

## **EVENT TITLE: How to craft enthralling science stories**

### **Event description**

The best essays and magazine stories about science feature unforgettable characters, sensory-rich scenes, carefully plotted arcs and other narrative elements crafted to bring the writing to life. This panel gathers four writers and editors to discuss the artful deployment of storytelling techniques to create enthralling writing about science and the natural world, with examples drawn from the participants' writing or editing on the Pacific and Inland Northwest and beyond.

### **EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction craft & criticism**

#### **Event organizer and moderator**

**Emily Benson:** Emily Benson is an associate editor for the magazine *High Country News*, which covers the landscapes, communities and people of the Western U.S. She edits and writes features, essays and more from her home in North Idaho, and is a graduate of the U.C. Santa Cruz Science Communication Program.

#### **Event participants**

**Jane C. Hu:** Jane C. Hu is an award-winning journalist living in Seattle. Her work has appeared in publications like *Slate*, *High Country News*, *National Geographic*, and *The Atlantic*, and in the 2022 *Best American Science and Nature Writing*.

**Ferris Jabr:** Ferris Jabr is a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*. Some of his work is anthologized in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing*. He has received fellowships from UC Berkeley, MIT, and The Whiting Foundation. He is currently writing a book for Random House about Earth history.

**Roberta Kwok:** Roberta Kwok is an award-winning freelance science journalist who has written for publications such as *NewYorker.com*,

NYTimes.com, *The Southern Review*, *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *Audubon*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. From 2020-21, she was a Project Fellow at MIT's Knight Science Journalism Program.

## **Opening remarks and housekeeping announcements (~5 min):**

Welcome to “How to craft enthralling science stories.” A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and I'll deliver a printed copy to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Thank you all for being here! My name is Emily Benson, I'm a senior editor for the magazine *High Country News*, which covers the Western United States, particularly the intersection of people and place. This panel arose in part from an ongoing conversation I had with my boss, our editor-in-chief, last year. I was editing a story about scientists using oyster shells as a natural archive of ecological conditions a thousand years ago; they were trying to figure out if a mysterious parasitic worm that can be devastating for shellfish companies and seems to be proliferating in Washington state was a recent arrival to the region, or if had always been here but is only now becoming more common.

I love a good scientific mystery, so to me the story was fascinating on its face — I wanted to know more about these mystery worms! But my boss wasn't convinced. She thought the story was a little too dry, the writer's descriptions of the scientists' struggles a little too convoluted — why should she care about them and their worms and oyster shells?

This prompted long discussions of how to bring wonder into stories about science, and how to use the tools of storytelling to animate science stories in a way that makes them appeal to readers who aren't necessarily interested in science for science's sake. I went back to the writer and together we decided which details in her piece were the most telling, which lines of exposition could be rewritten as mini-scenes, which metaphors were more confusing than compelling and could be cut.

The final story ended up being a popular addition to a special issue we ran on the idea of archives, both human-made and natural. And some time later, my boss suggested I propose this panel to gather together a few experts on the kinds of craft elements and storytelling techniques that we had employed to make that story a success.

So I'm delighted to be joined here today by these thoughtful and accomplished panelists, Jane C. Hu, Ferris Jabr, Roberta Kwok and Michelle Nijhuis! Please go ahead and introduce yourselves, and tell us briefly how you think about using narrative or storytelling elements to bring science stories to life and keep readers turning pages.

### **Participant initial remarks (~5 min each; ~20 min total):**

#### **Jane C. Hu:**

- My background: cognitive science researcher turned journalist. Made the switch because I was frustrated that academia doesn't let you tell the most compelling, human bits behind the research, which were my favorite parts of doing that work
- My litmus test for creating a compelling narrative actually has ties to my research background – a concept called theory of mind. Basically:

what does the other person (in this case, the reader) know?  
(Sometimes they might not know anything; sometimes you might be working against a popular misconception.) Compare that to: what do you want them to know? Finally: how do you bridge that gap?

