

**Remarks of Alan Lightman and Stephen Pinker  
at a colloquium to discuss the thematic issues within this volume**

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“Public Intellectuals and the Academy”

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I sympathize with Alan Lightman’s account of the effect of book-writing on family life. The only difference is that in my case, every once in a while my wife will notice me briefly drifting *into* contact with reality.

When I showed a draft of my first trade book to a colleague for comments, he predicted, accurately, “Your life will never be the same.” There is the wonderful perk of meeting people outside the usual academic circuit -- from writers and journalists to minor celebrities such as Noel Redding (drummer for the Jimi Hendrix Experience) and Ken Dryden (goalie for the multiple-Stanley-cup-winning Montreal Canadiens of the 1970s). But there is also the adoption of an entirely new mindset about my area of research and about why we in the academy do what we do.

think of writing trade books not just as “popularizing science” (which many academics equate with dumbing down), but as forcing me to take a bird’s eye view of my field. Academic research, according to the cliché, is the attempt to learn more and more about less and less until you know everything about nothing. Presenting one’s field to an audience of nonspecialists is a way to reverse this progression (though one hopes, not by learning less and less about more and more until you know nothing about everything). It forces one to remember a field’s proudest accomplishments -- the ones we often forget about in graduate teaching because they are no longer controversial and hence become part of the banal conventional wisdom. It forces one to organize hodgepodes, to consolidate cottage industries.

It also forces one to question basic assumptions. Having to explain an idea in plain English to someone with no stake in the matter is an excellent screen for incoherent or contradictory ideas that somehow have entrenched themselves in a field. Most teachers have had the experience of realizing part way through a sentence that the theory they are in the midst of explaining makes no sense. One sweats, one pads the sentence with fillers, buying time to figure out how to repair the theory or offer some alternative, and then, as the full stop approaches, one speaks quickly and indistinctly and nonchalantly hoping the students won’t pay attention, all the while praying that no hand shoots up to request a clarification (and if it does, resisting the temptation to blow it off with the suggestion that it is a stupid question). That kind of epiphany happens even more often when explaining a field to a general audience.

I have found that the habits necessary for writing for a general audience – putting issues in larger perspective, spelling out background assumptions, writing in a direct, concrete style – are just as useful in academic writing as in popular writing. I no longer maintain a sharp distinction between the two styles. My most recent book, *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*, reports the results of my research for the past twelve

years. It is written as a trade book but I would not have done it all that differently if I had written it as an academic book.

Another great benefit of writing for the public is being forced to explain a puzzle that everyone cares about except, apparently, the academics who ought to know the most about it. In the case of my main area of expertise, language, I have been asked to write or speak (usually on short notice) about topics such as Politically Correct language, the Boston accent, Bill Clinton's testimony about his sexual relationships, the future of English, and the brouhaha about the word "niggardly." It isn't easy to find discussions of such phenomena in the textbooks or journals, but I enjoy piecing together an explanation from what is out there, and when the explanation succeeds, it underlines the soundness and usefulness of the field in general.

Being accessible to the general public has disadvantages as well. And obvious one is time. Professors are supposed to divide their professional time among teaching, research, and administration. Writing and speaking to the press and public is a fourth major responsibility – once the word gets out that a professor is willing and able to communicate, reporters and radio stations from all over the world will call asking for sound bites, commentary, balance, and other bon mots. Since time is finite, something else has to give: sleep, mostly, but also some of the time devoted to the other responsibilities.

Reporters often ask me if another disadvantage to being a "public intellectual" is a loss of esteem within one's own discipline, the result of professional jealousy and an arrogance of the academic that equates explaining with dumbing down. The example always presented to me is Carl Sagan, star of *Cosmos*, the *Johnny Carson Show*, and *Parade Magazine*, who was never elected to the National Academy of Sciences. (The scientists who blackballed him should realize the harm they have done to the public image of science by painting us all as petty, arrogant snobs.)

My answer is that even in the unlikely event that that popular writing kept me out of the National Academy, it would be worth it, but that in any case my experience has been different. I don't know what people say behind my back, but the reaction from most of my academic colleagues has been "Thanks for writing the book; I gave one to my mother and she finally understands what I do." (On the other hand, I have found that a tiny number of academics, who might resent a writer for other reasons, try to compensate for the wide reach of a popular book they don't like by increasing their level of vituperation in proportion.) I also get asked whether the administration looks down on popularization, as some kind of shirking of professional duties. Far from it, at least at MIT. All levels of the administration have encouraged me to share ideas with the public. I am happy to acknowledge President Chuck Vest in particular, who has unfailingly provided moral support.

If one does decide to write for the public, how does one go about it? Perhaps the best advice I received was from an editor who discussed trade book writing with me well before I began to write my first one. Worried about the obvious pitfall of writing in too academic a manner, I self-deprecatingly suggested that I had to learn how to reach truck drivers and chicken pluckers. She corrected me: truck drivers and chicken pluckers don't buy many books, and it's an arrogant academic stereotype to assume that anyone who doesn't teach in a university must drive a truck or pluck chickens. "You shouldn't be trying to speak to truck drivers, she said; you should be trying to speak to your college

room-mate – someone who is as smart and as intellectual as you are, but who happened to go into some other line of work and does not know the jargon or background material.” It was good advice, extirpating any tendency I might have had to condescend to the reader.

One also has to decide to be positive about one’s field and colleagues, which does not come easy to most academics, especially those in controversial fields. What do we do in our graduate seminars? Pick a paper apart, to show how idiotic the author is, and then do the same thing the next week, and the next, and so on. This won’t do with a general audience – they don’t want to hear about a bunch of wrong theories and bad experiments; they want to learn what we really do know. And that requires the writer to actually *like* something, publicly – a terrifying step for most academics.

Another pitfall is to treat the writing of a trade book as some kind of holiday from serious writing, or worse, as a quick way to earn enough money for a new kitchen. Every year I see dozens of really bad popular science books, which look like undergraduate lectures written in a hurry in cutesy motherese. A decent trade book requires as much concentration, brainwork, and sheer time as one’s best research projects.

A final thought about why I write for the public. One can think about why we academics do what we do in two very different ways. On one view, research results are passed from one academic to another within a closed circle of specialists, with the public occasionally seeing trickle-downs such as a new laser or a cure for a disease. I have come to a different view, from seeing how excited ordinary educated people are by the kinds of issues we study – for many of them, the idea that one can get paid for studying consciousness, or language and thought, is an inconceivable luxury.

Most educated people enjoy science for the same reason they enjoy the opera or going to the Grand Canyon – they appreciate beauty for its own sake. On this view research results are always worth sharing with the public, practical applications or no. They pay for the research with their tax dollars, and they have the interest and the right to share in the sheer intellectual pleasure of coming to know how things work. I think it is refreshing to think of the role of an academic as spreading information not just to colleagues and 18-to-21-year olds but to human beings in general.