

This Week's Citation Classic®

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Butler R N. *Why survive? Being old in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 496 p.

Why Survive? Being Old in America provides a factual portrait of old age in America as of 1974-1975 and of the conditions affecting older persons. Specific recommendations are made for changes in social policies affecting the elderly, and the political, cultural, personal, and psychological aspects of growing older are dealt with. [The *SCI*® and *SSCI*® indicate that this book has been cited in over 330 publications.]

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This book provides a portrait of old age in America circa 1975 that is unfortunately not so different from the one in 1988. Recommendations for changes in social policies that I made in 1975 are still valid today.¹ Policy reforms are still needed in the areas of private and public pensions, Social Security, housing, health and social services, and nursing homes. Research is still inadequate in the areas of biomedical, behavioral, and social aspects of the aging process.

Specific recommendations that were made in the book included putting an end to mandatory retirement, reform of Medicare, upgrading the quality of nursing-home care, reform of psychiatric practices affecting the elderly, and the establishment of methods for dealing with the victimization of older people.

I have been working in the field of aging (geriatrics and gerontology) since 1955. I had been involved in two previous books before writing *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. I have always regarded the first, *Human Aging*,² as a critical, even seminal, book in the field of gerontology, since I believe it is the first major body of work in the field to show

that much that is often attributed to age and aging is instead a function of disease, social adversity, and even personality variables. The second work, *Aging and Mental Health*,³ written with Myrna I. Lewis and first published in 1973, is a textbook still widely used today. The fourth edition is now in preparation.

Why Survive? Being Old in America reflected both my personal history, particularly my close early relationship with my grandparents, and my professional scientific life. My grandparents raised me from infancy, my parents having separated shortly after my birth. When I was 11 months old, my mother brought me to live with her parents in Vineland, New Jersey. My grandfather, a gentleman chicken farmer then in his 70s, became my close friend and teacher. His sudden disappearance one day when I was seven made no sense to me. My grandmother said he went to visit relatives in Oklahoma, but with time I realized that I was never going to see him again. Why had he died? Why did people die?

In the years that followed, my grandmother showed me the strength and endurance of the elderly. Her triumphant spirit and determination during the Great Depression as she struggled to survive helped me to survive as well.

The writing of the book took place under difficult conditions following a period of marital separation that ended in divorce. I received an advance of \$30,000, and I made arrangements with my patients to call me only during emergencies. I worked steadily for six months from July 1 to December 31, 1973, before I returned to practice. My superb editor, Ann Harris of Harper & Row, returned the manuscript, which was huge, with incredibly concise and important chapter notes recommending changes. She also urged reduction in size by a third. By then, I had to return to practice and worked evenings and weekends to finish the book. My coauthor of *Aging and Mental Health*, Lewis, devoted herself to helping me finish the book. We spent innumerable hours rereading and editing the manuscript, and, finally, the book was published in 1975.

Perhaps because it is comprehensive and has a strong point of view, the book has lasted and continues to be referred to. The book received the singular honor of a Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction in 1976.

1. Butler R N & Gleason H P, eds. *Productive aging: enhancing vitality in later life*. New York: Springer, 1985. 148 p.
2. Birren J E, Butler R N, Greenhouse S W, Sokoloff L & Yarrow M R, eds. *Human aging: a biological and behavioral study*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1963. 328 p.
3. Butler R N & Lewis M I. *Aging and mental health: positive psychosocial and biomedical approaches*. St. Louis, MO: Mosby, 1982. 483 p.

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