of adaptability and an uncommon ability to deal with future shock. And in reality, very few stories of science fiction offer many speculations on life that goes on for more than a few thousand years. What of true immortality, which endures for longer than the age of a universe? Forever is a very long time, and even our best speculators in fiction don't seem to be able to see that far.

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<sup>i</sup> Isaac Asimov, *The Stars in their Courses*, Panther Books, Frogmore, 1975, p207.

<sup>ii</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, ed., et al, 1952. *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago: pp. 788.

<sup>iii</sup> First printed 1791. See William Godwin, *St Leon*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1994.

<sup>iv</sup> From an alchemical textbook, the *Chrysopoeia of Kleopatra*,

<sup>v</sup> See Ossensfelder's *Der Vampyre*, Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth*, Burger's *Lenora*, Byron's *The Giaour* as examples.

<sup>vi</sup> *Lippincot's Magazine*, London, 1890

<sup>vii</sup> See Robert Heinlein, *Revolt in 2100*, Street & Smith, New York, 1939.

<sup>viii</sup> Robert Heinlein, *Revolt in 2100/Methuselah's Children*, Baen Books, New York, 1999, first published 1958.

<sup>ix</sup> See p277, *Methuselah's Children*

<sup>x</sup> Poul Anderson, *The Boat of a Million Years* Sphere Books, London, 1990

<sup>xi</sup> Anderson, p341.

<sup>xii</sup> Anderson, p447.

<sup>xiii</sup> Robert Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love*, Ace Books, New York, 1988 p11. First Published Putnams, New York, 1973.

<sup>xiv</sup> Anderson, p130.

<sup>xv</sup> Larry Niven, *Three Books of Known Space*, Ballantine, New York, 1996, p544.

<sup>xvi</sup> Larry Niven, *Three Books of Known Space*, Ballantine, New York, 1996, p544.

<sup>xvii</sup> Larry Niven, *Ringworld*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1970, p2.

<sup>xviii</sup> See Larry Niven, *Three Books of Known Space*.

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<sup>xix</sup> A pun on the name of a fantasy author of the thirties, James Branch Cabell. In Cabell's best known work, *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice*, the hero, Jurgen, travels through many otherworldly realms, including Heaven and Hell, and this is a metaphor for the experience of Niven's hero after he is revived from death.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ringworld*, p103.

<sup>xxi</sup> Larry Niven, *A World Out of Time*, Futura Publications, London, 1977, p233.

<sup>xxii</sup> Isaac Asimov, in *The Stars in Their Courses*, a series of essays, notes that at the "doubling rate" of population growth in 1969, the entire universe would be converted to flesh by A D 8700.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Gerald Kersh, 'Whatever Happened to Corporal Cuckoo?' in Fred Pohl, ed, *Star of Stars*, Doubleday, New York, 1960, p11.

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