Listening for the echo

It's not yelling at the over-hanging snow that brings the avalanche on your head: it's being stupid enough to wait around for the echo.
~Des Sleighthome

For its author, publication of a book is both an end and a beginning. The publication day marks the end of a long process of planning, of liaising with a publisher, of researching, of writing, of re-writing, or making diagrams, of correcting and editing and - in academic life at least - of trying to fit the whole project around everything else that is going on, and will not stop going on just because there is a chapter to finish. For most of us, when we are engaged in writing, the agreed deadline has two characters at the same time; on the one hand, it is a tyrannical taskmaster exerting constant pressure to produce, and on the other it is day to be looked forward to, when a work we wanted to create will finally be called 'finished'. A few days before the official release, there is the excitement of a box arriving, full of the authors' complimentary copies. Seeing the physical book for the first time, the author can have the pleasure of putting one on his own shelves, and of sending signed copies to friends. And, though few of us admit it, over the next few weeks most authors find themselves running errands that just happen to take them past their local bookshop window, where their new work will be on display.

Seeing the book in the window is rather magical, but any pride that is begun by publication day tends to be short-lived for, once the work is out before the eyes of the world, it is also out before the judgement of the world. What will the critics make of it? Will it be getting five-star reviews or rotten tomatoes or, probably worst of all, will it be ignored and end up staked ignominiously in an end-of-line publisher's outlet shop before the still-unsold copies are pulped? The anxiety behind these questions is something for which publication day is a beginning, and for which there is not really any end. Glowing reviews can do a lot to calm the nerves, but for a factual work there is always the possibility of someone, somewhere, finding something terribly wrong and the author's initial pride becoming a very long fall.

I have recently discovered that, when one has written a book directly for the general reader rather than for fellow researchers, publication day can be the beginning of something else, too: a highly unpredictable, sometimes interesting, sometimes baffling two-way interaction with readers and even with non-readers. Two-way interactions are triggered by technical books too, of course, but these follow the normal mores of academic communication and tend to stay in the author's comfort-zone. For books aimed at general readers, some of the first interactions happen in person: large and influential publishers often succeed in getting their authors invited to give talks at literary festivals, and these are normally followed by book-signings at which there is time to chat briefly with each person wanting to have a book signed. This was the case with Oxford University Press, the publisher of my book *Life Unfolding: how the human body builds itself* (see links).

Not being used to the process, I found it very strange to be sitting at a desk, pen in hand, at the head of a line of patient people each clutching a copy of the book. The first odd thing was to be sitting: I cannot think of any other situation in which an able-bodied adult would open a conversation with a standing stranger while sitting down. I was strongly advised to remain sitting in the interest of time and also to avoid the risk of knocking things off the table (I suspect my habitual clumsiness had been spotted by that stage of the proceedings), and I managed that for more of the male visitors but I still found it impossible not to at least half-rise when greeting a woman. Blame it on my age and up-bringing. Then there was the worry that I would make an error when writing a message in the book, and ruin it: the problem was that people would talk to me when I was writing, and I find it really difficult to listen to one set of words and to write another. And then there were the conversations. Most were enjoyable and easy: someone saying briefly why they were interested, and that they were looking forward to reading the book, and then after a few pleasantries about how much we were both enjoying the festival, moving on. A small number of people opened the conversation by distancing themselves from any interest at all. The prize for this type of encounter must go to a middle-aged Scot in Glasgow's *Aye Write* festival, who opened by saying 'I cannae understand why anyone'd read a boring book on science, but ma nephew said he wanted it for his birthday, so please write something to Callum'. I wrote 'To Callum, with best wishes' and signed before my hand had time to add '… and sorry about your Uncle'! In the *Oxford Literary Festival*, a very well-spoken lady told me that she was buying the book for her teenage son who loves science '...because he is not really bright enough to appreciate the creativity of novels'. At least she was near enough to the end of the queue that I had a chance to say something, politely, about the

creativity needed to imagine how the world works and then to test one's ideas. To be fair, she was completely willing to listen to a concept new to her, and went away frowning deeply in thought.

Others came to gush about having a baby, and to try to tell me details of their medical history, or ask advice on the best way to attach nappies firmly or how to bath Junior. This elicited a frantic response from me to convince them that I am neither a medical doctor nor a parent, to warn them that they would not find anything about the practicalities of child-rearing in the book and, in the case of the technical questions, to fight back the urge to make suggestions like 'staples' or 'a pressure washer'. Some people, often families, came to ask about how one becomes a scientist: after the first festival at which this happened, I added a new section on 'becoming a scientist' to the pubic engagement section of my lab's home page and took along slips of paper with the URL, and an invitation to e-mail me for more information. One elderly gentleman turned up without a copy of my book but with a large black one. He opened it and began reading to me from Genesis in a loud voice as the remainder of the queue backed away a few paces. When I asked him why, he replied by denouncing evolution (a topic which I don't think I even mentioned in the book) as the devil's work, and wandered off.

After literary festivals come e-mails and letters. I must stress all authors generally find it a thrill and delight to hear from readers . Some readers may ask for more information about particular things in the book, or ask about something not in the book and related to it, or may propose future work. I have had some really interesting conversations by this route, and even a few collaborations with scientists outside my immediate field. But, once again, one needs to expect the unexpected. Someone from America sent a copy of the hardback version of *Life Unfolding* back to me, hoping I would appreciate the corrections for the next edition. Opening it with trepidation, I found that this reader had painstakingly gone through every page and had used a red pen to 'correct' every instance of UK spelling to American, and to add a capital letter after every colon! Another reader sent a copy of the book back to me, with a covering letter, asking me to sign it. The book itself had been richly annotated but in a way that suggested close, critical reading. Unfortunately, when I sent it back using the address label he sent, FedEx reported that the address he had specified did not exist and returned the parcel to me: I have it still, waiting for him to get in touch again so I can get his real address. I received two bibles, one with an admonition to repent, written in green ink. I have no idea why: the bible does not have a whole lot to say about cell-cell adhesion molecules, growth factors

and Hox codes so it is not obvious how writing about them would offend religious sensibilities.

It is easy to smile at this sort of thing. Much more painful are letters from parents of sick children, or bereaved parents, including parents of miscarried or still-born children. Some have clearly been reading many, many books on foetal development, including textbooks intended only for advanced students, revisiting the question 'why'? Letters like this are a sharp reminder of the pain and suffering that lie behind the topics of lab research. I always answer any technical questions as well as I can, and include contact details for a support group in the writers' country: alas I do not have the knowledge or training to help more.

The flow of letters and packages has dried to a trickle now, a year after publication. Receiving them has been an interesting and unexpected experience. One thing that it has done is prompted me to write to authors of books I have particularly enjoyed, just to tell them that. It is surprising how much receiving even a brief e-mail to that effect can brighten your day!

Jamie Davies,
Edinburgh,
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Links:

- Life Unfolding: https://global.oup.com/academic/product/life-unfolding-9780199673537?cc=gb&lang=en&
- Miscarriage support group (USA): http://americanpregnancy.org/pregnancy-loss/supporting-others/
- Miscarriage Association (UK): https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/your-feelings/