

Q&A with Ed Yong

Interviewed by Susan Straight

This is Susan Straight, editor of *Dimensions* magazine and I'm here at the ASTC conference with Ed Yong, our keynote speaker from this morning. Ed Yong is an award-winning science writer for *The Atlantic* magazine. His work has appeared in *National Geographic*, the *New Yorker*, *Wired*, *Nature*, *New Scientist*, and *Scientific American*. He is originally from the United Kingdom but currently lives in Washington, D.C. His 2016 book, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. He spoke at the ASTC 2018 conference about gender inequities in science and his own work to recognize and support women in science.

You speak to audiences in which there are occasionally people who are a bit hostile to some of your ideas. How do you use humor in those situations?

Science can be quite a difficult and obtuse topic to talk about. Anything that gets people to connect with emotions that are universal—regardless of the topic you're talking about—is great, which is why I use humor and storytelling. The best way to make people care about things they might not care about is by getting them to connect on that very deep, visceral, emotional level, by feeling things with you, by laughing with you, by sympathizing with stories of successes or failures or triumphs or quests. And I think that is at the heart of this idea of telling stories about science, whether it's creating exhibits or writing news pieces. We can trigger that sense of shared empathy through those means.

You must encounter some difficult situations with people who don't quite understand your message. Describe a situation in which you had to respond to someone asking a very difficult question.

I just gave a talk about diversity at this conference and why it's important to focus on gender diversity and creating more space and voice for women in sciences. One fellow asked in the Q and A, "Isn't it going to be a problem if we push this so far that we'll create a reverse inequality where boys will be disadvantaged instead of girls?"

I feel like, if you're onstage, you have to treat questions with respect. But my view is, why spend so much time worrying about some sort of hypothetical inequality that we're such a long way from, rather than actually dealing with what is in front of you. Those questions can be well meaning, but they can also massively derail, focusing energy and attention away from the issues that actually matter and that people are having to deal with nowadays. The thing to do is to refocus people's minds on what is currently at stake. What people are dealing with right now, in the moment, not some sort of far-off counterfactual.

Was there ever a turning point for you, when you might have left science but stuck with it because of a particular influence?

I was always a nature geek right from the start. I went to zoos a lot and watched natural history documentaries. I think that very naturally led to doing science in school and then in university and working as a PhD student. I think it was only after spending about a year in a lab that I realized I was catastrophically bad at doing that and much better and much safer at writing about science and talking about it. That inflection point was quite difficult because I think so many of us wrap our love of science around this identity as a scientist, whereas in fact, being on a tenure tracked research position is very much the minority career path in the sciences and there are so many ways to exercise one's love of science, whether it's working in a science center or as a science journalist. Ultimately it's about being curious about the world around us and wanting to understand how that world works. There are all sorts of ways of exercising that love that don't have to do with pipetting liquids in a laboratory.

What is your favorite science center or which is the one you go to most often?

That's a great question. The one that has really stuck with me is the California Academy of Sciences. I had a wonderful trip there. I really love what they do. I love some of the special exhibits like the giant globular rainforest encased in glass with a spiral staircase you can walk up. Love that. And I am a huge fan of zoos in general. My fiancé and I try to go to zoos whenever we can, in whatever cities we visit. I recently went to the Philly zoo which I think is the oldest in the country and I think does a great job of caring for the animals, thinking really carefully about the design. It's got these new walkways where animals can walk between exhibits and visitors can interact with them and they can interact with the zoo in a very different way than a lot of other zoos. So I'm a huge fan.

What's your favorite animal?

This is hard because there are so many and I love a great number of them. My answer varies from day to day. Some days I would say octopuses. I love mantis shrimps. But after the Philly zoo, I'm going to say gibbons. Gibbons are kind of the ape everyone forgets. Everyone is super into gorillas and orangutans and chimps. And gibbons are even known as lesser apes. But they are extraordinarily beautiful. Gibbons move by a thing called brachiation: they have a ball and socket joint in their wrist rather than the hinge-like joints we have, which allows them to pivot their entire body weight around their wrist which makes it very easy for them to swing through trees. And if you watch footage of them doing this, or even go to see them swinging about the ropes and the equipment in their enclosures, they are astonishingly graceful in a way that I could just watch for hours. So just for right now, I'll say I'm the world's biggest gibbon fan.