

Getting the Word Out

NPR'S JOE PALCA DISTILLS THE SCIENCES

AFTER HE TRADED IN HIS GIG AS A WRITER for *Science* magazine in 1992 for a microphone at National Public Radio, Joe Palca was struck speechless when an acquaintance asked him what it was like now that he didn't have to write anymore.

"What was this person thinking?" recalled Palca. "I write my scripts, my introductions to stories, I write everything." But then Palca felt flattered because on the radio it doesn't sound like he has written anything.

"I'm not lecturing or hectoring people," he said. "I'm talking to them."

Last year, Palca was the Science Writer in Residence at The Huntington. From April to October, he worked on a new book called *Annoying: The Scientific Tour of the Things That Drive Us Crazy*. In it he touches on the things that bother mice, why we find fingernails on a blackboard so excruciating, and what exactly happens in your brain when you get annoyed.

While fellowships are rare outside the walls of traditional academia, this is Joe Palca's second award. He was a Media Fellow with the Kaiser Family Foundation in 1999, when he explored the design of clinical trials. "That was a great year for recharging and getting the engines going again—creatively and journalistically," said Palca.



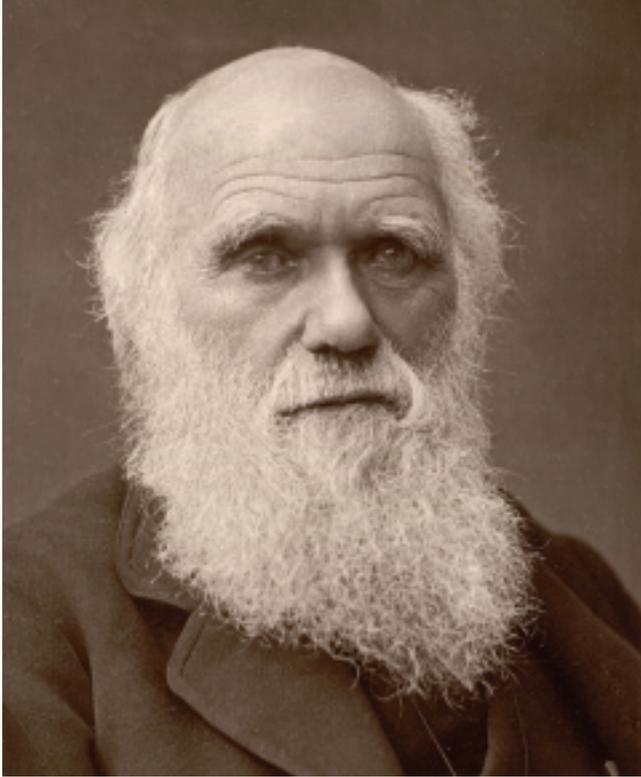
He admits that even in a longer form, his writing takes on a casual tone. "When you read the book it will feel more like I'm talking to you than like a treatise."

Palca knows how to get through to an audience, although he recently reported that the treatise route worked very effectively for Charles Darwin. Shortly after returning to his routine at NPR last fall, he broadcast a story on the 150th anniversary of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, musing on why the famed 19th-century author might have had better luck reaching an audience than today's science writer.

"Science writers," says Lewis, "have an increasingly heavy burden. They have to be able to translate, synthesize, and clarify scientific concepts that the public doesn't necessarily understand."

When the book first appeared, said Palca, "an educated layman was likely to be able to understand and evaluate Darwin's argument." Back then, inquisitive readers could navigate their way through academic treatises on geology, botany, and zoology. Palca marveled at how many of those early readers got their hands on *Origin* thanks to Moody's Circulating Library—a kind of Netflix for books that predated the emergence of a public library system in England. Moody's bought up 500 copies of *Origin* (out of a print run of 1,250) and loaned them to annual subscribers who hungered for information but couldn't afford to buy the book.

Today, while science publications are readily available to a lay readership, they aren't necessarily written in an



The last photo taken of Charles Darwin, 1881, by Herbert Rose Barraud. *The Huntington*.

accessible language. If people hear about the latest breakthrough in medicine or physics, they are not likely to seek out the original journal article, let alone understand it. And for good reason.

Daniel Lewis, the Dibner Senior Curator of the History of Science & Technology at The Huntington, sees what he calls a divide between amateurs and professionals in modern science. “Too often,” he says, “disciplines become buried in their own impenetrable jargon, making many aspects of the sciences really hard for any novice to understand.”

“Science writers,” says Lewis, “have an increasingly heavy burden. They have to be able to translate, synthesize, and clarify scientific concepts that the public doesn’t necessarily understand.” And do it on deadline.

Palca admits that he distributes that heavy burden with the scientists he interviews as well as with the scholars he met at The Huntington. “The difference between what I do and what scholars do,” he says, “is that scholars go deep into the bowels of a library, and they pore through page after page of documents or books, and they find the interesting bits. And I go to the scholars and say, ‘Show me the interesting bits.’”

During Palca’s fellowship, Lewis led him on a romp through materials related to the history of science. And at one point, he was paging through a diary from the overland experience of western settlers. Palca hoped to find what might have annoyed them along the way. ☺

Joe Palca’s book Annoying: The Scientific Tour of the Things That Drive Us Crazy will be published by Wiley in 2011.

TALKING ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Historians of science, too, must bridge the gap between the humanities and hard sciences.

“We have to rely on the broad cultural, social, political, and economic fabric for the history of science,” says Daniel Lewis. “So if you are speaking about engineering, you’re not necessarily going to focus on the host of equations about the stress on a bridge. You’re going to talk about why a bridge was important for a particular community, and what it connected, and what affect it had on the local economy. But the technical details are often important, and historians of science have to be great translators of those details.”

Part of that role is interpreting their research to the public. Each year, The Huntington presents a full slate of public lectures, including several talks sponsored by the Dibner History of Science Program, now completing its second year. An endowment for the program came to The Huntington with the 2006 acquisition of the Burndy Library, one of the largest private collections of books and manuscripts related to the history of science. The program offers short- and long-term fellowships to historians of science and technology and organizes conferences and seminars in addition to the public lectures.

You can listen to recorded Huntington lectures on iTunes U, including talks about Charles Darwin:

Darwin and His Discontents

Daniel Lewis, Dibner Senior Curator of the History of Science & Technology at The Huntington, examines the difficulties Darwin faced in publishing his seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*.

Anti-Evolution in America: From Creation Science to Intelligent Design

Ronald L. Numbers, historian of science and medicine at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, discusses the history of the debate over evolution in America, from William Jennings Bryan’s crusade to eradicate Darwinism from schools to current efforts to promote the teaching of “intelligent design.”



Go to itunes.huntington.org to listen to these programs as well as other talks in the fields of American history, art, book and printing history, California and the West, early modern history, literature and theater, and the history of The Huntington. You can also download audio tours as well as videos about the collections.