

Dan Fagin Reflects on His Pulitzer Prize Winning Book

BY LYNNE FRIEDMANN

Life can be hectic for an award-winner writer. Ask Dan Fagin, whose book *Toms River: A Story of Science and Salvation* (Bantam Books) was honored in a doubleheader on May 28. First, came presentation of the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, at a luncheon at Columbia University. This was followed that evening by receipt of the New York Public Library's 2014 Helen Bernstein Book Award for Excellence in Journalism.

Returning home late that night Fagin realized that amid the hubbub of the ceremony, the crush of congratulatory hugs, and dashing to the next award venue he had left the Tiffany box containing his engraved Pulitzer Prize crystal paperweight on the floor under the luncheon banquet table.

An email to Columbia the next morning was answered with the reassuring news that the box and its contents had been found.

"People ask if I freaked out," said Fagin. "Honestly, no."

That demeanor says a lot about Fagin and how he is keeping the success of *Toms River* in perspective.

"I'm obviously very thrilled this happened but I don't harbor any illusions that it means my book was particularly extraordinary," he said. "I'm not being falsely modest. I think I wrote a good book and after that luck took over."

The Pulitzer committee cited *Toms River*

as deftly combining investigative reporting and historical research to probe a New Jersey seashore town's cluster of childhood cancers linked to water and air pollution.

"The Pulitzer is one of the few things that happen in our business that people outside of our business understand and recognize," he said. "Now, I'm trying to figure out how best to use this recognition in my own work, my students' work, and for science and environmental writing."

Fagin is the director of the Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program (SHERP) at New York University. Before joining the NYU faculty in 2005, he was the environmental writer at *Newsday* for 15 years. It was while at *Newsday* that Fagin first heard about the plight of Toms River.

"I went down there, wrote a story or two and thought this is an amazing story—good science, compelling characters, and a rich history that resonates," he said. "But, there were things I felt I couldn't do in the form of a newspaper story. When I came to NYU, I began looking for a book topic and I immediately thought of Toms River."

I wanted very much for the world to know it was a book about science.

The inclusion of "science" and "salvation" in the book's subtitle represents a compromise between author and publisher.

"I wanted very much for the world to know it was a book about science. And, the publisher pushed for the word 'salvation' because it signals, accurately, that it is a very human story and these people left their town a cleaner, safer place than it was before."

Fagin began his reporting for the book in 2006 and resolved to "go big" by weaving historical vignettes and contemporary research into the saga.

"I knew it would take a long time and it took much longer," he said.

Fagin conducted 200 interviews plus did extensive historical research, made *PULITZER PRIZE* continued on page 29

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Columbia University
Department of Public Safety
Lost and Found Investigation Slip

Date: 5/28/14 Log #: 98574
Description of Property: PULITZER PRIZE
Investigating Supervisor: _____
Owner's Name: _____
Contact Info: _____
Steps taken to identify/locate owner: _____
Notifications made and to whom: _____
Date: _____
Remarks: Found in Low
ROTUNDA
Supervisor's Initials: CH

PULITZER PRIZE

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numerous FOIA requests, pored through hundreds of studies, and waited for current events to play themselves out—all while working fulltime at NYU. Then came the writing.

"I do think that one way to get vital, evidence-based information into a story is to put it in narrative form. It's not the only way and sometimes narrative is overused," Fagin said. "But narrative can be a powerful way to bring science to large audiences."

"Obviously, that's not brilliant insight," he continued. "People have been doing this for a long time. I'm hoping that recognition of this book will spur lots of people within NASW to keep trying."

Fagin is eager to start another book project.

"I don't write books explicitly because I want to sell a lot of books but I pick topics I want people to hear about," he said. "But I do think I will switch out of Microsoft Word and use one of the new book-writing software package." ■

Correction

In the spring issue, Emily Willingham was incorrectly identified as the organizer of "The XX Question" session that took place during the NASW workshops, at ScienceWriters2013. Deborah Blum was the organizer of that session; Willingham was a panelist. ■

NEWS FROM AFAR

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and medical experts who discussed the benefits of vaccination and made clear the dangers of leaving children unprotected.

The 84-member Argentine Network of Science Journalists was formally launched in 2010; although it has been an informal working group since 2007. It is a member of the World Federation of Science Journalists.

This is not the first time that the Argentine Network of Science Journalists has taken a public stand. In 2011, it issued a press release denouncing the closure of the science and health section of the newspaper *La Nación* (bit.ly/1k318L3). ■

VALERIA ROMÁN IS A SCIENCE AND MEDICAL JOURNALIST, IN BUENOS AIRES. SHE WRITES FOR *CLARÍN* NEWSPAPER (ARGENTINA). SHE CO-FOUNDED THE ARGENTINE NETWORK OF SCIENCE JOURNALISM, WAS BOARD VICE PRESIDENT OF THE WORLD FEDERATION OF SCIENCE JOURNALISTS, AND A KNIGHT SCIENCE JOURNALISM FELLOW AT MIT (2004-05).

REGIONAL GROUPS

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landscape. Pam Schuler, National Parks Service Ice

Age Trail manager, detailed plans for possible trail expansion. Located completely in Wisconsin, the thousand-mile footpath is one of only 11 National Scenic Trails. It traces a dramatic example of how glaciation has sculpted the planet.

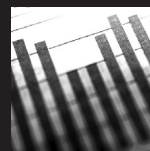
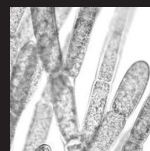
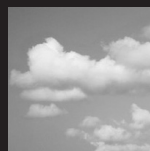
The last ice age endured from about 2.5 million until a mere 10,000 years ago. From the top of the steep Johnstown Moraine glacial deposit, the science writers/hikers looked out to the west at the rugged neighboring area which has remained untouched by glaciers for an estimated 500,000 years. To the east, they viewed a landscape transformed by a mile-thick sheet of ice, which Mickelson explained once extended all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. They learned that the rocks and boulders scattered across the glaciated terrain, some more than five feet across, are erratics carried on the back of the glacier from as far away as Ontario, north of Lake Superior. They saw how the receding glacier left piles of distinctly different soils behind in a patchwork that now finds cactus thriving near marshes and is also responsible for the many lakes which dot much of the state. Gazing down into a deep gorge formed by violent pressure generated by icy melt-water from the receding glacier, they heard about ongoing efforts to restore native prairie and oak savanna ecosystems through controlled burning, work that is largely orchestrated by volunteers.

Afterwards they regrouped at the Crossroads Coffeehouse, next door to the Ice Age Trail Alliance headquarters, in Cross Plains; asked follow up questions of the presenters; and rehydrated. On the menu was a local beer called Glacial Trail, brewed in honor of this unique (yes, unique) Wisconsin landform. ■



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