



Curious Minds: How a Child Becomes a Scientist

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What makes a child decide to become a scientist?

- For Robert Sapolsky—Stanford professor of biology—it was an argument with a rabbi over a passage in the Bible.
- Physicist Lee Smolin traces his inspiration to a volume of Einstein’s work, picked up as a diversion from heartbreak.
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist and the author of *Flow*, found his calling through Descartes.

Murray Gell-Mann, Nicholas Humphrey, Freeman Dyson . . . 27 scientists in all write about what it was that sent them on the path to their life's work. Illuminating memoir meets superb science writing in stories that invite us to consider what it is—and what it isn't—that sets the scientific mind apart.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this anthology of reminiscences by prominent scientists, the roll includes Richard Dawkins, Murray Gell-Mann, Joseph Ledoux and Ray Kurzweil, along with 23 others. The mandate of the book's editor, literary agent Brockman (*The Third Culture*), to each of these authors was to write an essay explaining how he or she came to be a scientist. Some take him at his word and write meandering stories of childhood. David Buss found his calling—the study of human mating behavior—while working at a truck stop after dropping out of school. Paul Davies says he was born to be a theoretical physicist. Daniel Dennett, on the other hand, seems to have tried every other profession before landing, as if by accident, in science. A few writers let their essays get hijacked by the science they have devoted their lives to. And in the midst of this, like a keystone in an arch, is an essay by Steven Pinker explaining why the entire exercise is a bunch of hooey: scientifically speaking, he says, people have no objective idea what influenced their behavior, and that writing a memoir is creative storytelling, not objective observation of what actually happened. Whether or not these essays are scientifically sound is open to debate, but they do offer occasionally inspiring glimpses into the minds of today's scientific intelligentsia.

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From Scientific American

When the late evolutionist and polymath Stephen Jay Gould was a toddler, he became fascinated and terrified by the towering Tyrannosaurus rex skeleton at the American Museum of Natural History. Gould later claimed to have been instantly "imprinted" on the monstrous saurian, like a duckling on its mama. The little boy decided on the spot to become a paleontologist—years before he even learned the word. In John Brockman's *Curious Minds: How a Child Becomes a Scientist*, a collection of 27 autobiographical essays by leading savants, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker scoffs at this oft-told story. Pinker relates that Gould dedicated his first book: "For my father, who took me to see the Tyrannosaurus when I was five," and admires Gould's "genius ... for coming up with that charming line." But he doesn't buy it. Pinker goes on to tell his own childhood story, with the caveat that long-term memory is notoriously malleable and that we often concoct retrospective scenarios to fit satisfying scripts of our lives. So don't believe anything in this book, he warns, including his own self-constructed mythology; many children are exposed to books and museums, but few become scientists. Pinker concludes that perhaps the essence of who we are from birth shapes our childhood experiences rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, when Brockman asked Pinker and others to trace the roots of their adult obsessions for this book, he received some unexpected and entertaining responses. Primatologist Robert Sapolsky, for example, haunted the Bronx Zoo and the natural history museum, as Gould did, but fell in love with living primates rather than fossil bones. He didn't want to just study mountain gorillas, he recalls of his childhood crush on monkeys and apes, "I wanted to be one." For the past few decades, Sapolsky has spent half of each year in his physiology lab and the other half among wild baboon troops in East Africa. Some people, such as theoretical psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, are simply born into science. His grandfather, Nobel laureate A. V. Hill, often took him along to the physiology lab. Grandfather Hill—quoting his friend Ivan Pavlov—taught young Nicholas that "facts are the air of a scientist. Without them you can never fly." Among frequent visitors to the family home were his great-uncles Maynard and Geoffrey Keynes, members of British science's aristocracy, as well as his great-aunt Margaret, a granddaughter of Charles Darwin. He recalls how their long-term houseguest, an adolescent, "bossy" Stephen Hawking, once marched up and down the hallways clutching a military swagger stick, barking at a "platoon of hapless classmates." Science was Humphrey's birthright. Richard (The Selfish Gene) Dawkins, one of England's preeminent Darwinians, admits that he never cared for science or the natural world during

his early years. He was inspired, however, by the fanciful children's books about Dr. Dolittle by Hugh Lofting. The good doctor was a Victorian gentleman who held intelligent conversations with mice and parrots and whales. An adventurous sort, he traveled the world to learn the secrets of faraway places. When the adult Dawkins encountered the life and works of Charles Darwin, he welcomed him as an old friend and hero of his youth. Dolittle and Darwin, he opines, "would have been soul brothers." Lynn Margulis's early interest in the wonders of the microscopic world began when she was a "boy crazy" adolescent, who was amazed to learn that some minuscule creatures never need sex in order to reproduce. Enter a teenage heartthrob: the budding astrophysicist Carl Sagan. ("Tall, handsome in a sort of galooty way, with a shock of brown-black hair, he captivated me.") She was 16 when they met; eventually they married. Sagan's fascination with "billions and billions" of cosmic bodies resonated with her own fixation on the billions of microcosms to be observed through the microscope. Margulis's study subjects have included a tiny animal in a termite's gut that is made up of five distinct genomes cobbled together. She has argued that we and other animals are composite critters, whose every cell harbors long-ago invaders--minute symbiotic organisms that became part of our makeup. Her innovative approach to evolution has profoundly influenced biology. Harvard psychologist and neurologist Howard Gardner says his youth was notable for its lack of any clues indicating a future in science: "I did not go around gathering flowers, studying bugs, or dissecting mice ... I neither assembled radios nor tore apart cars." Yet, for others, there was a decisive turning point. And some could clearly remember it. I was fortunate in having been a childhood friend of Steve Gould's and can vouch for the sincerity of his conviction that his extraordinary career as a paleontologist, historian of science and evolutionary theorist began when that T. rex followed him into his nightmares. Once, during our junior high school days, I stood with him beneath that iconic carnosaur in the museum, observing his reverence and awe on revisiting the shrine of his inspiration. Professor Pinker, of course, is free to believe that I'm making this up for my own psychological reasons.

Richard Milner is an associate in anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History. His new book, Darwin's Universe, will be published by the University of California Press in 2005.

From [Booklist](#)

Twenty-seven scientists credit a satisfying suite of epiphanies, mentors, teachers, and books as reasons and inspiration for their career choices. Most remember their parents as being vital influences who enriched their childhoods with zoo and field trips and the like. And most contend that native intelligence is insufficient: mastering a subject is key. As crucial as hard work to becoming a scientist, however, is retaining one's impressionability. As one of Brockman's contributors remarks, "My childhood continues." With bylines from world-famous scientists such as Freeman Dyson and Murray Gell-Mann, these autobiographical stories will fully gratify the general science audience. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Dwight Richardson:

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