

# Harlan Ellison, science fiction master, dies at age 84

June 28 2018, by Robert Jablon

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This March 13, 2012 photo provided by Steve Barber shows author Harlan Ellison in the Sherman Oaks neighborhood of Los Angeles. Ellison, the prolific, pugnacious author of "A Boy and His Dog," and countless other stories that

blasted society with their nightmarish, sometimes darkly humorous scenarios, has died at age 84. Ellison's death was confirmed Thursday, June 28, 2018. During a career that spanned more than half a century, Ellison wrote some 50 books and more than 1,400 articles, essays, TV scripts and screenplays. (Courtesy Steve Barber via AP)

Harlan Ellison, the prolific, pugnacious author of "A Boy and His Dog," and countless other stories that blasted society with their nightmarish, sometimes darkly humorous scenarios, has died at age 84

Ellison's death was confirmed Thursday to The Associated Press by Bill Schafer, an editor with Subterranean Press, the author's publisher. A woman who answered the phone at Ellison's office, who declined to give her name, said he died Wednesday in his sleep.

During a career that spanned more than half a century, Ellison wrote some 50 books and more than 1,400 articles, essays, TV scripts and screenplays. Although best-known for his science fiction, which garnered nearly a dozen Nebula and Hugo awards, Ellison's work covered virtually every type of writing from mysteries to comic books to newspaper columns.

He was known as much for his attitude as his writing—he described himself once as "bellicose." His targets were anyone or anything that offended him, from TV producers to his own audience. An encounter with Frank Sinatra, when the two faced off while Ellison was shooting pool, was immortalized in Gay Talese's famous 1966 magazine profile of the singer.

"I go to bed angry and I get up angrier every morning," he once said.

"Harlan Ellison: There was no one quite like him in American letters, and never will be," author Stephen King Tweeted on Thursday. "Angry, funny, eloquent, hugely talented. If there's an afterlife, Harlan is already kicking ass and taking down names."

Several of Ellison's works were translated into dozens of languages.

One of the best-known, "A Boy and His Dog," portrays a world devastated by nuclear war and fought over by vicious gangs.

The hero, a young thug whose traveling companion is a mutant, telepathic dog, is lured to an underground community but rebels against its sterility. The novella was the basis for a 1975 movie starring Don Johnson. The film's gruesome but darkly comic ending elicited stunned laughter from its audience when it was the featured film at a science fiction movie marathon in Los Angeles that year.

Ellison recently expanded the story into a full-length novel, "Blood's A Rover," that Subterranean is publishing this month.

Some of his most popular works were surrealistic fantasies set in grisly worlds run by totalitarians and conformists. Some were humorous; many were shockingly graphic for their time.

He once said he wanted his stories "to grab you by the throat and tear off parts of your body."

His short story, "I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream," is about the last humans, eternally tortured by a malevolent, godlike computer. It was made into a computer game, with its author providing the machine's voice.

Ellison disliked computers and worked on old manual typewriters,

although he denied being anti-technology.

"I hate the uses that technology is put to," he once said.

Sometimes, for promotional purposes, he would write his stories while seated in bookstore windows.

He edited "Dangerous Visions," a seminal 1967 collection of science fiction stories that expanded the boundaries with their complex psychology and depictions of sex and violence.

He was born on May 27, 1934, in Cleveland. His youth in nearby Painesville was lonely—he and his older sister, Beverly, were among the only Jews in town and were rejected. His loud mouth and small size—as an adult he stood about 5-feet-5—also made him a target of bullies.

He attended Ohio State University but left after punching a professor who said he lacked writing talent. After he was drafted, he served in the Army and then embarked on a writing career.

Ellison was fiercely protective of his work and was not shy about going after those he believed had stolen or tampered with it. He instructed his fifth wife, Susan, to destroy all his notes and unfinished works after his death to avoid having them completed by some "literary grave-robber."

When a publisher broke a contract by allowing a cigarette ad in one of Ellison's books, the writer mailed him dozens of bricks and, finally, a ripe, dead gopher.

He received partial credit after suing the producers of the "Terminator" movies that made Arnold Schwarzenegger a star, claiming the idea of the killer robot was stolen from his stories.

Throughout his career he maintained a love-hate relationship with the TV and motion picture industry, scripting episodes for such series as "The Outer Limits" and the original "Star Trek." He was also a conceptual consultant for the 1990s popular syndicated [science fiction](#) series "Babylon 5."

His 1967 "Star Trek" episode, "The City on the Edge of Forever," was one of the series' darkest and most brilliant. A young woman played by Joan Collins is saved from a fatal accident by the starship Enterprise's time-traveling Dr. McCoy. Later, the ship's Capt. Kirk and Mr. Spock learn they must return to the year 1930 and let her die or history will be changed and Nazi Germany will win World War II.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ellison championed opposition to the Vietnam War and other liberal causes. He also wrote frequently scabrous television criticism for the underground newspaper Los Angeles Free Press in a column called "The Glass Teat." The collected essays still are used in some college criticism courses.

Ellison also wrote from experience. For his first novel, about 1950s street gangs, he ran for 10 weeks with a Brooklyn gang.

His 1997 book, "Slippage," included an essay mentioning California's 1994 Northridge earthquake. The quake injured his wife, caused \$200,000 in damage to his San Fernando Valley home and knocked him out when his 30,000 books were hurled from their shelves.

The book also discussed his 1996 quadruple-bypass surgery, which he underwent after a heart attack he blamed on the stress of his work schedule.

Despite his success—the Los Angeles Times said he should be considered the "20th-century Lewis Carroll"—Ellison sometimes

seemed wistful about his own legacy.

His afterword to "The Essential Ellison," a 1987 collection of his writings, read simply: "For a brief time I was here; and for a brief time I mattered."

He is survived by his wife, Susan.

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