

Science writing has a reputation for bloodlessness, but in many ways it is the most human of disciplines. Science, after all, is a quest, and as such it's one of the oldest and most enduring stories we have. It's about searching for answers, struggling with setbacks, persevering through tedium and competing with colleagues all eager to put forth their own ideas about how the world works. Perhaps most of all, it's about women and men possessed by curiosity, people who devote their lives to pursuits the rest of us find mystifying or terrifying — chasing viruses, finding undiscovered planets, dusting off dinosaurs or teasing venomous snakes.

In its crudest form, science writing simply translates the latest results from the academy: Coffee is good for you, bean sprouts are not, and your sex life is much, much worse than you thought. Better science stories put new results in context, synthesizing and analyzing what came before, what might come next, and why you should care.

The most memorable science writing also puts humans back in the equation, introducing the reader to both the people behind the science and the people affected by it, for better and worse. It transcends the genre, becoming not just good science writing but just good writing, and as such it unlocks entire fields of research to the rest of us. It's what Richard Preston did for virology with the fast-paced drama of "The Hot Zone," what Rebecca Skloot did for cell biology in "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" and what John McPhee did for geology in "Annals of the Former World," a collection of books that spans a generation.

It's essentially what Dr. Watson does for Sherlock Holmes: By reacquainting the head with the heart, we science writers tell the story of the frustrations, false starts, triumphs and breakthroughs that lead to the solution — or, in many cases, to even more questions.

Which is not to say we science writers are sidekicks. Like the scientists we cover, we're driven by curiosity, and we too are trained to observe and investigate. It's our job to point out the fallibility of science as well as its fascinations.

Michelle Nijhuis, the co-editor of "The Science Writers' Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Pitch, Publish and Prosper in the Digital Age," writes about science and the environment for National Geographic, Smithsonian and other publications.

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