ne morning in 1979, while cycling toward the University of Cambridge laboratory where I was in the second year of my chemistry Ph.D. program, I noticed the vendors setting up their stalls in the market square. “Every damn day,” I thought as I rolled quietly past. “They do the same thing every damn day.” A wave of gloom swept through me. How could anyone get up each morning to do the same thing every day? Science was one of my passions, but the setbacks of research were beginning to grind me down, and I was realizing that actually doing science was not for me. By the time I reached the lab that day, I knew that I needed to do something different with my life than chase the “regular” job in academia or industry that I was being encouraged to prepare for.

My other passion was writing, so the way forward seemed clear: I should become a science writer. As I continued my Ph.D. studies, I began to pitch short articles to a popular science magazine. The rejections I initially received stung as much as the frustrations and failures of scientific research, but I persisted. I pondered some tough advice from a couple of helpful editors, and eventually I began to regularly see my words in print. When I graduated, I decided I wanted to become a writer. I was on my way to a career that brought me little more glory than research would have—but far more satisfaction.

Few fledgling freelance science writers can survive by writing alone. I certainly couldn’t. Teaching seemed an obvious source of additional income, and I was soon explaining basic science to youngsters at a small local college. Although the resources at my disposal were a far cry from what I had been used to in my research training, I came to enjoy the interaction with the students, and I soon became a regular member of the part-time teaching team. Teaching for part of the week and writing the rest of the time kept me intellectually stimulated, and I enjoyed the variety. I also found that teaching kept me aware of the difficulties many encounter in understanding science, which helped me when writing for a general audience. But while most of my former university colleagues seemed to be prospering financially, I was just scraping by.

I had the naive impression that if I could write a book, I would make some money, so I was overjoyed when an editor who had read a magazine article I had written about viruses invited me to expand it into a book for the general public. After a year of effort, my book was published and received excellent reviews, which supported my belief that I was on my way to riches. This prospect was further reinforced when I wandered into a large London bookshop and was astonished to discover more than 20 copies of my book. I was told that it was a recommended text at the University of London.

Despite the excitement I felt, reality kicked in when I realized that—even with great reviews, academic recommendations, and eventual translations into many languages—I was never going to earn enough from writing as a freelancer to live by that alone. I have now published nine science books, including two textbooks for major academic publishers in the United States, but I remain a hybrid writer-lecturer. I have not achieved the level of sales success that I had hoped for, but I have found a way to remain involved in science. I also hugely enjoy self-publishing my fiction, even though the readers of this work are relatively few.

It now occurs to me that in some ways, my life in science writing has been very similar to the lives of many science graduates who stay in research. Our driving force is a passion for what we do, but in the same way that my books are falling out of date and out of print, most research papers soon sink into the swamps of the rarely cited and the never applied. Most of us, whatever path we choose through science, must be ready to be content with a life in the shadows rather than in the limelight. But such a life, I have found, can still be fun and fulfilling.

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