Book Review

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The Forgotten Tribe: Scientists as Writers

—Reviewed by Raymond Floyd

Index Terms—Immediate discipline, social media, technical writing.

The Forgotten Tribe is a collection of narratives on the subject of scientific writing skill needs compiled by the author through more than 100 interviews with senior scientists, emerging (early career) scientists, and recent Ph.D. graduates, all of whom would be appropriate audiences of the book. It is an interesting amalgam of opinions from the scientific community about technical writing, its importance, the breadth of writing opportunities, and the authors’ enjoyment—or lack thereof. While oriented toward science, it could easily be expanded to the entire spectrum of STEM fields. Through her informal approach, the author achieves her purpose of exposing diverse opinions on the need for and acceptance of technical writing within the scientific community.

While the book might not fit nicely into a technical writing course, it can provide valuable insight into technical writing needs beyond university undergraduate and graduate students. The author, through the use of interviews and narrative summaries, has provided a view of technical writing as accomplished by three levels of scientists, where personal opinions of the scientists are supported by the level of success achieved by the individual respondent.

The book is organized into a series of reflections and revelations from interviewees about science writing. Chapter 1 offers an oral history approach to understand the needs of undergraduate and graduate science writers—including early attitudes and beliefs about learning and practicing science writing—as well as disciplinary differences in writing processes. Chapter 2 describes how interviewees think about audience as they write and see writing as a process of reaching out to peers and others. Chapter 3 exposes interviewees’ dislike of writing and their reluctance to engage in it. In Chapter 4, interviewees describe how they collaborate with others to complete writing projects and how their writing contributes to their respective scientific communities. Interviewees describe how their writing practices, purposes, and motivations have changed over time in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, interviewees reveal how science writing has helped them to find a form of creativity in language and storytelling that they admire in the literature. Finally, Chapter 7 proposes a model of science writing development based on interviewees’ experiences triangulated among early influences, writing instruction, attitudes, and beliefs.

This book could be used for a course in technical writing in a number of ways, especially at the undergraduate level, either as a reference text or as the primary text for the course. To begin with, the material in the book is based upon the contributors’ years of experience. In some cases, that could mean many years of technical writing not only within a particular field of interest, but in other genres or subject matters, based upon the individual’s experiences. A professor teaching the technical writing class may have limited experience in the world of publishing papers, books, or other technical matter. An assignment for a class could be to pick one of the respondents in the book, and develop a detailed description of his or her beliefs and approaches to technical writing. Such an assignment could then lead into a class discussion on the importance of technical writing in one’s career as supported by the text.
Another assignment could be to have the class select a senior scientist and contrast his or her opinion with the opinion of a recent Ph.D. graduate’s belief about the importance of technical writing skills. Again, class discussion could follow to reinforce the subject matter.

Finally, an assignment could have the students select a STEM field outside those represented in the text and develop a paper showing the relative importance—or lack thereof—of technical writing skills within that field. As in prior examples, class discussion would be a part of the assignment.

The one shortcoming I found was the author’s statement that the book was “. . . not a typical scholarly book” and “. . . used a personal writing style . . .” (p. 6). While that holds true for the majority of the book, Chapter 1 reads like typical academic prose wherein the number of references often far outweighs the author’s commentary—sometimes as many as three references for just a few words. In other chapters, the book is not what might be considered a standard academic text. Other than two block diagrams and a handful of bar charts used to illustrate demographic data, there are no equations, no definitions, no rules, no sample problems, nor suggested homework.

However, the book would be useful for professors of technical writing who are looking to supplement course readings and classroom activities with interviews of technical communicators at different stages of their careers.