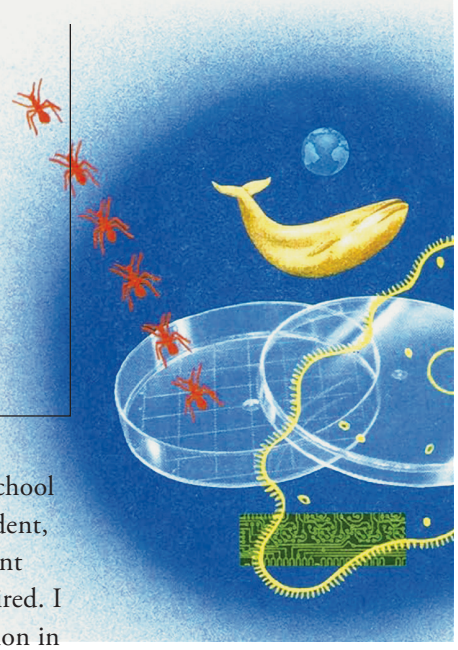
HOW LEWIS THOMAS CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT SCIENCE

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



As a high school science student, I was diligent but uninspired. I paid attention in class, turned in the homework, and scored decently on tests, but the subject didn't move me. I'd been a liberal arts kid since grade school, drawn to the English language because literature looked like a wild frontier, limitless and free of rules. Just about anything might happen when you opened a book and started reading Jack London or Mark Twain – a feeling of suspense that seemed unmatched by anything else.

Science, by comparison, struck me as a stiffly formal enterprise. With its precise methods of experiment and columns of data, it appeared to be more about confinement than liberation. The teenager in me would have none of it.

David Vitter, who taught general science to all the freshmen, quietly summoned me to his desk one day and whispered a mere six words across his grade book: "Read *The Lives of a Cell*."

Published in 1974, that collection of essays by physician and medical researcher Lewis Thomas had become a surprise bestseller. Many readers loved its graceful insights into the workings of biology. I had no interest in it, though I was keen to polish my GPA. "Is this for extra credit?" I asked.

Sighing, Mr. Vitter shook his head. "Just *read* it," he added with his usual reticence. "Read it because you *should*." I suspect he'd noticed my ambivalence about science and wanted to shake me awake.

I bought a paperback copy of *The Lives of a Cell* and rolled my eyes as I turned to the title essay on the first page. What dreariness lay ahead? Here's how the essay opens:

We are told that the trouble with Modern Man is that he has been trying to detach himself from nature. He sits at the topmost tiers of polymer, glass, and steel, dangling his pulsing legs, surveying at a distance the writhing life of the planet.

I was hooked. Here was a writer marshaling the most graceful gifts of human language to explore the deepest questions of science: Who are we? What's our place in the world, and how does the world, our home, really work? Those mysteries rest at the center of the humanities, too, and a fully engaged mind needs both science and the arts to ponder the puzzles of existence. C.P. Snow, the British novelist and chemist who bridged science and the humanities in his life and work, said as much in his 1959 lecture "The Two Cultures."

But I didn't yet know about Snow as I sat with *The Lives of a Cell*, entranced. It led me to other books by Lewis, then other scientist-authors in the same tradition: Oliver Sacks, Gerald Weissmann, A.J. Lees, Alan Lightman, E.O. Wilson, and, eventually, Dr. Snow. Through them, I learned that the rules of science and its wellspring of imagination aren't mutually exclusive; they can work in tandem to create truly beautiful ideas.

All of this started because of a simple imperative: "Read *The Lives of a Cell*." Six words, you might say, that changed my mind for the better.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for other national publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Humanities* magazine.