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On Books

with Laurie Hertzel

Laurie Hertzel has been a journalist her whole life, working at the Duluth News-Tribune, Minnesota Monthly, and, for the past 15 years, the Star Tribune. She is the author of three books of nonfiction, including the recent memoir, "News to Me: Adventures of an Accidental Journalist," winner of a 2011 Minnesota Book Award.

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Ten questions for an author: Lisa Randall

Posted by: Laurie Hertzel under [Author events](#), [Book news](#), [Libraries](#), [Readings](#) | Updated: September 26, 2011 - 9:25 AM

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Lisa Randall. Photograph by Christopher Kim.

Lisa Randall's 2005 book, "Warped Passages: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe's Hidden Dimensions," was named one of the top 100 books of the year by the New York Times.

Her new book, "Knocking on Heaven's Door: How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe and the Modern World," explores what scientists study, and how they make those choices. She will be speaking this Thursday at the Minneapolis Central Library as part of the [Talk of the Stacks series](#). Doors open at 6:15 and Randall will speak at 7 p.m., followed by a book signing.

We caught up with Randall last week and lobbed a few questions at her. Her answers are, as you might expect, thoughtful and wise and surprising. (Like [Calvin Trillin](#), she doesn't re-read books. And how many of the rest of us can claim to have a pot made of quasicrystal material on our writing desks?)

1. Describe your writing room.

I don't actually have a writing room. I have a living room, trains, my dining table ... any place I can sit comfortably for long periods of time. I do have a nice office in my home but it's not usually where I feel like writing so I end up using it only sparingly. My living room is bright and comfortable so I don't feel like getting out of my chair every five minutes, which I'm liable to when ill at ease. But I also do quite a bit of editing and writing when traveling--on the Acela between NY and Boston, or in a room in a nice place with a nice view or a cafe that had a good vibe. I kind of trick myself into associating writing with vacation (even though sometimes I'm also attending a physics conference) since I can then block out the rest of the world (at least temporarily) and just enjoy what I am doing.

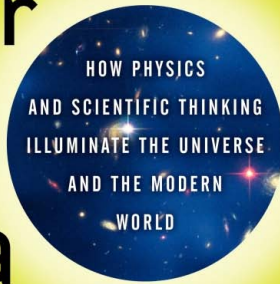
I wrote my previous answer before I saw this question. So you are probably getting the hang of my strategy. I try to make as comfortable an environment as I can. Then I write.

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Knocking on Heaven's Door

"Just might make you think differently—and encourage you to make smarter decisions about the world."
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Lisa Randall

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF WARPED PASSAGES

If I have something to say I write it down. I don't force myself to write the finished project immediately. If I write something I think is interesting, the next time I sit down to write I have a base to build on. I even send e-mails to myself as reminders about interesting ideas. I suspect I seem very disciplined to some because I can sit and focus intensely for long periods of time day after day. But it doesn't feel like discipline. When I'm heavily involved it's what I want to do.

3. How do you get past writers' block (or the distraction of the Internet)?

I don't usually have writers' block. It might be one advantage to having a physics career at the same time. Writing time is precious, so I want to use it well. But I am distracted by the Internet and it can be a problem. The last time I wrote a book, wi-fi wasn't yet omnipresent. I was determined to avoid it so I'd not have Internet when writing on my couch. But then I broke my foot so I had to get wi-fi since I wasn't very mobile. So now I'm often distracted.

I did love the Acela pre-wifi. I think I was the only one who was disappointed when they added it--I had the same awkward ingratitude I had when my father fixed the TV in the bedroom I shared with my sister when I was young.

4. Do you have a favorite book from childhood?

2. What is your writing strategy--do you have rituals that you maintain?

I should, but I don't. I could say "Alice in Wonderland," since I did really like it. But I liked the Betsy Books too...

5. What books do you re-read?

Very few. Unless physics texts count. And I mostly read and reread papers even in that case.

6. What's on your desk?

My desk is a mess, I'm afraid. I have everything on it including physics papers, magazines, mail, my Time 100 award, a pot made from quasicrystal material, videos, CDs--you get the idea. The only thing missing might be books because those are easy to pick up and move to a shelf without having to actually organize. It's actually a very nice desk when you can see it.

7. Where are you right now? Describe what you see.

I'm in Washington DC in a hotel room on a couch. I should be preparing for the talk I'm about to give, so I'm writing this instead. Oh yes--that reminds me of another strategy. I make sure there is something more onerous or ambitious to do so that what I am doing--no matter how productive-- seems like goofing off. Anything beats annoying professorial administrative things, for example.

8. What are you reading right now?

When I was busy writing and editing, I didn't have a chance (or the mental space) to also read a lot of books. Once I was finished, I had a brief reprieve where I started catching up on friends' novels or books I was given for some reason that looked interesting.

I read the "Grimm Legacy," "Lost in the Meritocracy," "The Safety of Objects," "A Visit from the Goon Squad," and now have "I Was a Dancer" by my bedside.

But physics and the lecture circuit don't leave much time for reading now, either.

9. What's been the best place so far to do a reading?

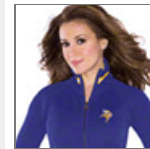
There were a lot of good places. I should clarify that I never do "readings" but instead give some sort of lecture. Boulder was one of the nicest since it was a thousand people who seemed engaged and curious. An added bonus was the dinner afterward, where I met a climbing contact, so visiting Boulder is much more fun now.

10. What authors have inspired you?

I try to have my own style, though there are lots of authors I admire. For physics, I liked Steve Weinberg's "First Three Minutes," since it was unadorned physics written well and to the point. For general nonfiction, I admired Robert Caro's "The Power Broker," since I appreciated the way it wove in so many different themes into an integrated whole.

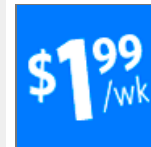
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I learned a lot --including about the neighborhood in which I grew up.

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