

Interview with Faye Flam



Early Years

NTW: Who were your mentors while growing up? Who has had the most influence on you?

My best mentors were writers and illustrators. I still remember that we had a beautiful World Atlas with a great artist's renditions of the origin of the solar system, the evolution of the planet, and the death of the sun. I was trans-

fixed by this. Later I discovered Stephen Jay Gould and Isaac Asimov. There were also great stories on science in National Geographic. I realized that there's a big difference between learning about science from a textbook and reading a good popularized account.

NTW: Did you own any animals as a child?

I had a miniature dachshund named Salty. I also kept goldfish on occasion. And once I put a cocoon into my bug catcher and a monarch butterfly eventually emerged.

NTW: What were your favorite subjects in school?

Math, Physics and Chemistry, in that order. Biology scared me. There wasn't much about evolution in my high school Science class and I hated dissecting the frog and the fetal pig.

NTW: Why did you choose to study geophysics at California Institute of Technology?

I took a summer course in earthquake studies after my sophomore year in high school, and we visited Caltech. Some of the other kids were talking about how hard Caltech was, and I always liked a challenge, so I tried for it. I wasn't into sports or cheerleading, and neither were they, so it seemed like a good match. Can't explain why I chose geophysics, since I was completely indecisive in my interests, but I liked physics and I liked the earth science courses I took.

NTW: What topic in science is the most interesting to you?

I can't pick just one. I loved writing about cosmology, which was a big part of my old job as a new writer for Science. The field has progressed so much in recent years and deals with such mind-bending questions. The other part of my Science beat was particle physics. That was fun to cover because I got to go to meetings and corner people and ask them to explain things. It was like getting private lessons, and I wasn't being graded. In a way the scientists were being graded instead, since I was the one deciding whether their work was worth putting into my stories. Their work is hard to explain but they were for the most part very generous in helping me.

I'm also intrigued by research into the origin of life, and I've found that Inquirer readers share my fascination.

NTW: What was your most rewarding experience in writing for the science and technology section of The Economist?

Seeing my stuff in print in such a famous magazine! It was thrilling, as I'd never been published before. I also loved the people who worked there. They were more sophisticated and worldly than anyone I'd ever met.

NTW: What is the most interesting place you've visited?

The South Pole. I'd like to go back. It was like being on another planet.

NTW: What do you think makes you such a versatile science writer?

Curiosity, I think, and also experience. The longer you do it, the more you feel like you've covered everything before. I think if you come in with the right understanding of the scientific method and the right critical thinking skills you can cover just about any field.

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NTW: Are you a scientist more than a writer?

I don't think so. I never do experiments or formulate theories. I think of myself as a journalist, since I approach my topics journalistically, through research and interview. I never write as an expert. And since I cover such diverse areas, I can't claim any particular expertise.

NTW: What is it like interviewing some of the top scientists in their fields?

The interviews are the fun part of my job. Most top scientists are happy to explain their work and are very generous with their time. Many say they believe in the importance of explaining science to the public.

NTW: What are some of your favorite books and authors?

In the sciences:

Stephen Jay Gould – everything I've read from him.

Carl Sagan – Pale Blue Dot, Cosmos, Demon Haunted World

Jared Diamond – Collapse; Guns, Germs and Steel

Richard Rhodes – The Making of the Atomic Bomb

Gary Taubes – Nobel Dreams

Richard Dawkins – The Selfish Gene, The Blind Watchmaker

Michael Pollan – Omnivore's Dilemma; Botany of Desire

Douglas Adams – Last Chance to See

I'm currently reading Under a Green Sky by Peter Ward. That's excellent so far. I'm only half way through.

Evolution



Illustration by: Pulitzer Prize-winning Illustrator, Tony Auth

NTW: What is the most rewarding aspect of writing the evolution column Planet-of-the -Apes for the Philadelphia Inquirer?

I really like writing weekly columns. They give me a much better opportunity to explore original topics and explain science than do typical news stories. With news, you're almost always covering things along with a million other reporters. And with news there's often pressure to hype things to make them

newsworthy. With the column I never fight with the editors pestering me to tell readers "why this is important".

And the column allows me to interact more directly with readers. I like framing a topic around a reader's question, and have done this with a number of columns. Another thing that's great about writing the column is that I've met some interesting people through my interviews. Tim Berra is a biologist at OSU who's been very supportive and helpful. He wrote a great little book about Darwin's life. Jerry Coyne at the University of Chicago has given me a couple of great column ideas and given me some coaching on how to be a prolific blogger. I'm not one yet, but I'm better. And his book, Why Evolution is True, is an essential reference when trying to handle criticism and questions from creationists.

NTW: What is most challenging in writing to a broad audience about evolution?

That's not a challenge for me because I have so many years of experience writing about science for a broad audience. It's more challenging to write news stories for newspapers because even when a story is fascinating editors often want to know "why this is important." In the column I'm allowed to write without any of that annoying breathlessness that's often associated with news stories.

The column really is designed more to satisfy readers' curiosity and clear up confusion than it is about publicizing scientists' work. So instead of writing about topics that the journals Nature and Science say are important, I start with science questions that interest readers and push the scientists to answer them in a thoughtful way.

NTW: Would you consider writing a book about evolution?

Yes, definitely. I would like to write a book with Tony Auth as illustrator. I just need the right topic within evolution. He's such a good science illustrator that I'd be a fool not to take advantage of the fact that he likes working with me.

NTW: Are you surprised how the general public in this country views evolution?

Sometimes the surveys are dispiriting, when they report that such a high percentage of people completely deny or ignore the evidence, or just don't care. But since I started the column I've been pleasantly surprised at how many regular people have good, thoughtful, intelligent questions. I've had many readers pose the kinds of questions I can't readily know the answer, so it gives me a chance to go find out.