- Tell-tale sign you've got a detail worth including: What do you breathlessly tell your friends at happy hour?
- The science story is almost never just about the science – it's about how the science is done, the history of the place/method/people involved, the promise for the future, the ethics. Figure out what that thing is. (Always a good place to start: why were you drawn to this story?)
- Fav stories: recreating scenes in a piece about [women on a North Pole expedition](#), bringing life to relatively uncharismatic species in a piece about [periodical cicadas](#), interviewing survivors about the [long-lasting mental health effects of wildfire](#)

### **Ferris Jabr:**

Hi, I'm Ferris Jabr. I'm a freelance writer based in Portland, Oregon. For the past few years I've been writing a book for Random House about Earth system science, the coevolution of Earth and life, and how recent scientific discoveries are reanimating the ancient idea that the planet as a whole is alive in some meaningful sense. I'm also a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, where I primarily write features about nature and science. I've written about an ornithologist with a controversial theory about the origins and purpose of beauty in the natural world and a Canadian forest ecologist who has spent decades studying how trees communicate and share resources through underground networks of roots and fungi.

In my work, I'm often looking for charismatic characters with compelling narratives through which to explore larger ideas and themes. I find this works especially well when a scientist's personal story and research resonate in just the right way. I'm particularly interested in scientists' origin stories—what got them passionate about their field in the first place—as well as turning points or times of hardship in their careers, as these are

often essential components of a narrative arc. All good stories need tension. I'm also very interested in creative and narrative nonfiction that center on nonhuman characters: a bird can be a character; a tree can be a character; so can an object, an idea, or a planet.

**Roberta Kwok:**

I'm currently working on a book about the "messy middle" of the scientific process, tentatively titled *MINUTIAE: The Tiny Details That Scientists Pursue to Illuminate Big Questions*. Each chapter follows a research project in progress from a different field of science, ranging from astronomy to zoology. Instead of focusing on results, I'm interested in the uncertainty, doubts, drudgery, and mistakes that researchers struggle with during the months and years leading up to discovery—the opposite of the Eureka moment. Some of the strategies I've been thinking about and experimenting with as I report and write the book:

- How to gather character and narrative details over phone/Zoom
- How to reconstruct vivid fieldwork stories after the fact
- When and how to insert myself in the story to keep the reader engaged
- How history can enrich and enlarge the narrative

**Michelle Nijhuis:**

I'm the author of *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*, a critical history of the modern conservation movement. For the past five years I've been a project editor for *The Atlantic*, and I'm a longtime contributing editor *High Country News*. I've also reported on and written about climate change and conservation for blah blah (whatever seems pertinent).

- The parallels between the essay form and the scientific process, or why essays and other nonfiction narratives are particularly appropriate forms for stories about scientific research - both are

explorations guided by questions, both reach only provisional conclusions, both build on and are in conversation with other works.

- The rewards of writing about science history - sometimes the science we think we know is the most surprising of all

### **Moderator questions (~35 min):**

- 1) Why are you drawn to science stories? What about them makes for compelling writing?
- 2) One of the things that draws me to science as a topic is the way scientists, like journalists and other writers, are often driven by extreme curiosity about the world around them. But that can be a double-edged sword, and lead a writer down a lot of rabbit holes that don't necessarily fit into a final piece of writing. How do you navigate those forces in your work?
- 3) How do you think about reporting for sensory-rich scenes, either as a writer yourself or when helping to guide a writer as an editor?
- 4) Tell us a little bit about a favorite science story you've written or edited, and what makes it a favorite for you.
- 5) How do you use storytelling elements to bring a science story to life when there's not necessarily a main character or traditional narrative throughline to follow?
- 6) I think all of us most frequently write or edit magazine-style stories, or nonfiction books. Do you think about other genres of writing — fiction, essays, creative nonfiction, poetry — and pull techniques from there into your nonfiction or journalistic work? What does that look like?
- 7) TK
- 8) TK

### **Questions from the audience (~15 min)**

#### **Additional moderator questions in case we run out of audience questions:**

- 1) TK

2) TK