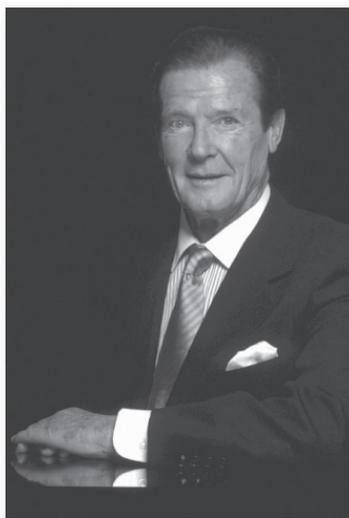


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INTRODUCTION

The poet Dante believed old age starts at forty-five. The United Nations suggests it begins at sixty. Meanwhile, in 2016, the *Daily Express* newspaper reported that Britons do not see themselves as elderly until they are nudging eighty-five.

Well, as I write, I'm in my ninetieth year. Ninety! Where did those years go?

But what is 'old age'? Does it define us? Does it inhibit us? You can't escape it, you can't avoid it – well, you can, but the alternative isn't to be recommended – so you just

have to embrace it. Mind you, ‘Old Folks’ Home’ doesn’t exactly sound like a place you want to add to your bucket list, does it? It has a ring of finality about it, and that’s why the graceful Dame Judi Dench says she doesn’t allow the word ‘old’ to be spoken in her house, as it suggests she is past it – and that is quite clearly not the case.

Do I feel old? Not at all! Though my body may creak and groan a bit more now than it used to.

It always amuses me that children measure their years in fractions: ‘I’m three and a quarter’ or ‘I’m four and a half!’, before rounding it *up* as soon as possible. Later on in life, you’ll find people do the reverse, insisting that they’re not almost ninety-five, but ninety-four-and-three-quarters. Better still, in middle age, we don’t use fractions; we use euphemisms such as ‘fifty-plus’ or the ‘third age’. While children and teenagers long to grow older and acquire the greater freedoms and privileges that come with ageing – it used to be your twenty-first birthday but now it’s your eighteenth – the cosmetics industry and the anti-ageing market has extended at both ends, with endless products and potions for ‘mature’ skin, but also anti-ageing creams for twenty-somethings ...

When my publishers reminded me I am going to be fairly ancient this year, they suggested I might once again put

finger to keyboard and come up with a tome to tie in with my upcoming celebration. I started reflecting and thinking about age, people, places and the good fortune I've enjoyed across these past decades. This is a book about some of those memories, many irreverent, along with some thoughts of what might have been, some sideways glances, and a few grumbles. You see I've lived through so many landmark events – ranging from the introduction of television, World War II, the first man on the moon, the start and end of the Cold War, the birth of the internet ... and so very much more. I suddenly realized that yes, I really am that old.

Then, there are some of the absurdities advancing age brings with it. For example:

- When you still feel twenty-one inside but wonder who the old fart in the bathroom mirror staring back at you is.
- When you thought 'sick' meant someone was ill.
- When you tune into the radio and hear they're playing 'a golden oldie', only to realize it's from 1988.
- When you realize 'easy-open tin' is the very definition of an oxymoron.

À bientôt ...

- When you look at a bathtub and wonder, if you get in it, will you ever get out?

With my tongue firmly placed in my cheek, it's now time to get on ...



With my older cousin Doreen who liked to keep me firmly grounded with tales of our youth together.

A SENSE OF NINETY YEARS

When contemplating how to start this book I thought I would cast my mind back to my earliest memories, which is not as easy as you might think. It was then that I realized that so many recollections are not in fact linked to places or dates, but rather to smells and sounds. I shouldn't be too surprised I guess, as, after all, we humans have five main senses: sight, touch, taste, plus the all-important smell and hearing. Yet rarely do we appreciate just how intrinsically those last two are linked to our most treasured memories.