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THE THIRD CULTURE

NEXT STEP, A NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE?

Novelists may win the plaudits, but they don't have all the good stories.....

Richard Dawkins gives advice to entrants to a competition for young science writers.

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Richard Dawkins's Edge Bio Page
http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/bios/dawkins.html

NEXT STEP, A NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE?

In a 1968 book review of THE DOUBLE HELIX, anthologised in PLUTO'S REPUBLIC, the distinguished biologist Sir Peter Medawar wrote that if a young man as talented as Jim Watson had been born British, especially in the Cambridge of his and Crick's time, he would have been steered towards literary studies:

"It just so happens that during the 1950s, the first great age of molecular biology, the English Schools of Oxford and particularly of Cambridge produced more than a score of graduates of quite outstanding ability & much more brilliant, inventive, articulate and dialectically skilful than most young scientists; right up in the Watson class. But Watson had one towering advantage over all of them: in addition to being extremely clever he had something important to be clever ABOUT."

Scientism of this order provokes shrieks of outrage, and I would not recommend Medawar's style of patrician insouciance - not till you reach the age of 60 and have a Nobel prize as well deserved as his. The suspicion that Medawar is righter than most of us publicly admit may be fleeting, and it may be secret, but it should at least embolden the young science writer. Choose science, and you have something important to write about.

Not just important but fascinating. Not just fascinating but open-ended: you'll never run out of subjects, where the effort of simplification repays the writer as richly as the reader. Einstein said: "Everything should be as simple as possible, but no simpler." Any fool can oversimplify. Far from talking down, flatter your reader. Don't apologise for elitism, encourage your reader to join the elite. Don't shrink from choosing the exact word that says it best, even if it drives your reader to the dictionary. A dictionary never harmed anyone, and a word can excite by its very unfamiliarity.

Seek to enlighten and inspire, not impress. Darwin may not have been the most graceful role

model for a young writer, but he laboured mightily to be understood because he knew the importance of what he had to convey. He worked to anticipate every problem that might arise, even devoting an entire chapter to "Difficulties on Theory".

Dawkins's Law of the Conservation of Difficulty states that obscurantism in an academic subject expands to fill the vacuum of its intrinsic simplicity. Theoretical physics is a genuinely difficult subject. Envious disciplines, which I shall not advertise, conceal their lack of content behind billowing clouds of deliberate obscurity, hilariously lampooned by Alan Sokal in his hoax article, "Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity", published by SOCIAL TEXT to the subsequent embarrassment of that pretentious journal's "Editorial Collective". Wanton obscurantism subverts the very point of science. If science seems difficult, it should only be because the real world is difficult. Yet a sufficiently skilled writer can cut through the difficulty without losing content and without dumbing down.

Yeats proclaimed "The fascination of what's difficult", and at different times described poetry as a "craft", or "trade" which had to be learned.

A line may take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Stitching and unstitching, yes, that hits home. Economy of line serves scientists no less than poets and novelists. Learn parsimony by reading Shakespeare - or Evelyn Waugh - as well as J B S Haldane or D'Arcy Thompson. Learn lyricism by reading Wordsworth, as well as Carl Sagan or Peter Atkins. Learn wit from P G Wodehouse, as well as Steve Jones or Matt Ridley. You cannot write unless you love reading.

Adjectives and adverbs are special treats. Ration them. The passive voice is not to be encouraged - see what I mean? Use short sentences, but vary their length or your prose will plod. Such advice is commonplace and I go along with it. But I've never written down a formula for writing, and I shrink from anything formulaic. If your tennis serve works for you, an insensitive coach who barges in and tells you to throw the ball higher may ruin everything. If you're too aware of your own technique you may dissect it to destruction. I hate it when editors belabour me with their schoolmarm rules, so why would I impose rules on others?

Whatever I say, then, it is no more than what seems to work for me. Read your stuff aloud and tune your ear to its cadences. Read it to yourself, again and again, and each time trim more fat. Each time, apply the virtual red pencil of a different imaginary critic. If occasionally you venture into a purple passage, let it be nature's truth that leads you there, not self-regard. Fall in love with your subject, not your prose.

I love amazing numbers, and I suspect that many readers do too. How many miles of neurons are in the human brain? Others have worked that out, so calculate an equally astounding number yourself. Remember the little boy who pleaded: "Please tell me one thing I could tell Daddy that he doesn't know already." Prick your reader's imagination with a stunning fact, or a fresh metaphor, or by turning a familiar fact dizzyingly upside down, or by filtering it through the alien lens of a Martian eye. However useful science may be, and however relevant to everyday life, that is the least important thing about it. Science is, above all, wonderful. You may write to inform. You should write to inspire.

No scientist has won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Why not? I suspect that it simply hasn't occurred to the judges. "Literature" automatically conjures "novelist", or "poet". Yet, could there be a better subject for great literature than the spacetime fabric of the universe? Or than the evolution of life? Or than Sherrington's enchanted loom of the brain? At very least it is not obvious why fiction should make greater literature than reality. And science is the study of the real world. Nobel Prize for Literature? Now there's a life's challenge for the aspiring science writer.

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