

WHEN SMOKE RAN LIKE WATER Devra Davis, Basic Books, New York, 2002

Who was your very best professor ever? Of all the perhaps hundreds of professors you had in undergraduate and graduate school, who stands out in your memory as the finest exemplar of the teacher/mentor/scholar? [After you have selected your finest professor, stop reading this review and if this person is still alive, write a short note to him or her. Just say that you are checking in, and describe a few things about your career and accomplishments. Indicate by some story or memorable quote that you remember the professor, and send along your best wishes. Then come back to reading this review]

I so often hear that student evaluations of professors are imperfect because the value of a professor changes with time. There are those who believe that the mean guys you hated, the guys who forced you to work hard, will turn out to be your most respected and loved professors in the end. I have always personally disagreed with this assumption. My best (and worst) teachers when I was in school remain my best (and worst) 40 years later. So it did my heart good to realize that there is experimental evidence to back up my observation.

One study found that there is no significant change in teacher ratings with time. Students asked 10 and 20 years after graduation to name their best instructors named the same instructors whom they rated highly while they were students. The tough instructors who had poor teaching skills regardless of how difficult their courses were were still rated poorly. In another study, when alumni were asked to describe their former professors, they told stories that illustrated the positive effect the teachers had on their lives. One alumnus, finishing his favorite story about his former professor, ended reflectively -- "I miss him" he said -- thirty years after graduation. (*J. Educational Psychology* 42(129-143), and *Change*, 28(6)).

The same thing applies to books. I remember hating some of my texts (Gaylord and Gaylord still holds first place as the worst textbook ever) and loving others. And the ones I love I still have. (Gaylord and Gaylord was ceremonially burned when I finished my last steel design course.) Occasionally I pick up one of my favorites, riffle through the pages, and remember how the text helped me understand the subject.

I think this book by Devra Davis is going to be one of those books to which I periodically return, both to enjoy her writing as well as to glean material for lectures. Davis is an environmental scientist and epidemiologist, and has had a distinguished career in and out of governmental service. She been personally involved in many of the significant cases of public protection from environmental pollutants such as the elimination of lead from gasoline. But her most important attribute is that she was born in Donora, Pennsylvania, and spent her childhood in the shadows of the steel mills that lined the Monongahela River. She speaks in the first person about the fateful days in 1948 when an inversion layer capped the valley and the three plants continued to operate at full production. She has great pictures of the Friday night football game when the pollution was so thick the ball disappeared into the haze, and when it was not possible to see across the field. Some of her acquaintances were among the 27 people who died during this disaster which catalyzed the United States into controlling air pollution. And yet, when she was a little girl, nobody talked about the episode. Only when she went to college did she find out that the Donora Episode had occurred. Smoke was jobs and life to these first

generation Americans, and they were not about to do anything that would force the steel plants to close, including talk about the week when smoke ran like water.

Using the Donora episode as a jumping off point, Davis talks about other environmental problems, including growing concerns with breast cancer and male sterility. In my opinion, the best part of the book is at the end when she talks about some defiant figures in the quest for a clean environment -- those unsung people who for years stood up to great pressures to do the right thing. All in all, this is a masterful book. I know I will visit it often, and that years from now I will think of it as highly as I do now, just after reading it. Good books, and good professors, tend to be that way.

Devra Davis is now a visiting professor at the Carnegie-Mellon University's Heinz School in Pittsburgh.

P. Aarne Vesilind
Bucknell University