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Harlan Ellison, Intensely Prolific Science Fiction Writer, Dies at 84

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Harlan Ellison, a furiously prolific and cantankerous writer whose science fiction and fantasy stories reflected a personality so intense that they often read as if he were punching his manual typewriter keys with his fists, died on Wednesday at his home in Los Angeles. He was 84.

His wife, Susan Ellison, confirmed his death but said she did not know the cause. He had had a stroke and heart surgery in recent years.

Mr. Ellison looked at storytelling as a “holy chore,” which he pursued zealously for more than 60 years. His output includes more than 1,700 short stories and articles, at least 100 books and dozens of screenplays and television scripts. And although he was ranked with eminent science fiction writers like Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov, he insisted that he wrote speculative fiction, or simply fiction.

“Call me a science fiction writer,” Mr. Ellison said on the Sci-Fi Channel (now SyFy) in the 1990s. “I’ll come to your house and I’ll nail your pet’s head to a coffee table. I’ll hit you so hard your ancestors will die.”

Mr. Ellison’s best-known work includes “A Boy and His Dog” (1969), a novella set in a postapocalyptic wasteland of the United States, which was made into a 1975 movie; “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” (1967), a short story about a computer that tortures the last five humans on earth; “The City on the Edge of Forever,” a beloved back-in-time episode of the “Star Trek” television series in 1967; and “ ‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman” (1965), about a futuristic society in which time is regimented by a fearsome figure called the Ticktockman.



Mr. Ellison, left, with the filmmakers Werner Herzog and Erik Nelson in 2008. Lena Herzog

“But no one called him that to his mask,” Mr. Ellison wrote. “You don’t call a man a hated name, not when that man, behind his mask, is capable of revoking the minutes, the hours, the days and nights, the years of his life. He was called the Master Timekeeper to his mask.”

Mr. Ellison was a fast-talking, pipe-smoking polymath who once delighted talk-show hosts like Merv Griffin and Tom Snyder with his views on atheism, elitism, violence and Scientology.

He could be wild, angry and litigious. He said that he lost his job with the Walt Disney Company — on the first day — when he stood up in its commissary (with company executives watching) and described how he wanted to make an animated pornographic film starring Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

He is said to have sent a dead gopher to a publisher and attacked an ABC executive, breaking his pelvis.

He frequently criticized studios and television producers when he believed they had copied his stories. His many lawsuits included one against the makers of the movie “The Terminator,” which accused them of plagiarizing “Soldier,” a script he wrote in 1964 for the TV series “The Outer Limits.”

The title story in this collection of short stories by Mr. Ellison is about a computer that tortures the last five humans on earth.

And he remained upset for years that Gene Roddenberry, the creator of “Star Trek,” and others had made rewrites to his script for “The City on the Edge of Forever.” Decades later, he sued CBS Paramount TV for merchandising royalties that he felt he was owed from the episode.

Ms. Ellison said that her husband eventually put his “Star Trek” imbroglio behind him. But he would never watch the classic episode.

“Let’s not go that far,” she said in a telephone interview.

Harlan Jay Ellison was born on May 27, 1934, in Cleveland. His father, Louis, was a dentist and jeweler, and his mother, Serita (Rosenthal) Ellison, worked in a thrift store. Growing up, partly in Painesville, Ohio, about 30 miles northeast of Cleveland, he was bullied in school, largely for being Jewish. The experience made him feel like an outsider and fueled his anger.

“I survived their tender mercies with nothing more debilitating to show for it than a lifelong, blood-drenched obsession for revenge,” he wrote in “Harlan Ellison’s Watching,” a collection of film reviews first published in 1989.

That anger imbued his writing, said James Gunn, the founding director of the Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

The published script of Mr. Ellison’s beloved back-in-time episode of the “Star Trek” television series, from 1967.

“Some writers were able to detach themselves and write objectively,” Mr. Gunn said in a telephone interview, “but you could always sense that Harlan was in there yelling. You could hear Bradbury in his stories, but he was not violent at all; he had a melancholy attitude.”