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NTW: What is the most important thing that you've learned while writing for your column and blog?

I lobbied the paper for two years before they let me have this column, so I guess I'd say the most important lesson is not to give up. I also learned that evolution is not as controversial as sex. I got hate letters every day when I wrote Carnal Knowledge, but I rarely get hate mail now. 90% of all the feedback I get from readers is positive.

As for blogging, I'm still trying to figure out whether it's worth the time. So many people blog, and so few people write weekly newspaper science columns. I don't know whether it's worthwhile for me to take time out of my column to write to blog. I'm trying to blog almost every day as an experiment, but so far I'm finding it pretty exhausting. I'm also not happy with the way the website mixes the columns and blog entries so readers can't distinguish the stuff that took extensive research and interviews with random thought that I put together in a half an hour.

The Score

NTW: What made you want to write this book?

The book was an offshoot of the column Carnal Knowledge. I really wanted to write a weekly science column but the only type of column the Inquirer editors would let me have was a sex column. I took a very scientific approach, and after a couple of years people asked me if I was planning to collect them in a book.

I approached some publishers and they all said they would not publish a collection but they would publish a book that explored a theme and combined ideas that were expressed in the columns.

NTW: Your book received very good reviews. How did you research for this book?

I didn't have much leave time, so if I needed to know something for the book, often I'd write a column on that topic. That way I could get the interviews and reading done. I always gather much more information than I can fit into a column, so it wasn't hard expanding it.

NTW: Will there be a sequel to your book?

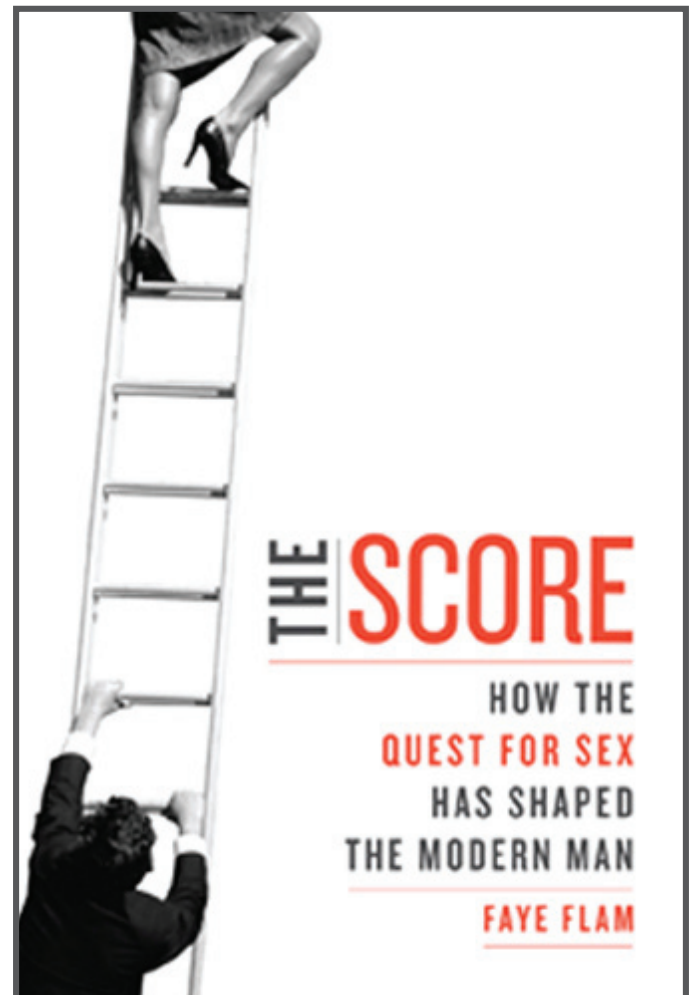
I keep thinking that the book was packaged badly. The publishers tried to sell it as an adult, "sexy" book and some people gave it a bad review for not being sexy enough and having too much science in it. Not enough people who like science books ever knew it existed.

I think a good follow-up might be a young person's version of the book that emphasized the science more and used Tony's drawings as illustrations.

NTW: What do you find most interesting about the evolutionary strategy of reproductive biology in our own species?

What's amazing to me is how many bits and pieces of other reproductive strategies we seem to employ. We do some monogamy and some display and some random promiscuity and some cheating. Well, we don't all do all of those. We're also different from all other animals in that there's so much variation within the human species – from people with one partner for life to people with thousands.

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Carnal Knowledge

NTW: Your column “Carnal Knowledge” was very popular and nominated for a Pulitzer. What was your favorite part in writing this column?

I think the best part was receiving letters from individual readers who got something beyond just information from these columns. That happened often with columns I wrote about homosexuality. In several columns I questioned religion-based ethical ideas, especially the prohibition against homosexuality and double standards about female sexual behavior. I also remember once writing a column about how breast size preference is at least partly cultural, since different cultures at different times preferred small breasts. Several women called me to say “thank you.”

Higgs

NTW: Do you own a cat named after the Higgs Boson?

Sort of. My editor thought I should name him after a famous scientist, and we batted a few names back and forth. Fermi, Einstein, Heisenberg...none of those quite worked. I thought the name “Higgs” was perfect, though Higgs the cat may in fact be named after Peter Higgs, for whom the particle was named, since the original intent was to name him after a scientist.

There’s some question now over whether the Higgs Boson exists, or whether it can be detected during the lifetime of Peter Higgs. If he dies first he can’t get a Nobel Prize for his idea. But at least Peter Higgs can take heart in knowing that an adorable yellow tabby is named after him.

