Q&A Tracy Chevalier

On facts and fiction

Novelist Tracy Chevalier describes her experience of judging the entries in this year's Royal Society Prize for Science Books, and explains why she placed a nineteenth-century female fossil hunter at the centre of her last novel.

How did you find being on the judging panel?

It was daunting at first. I admire science, but feel inadequately prepared for it. As a student at Oberlin College in Ohio, I took science courses designed for non-scientists, but I haven't had any formal exposure since. When I read for leisure, I turn to novels. So imagine how it felt having to read 136 non-fiction books. Still, the older I get, the more I find myself reading non-fiction. At some point in your life you stop listening to pop music so much and start appreciating jazz.

How did you feel about the winning entry?

Nick Lane's *Life Ascending* [W. W. Norton, 2009] was beautifully written. As a novelist, I liked the overarching structure. It starts with the origins of life and ends with death. It follows a narrative that we are hard-wired to understand because it is our own life cycle.

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Along the way, each chapter is a self-contained building block, but it all fits together. There are also themes

that keep reappearing throughout the story, all elegantly woven together.

What did you think of the other books?

On the whole, I was impressed with the quality of the writing but not with the production. Publishers seem to have a difficult time knowing how to sell science. Some of the back covers used language that was too user-friendly, calculated not to scare people off. At the other extreme were books that made no attempt whatsoever to be approachable.

Were any themes more popular than others?

There were loads of books about evolution with Darwin in the title, and lots about climate change. And quantum physics was big: we judges kept asking, why is a topic that is so incredibly difficult such a popular choice? I was overwhelmed by the largeness and smallness of the concepts the books covered, on time frames that are so far removed from the scale of our fourscore and ten years.

In your 2009 novel *Remarkable Creatures*, you fictionalized the life of Victorian fossil

hunter Mary Anning. Why did you choose her?

I first came across Anning while visiting a small dinosaur museum in Dorchester, UK, where she's still seen as a local heroine. I was fascinated by her ability to make her mark in an arena dominated by middle-class men when she was a working-class woman. It was amazing that she could make important fossil discoveries that changed the landscape of natural science in the early nineteenth century without having been formally educated or trained. She received little recompense or credit for her findings.

Why write fiction about factual events?

I understand why historical fiction makes some people uneasy, and why they might prefer biography. In my novels I often point out what's true and what's not in an afterword. I try to be as accurate as I can. For example, I wanted Anning to have been present at the big Linnean Society meeting in London where her fossils were presented to the scientists. But she could not have been: we know she only went to London once, and that was later. So I decided to sneak her friend Elizabeth Philpot into that meeting instead. We have no idea whether or not Philpot was there in real life, so I felt I could make her do what Mary could not.

Does the theme of a woman getting an unfair deal resonate with you?

Anning once wrote that her brain had been "sucked dry" by men of science. Hers was a wonderful story. I like to write about people who are not normal, who are moving at the margins of society, who aren't happy with their lives, perhaps because they have no money or no power. That's why Anning was so compelling.

The shortlist contained no books by women writers. Does that bother you?

It was depressing. We judges didn't discriminate against female authors — only a few of the 136 books were written by women, so they never stood much of a chance. We need to encourage more women to write popular-science books. Given that many popular-science writers are also academics, perhaps women in those careers are spending their time publishing papers rather than writing books.

Do you think book awards are a good idea?

Prizes are crucial in giving books a boost. Hundreds of thousands of books are published each year, and we need something to help us distinguish what is really good — otherwise the choice is overwhelming. Prizes bring publicity and a prime position in bookshops. This is especially important for science books, which aren't always a natural draw to the public. They need that extra help. ■

INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER ROHN