After his father died, Harlan moved back to Cleveland with his mother and his sister, Beverly, in 1949 and started the Cleveland Science Fiction Club, became a frequent moviegoer and worked as a runner for local mobsters, he told *The Plain Dealer* of Cleveland.

He left home several times, traveling around the country and variously working on a tuna boat, as a truckdriver and as a short-order cook, among other jobs.

Mr. Ellison attended Ohio State University but left after two years. At one point he punched an English professor who had told him that he did not see any writing talent in him. Thereafter, Mr. Ellison sent copies of his published stories to the professor.

In the mid-1950s he began publishing a torrent of work — in publications like *Galaxy* and *Fantastic Science Fiction* — that would continue for years. He wrote stories, novels and novellas. He edited anthologies like “*Dangerous Visions*” (1967) and a sequel. And he wrote episodes of television series like “Route 66,” “*The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*,” “*The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*,” the 1980s revival of “*The Twilight Zone*” and, improbably, “*The Flying Nun*” (an episode in which Sally Field’s character, Sister Bertrille, and two other nuns land on a remote island).

This 1969 novella by Mr. Ellison is set in a postapocalyptic wasteland of the United States.

In 1965, he found he had become a character in Gay Talese's celebrated New Journalism article "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," published in Esquire magazine. By Mr. Talese's account, Sinatra, annoyed at the boots that Mr. Ellison was wearing in the pool room of a private club in Beverly Hills, asked him what he did for a living.

"I'm a plumber," Mr. Ellison answered.

When someone interjected that Mr. Ellison had written the screenplay of "The Oscar," a forthcoming film, Sinatra replied: "Oh, yeah? Well, I've seen it, and it's a piece of crap."

Mr. Ellison then said, "That's strange, because they haven't even released it." (It was released in 1966.)

He left after few more testy exchanges with Sinatra. (Sinatra, coincidentally, had a cameo role in "The Oscar.")

By the time he encountered Sinatra, Mr. Ellison was already reviewing movies and writing essays about buddy films and other genres.

Mr. Ellison in Erik Nelson's 2008 documentary film about him, "Dreams With Sharp Teeth."
Douglas Martin/Creative Differences

Most of the movies he reviewed were mainstream productions like "Rosemary's Baby" (which he loved) and "Star Trek: The Motion Picture" (which he called "stultifyingly predictable").

In a review of "Harlan Ellison's Watching" in The New York Times in 1989, Robert Moss wrote that "one is never tempted to stop reading" despite Mr. Ellison's occasional windiness. His criticism, Mr. Moss added, "has some of the spellbinding quality of a great nonstop talker with a cultural warehouse for a mind."

In recent years, Mr. Ellison wrote a graphic novel, "7 Against Chaos" (2013), with the artist Paul Chadwick for DC Comics. About 30 of his stories were reissued digitally. He published "None of the Above," an unproduced screenplay based on "Bug Jack Barron," a story by Norman Spinrad, a science fiction writer who had been his friend since the 1950s.

Mr. Ellison was also the star of "Dreams With Sharp Teeth" (2008), a documentary feature about his life directed by Erik Nelson. In the film, which showcases Mr. Ellison's fierce, volcanic and argumentative personality, he is described as a "hurricane," "an alternately impish and furious 11-year-old boy" and, by his friend Robin Williams, "a skin graft on a leper."

In describing her husband's friendship with Mr. Williams, Ms. Ellison said, "Talent will find talent."

His marriage to Susan Toth, his only immediate survivor, was his fifth; his four previous marriages ended in divorce.

Isaac Asimov once called Mr. Ellison "one of the best writers in the world." But he lamented that Mr. Ellison had too often been sidetracked by his furies.

"It is simply terrible that that he should be constantly embroiled in matters which really have nothing to do with his writing and which slow him down tragically," Mr. Asimov wrote in 1994 in his autobiography, "I, Asimov."

He added: "He claims he is five feet four inches tall, but it doesn't really matter. In talent, energy and courage, he is eight feet tall."