

**A Voice with an Audience: an Interview with Hope Jahren**  
On October 6, 2016 by [Matt Shipman](#)

*Lab Girl, by Hope Jahren, is one of the best books I've read in recent years. It's a book about science. And about plants. And about people. As I wrote in [a review earlier this year](#), Jahren manages to find a balance between entertaining popular science and compelling memoir. That's a tough combination to pull off, and a hell of a read. And I was far from the only one who enjoyed Lab Girl – it's garnered positive attention in outlets from the New York Times to PBS to The Guardian.*

*Recently Jahren—who has relocated her geobiology lab from Hawaii to the University of Oslo—let me pick her brain about writing, blogging and how she balances her writing with her work as a scientist.*

**Science Communication Breakdown:** I first became familiar with you (and your writing) because of the [Hope Jahren Sure Can Write](#) blog, which you launched in 2013. From the beginning, your blog writing had a very clear and distinct voice. Normally that sort of thing takes a while to develop. When did you start writing? How much non-scientific writing had you done before launching the blog?

**Hope Jahren:** This is a hard question to answer, because I've been writing all of my life. I remember as a little kid, writing ideas for stories onto index cards and trying to organize them so that I wouldn't forget to write them out fully later – I'd write everything from cartoon strips to plays to poems to song lyrics, and try to get any adult that I could to read them: my elementary teachers were always trying to calm me down and refocus me on the playdough, etc. In junior high and high school – back when we passed notes to each other – I would write pages and pages of notes to my various girlfriends every day and pass them around. I was always getting caught with some note and then getting in trouble, but I just couldn't stop.

When I went to college, I encountered the concept of “journaling,” but I've never been able to embrace writing that doesn't have the goal of reaching someone – to me, the vision of my reader is so important, I think constantly about what they might think of each word, each sentence—how to really touch someone else's mind. That's the biggest challenge life offers, I think. So I started writing more complex letters to friends far away, in different voices, trying to make people laugh or wonder. I'd write to authors and public figures. Gradually I've amassed some amazing “pen pals.” I have one friend from graduate school who is a stone-cold genius—he writes the most hilarious stuff to me, and I've been answering him for years, each of us trying to top the other's crazy. It is one of the greatest joys of my life to correspond with him. He was one of the first readers of *Lab Girl* when the proofs came out, and it made me feel so good to hear that he liked it. For me, living is writing. If I couldn't write, I don't think I'd want to live.

**SCB:** What was the impetus for the blog? I mean, you say on the blog itself that it was an attempt to get noticed as a writer. But why did you decide that you wanted to get noticed as a writer? Or, more specifically, why did you decide that you wanted to get noticed as a writer at that point in your life—did you already have the idea for your book in mind?

**Jahren:** Well, the book was already in a complete draft form, and I had the attention and advice of an agent that I look up to and trust very much. I knew that she was the person that I wanted to work with. The trouble is that agents and publishers—especially the very best ones—are just so overloaded. It's much like professors, really—you get to a place where you've just got soooo much on your plate, you can't get to anything that's not a freaking emergency. As an unknown writer, pitching a memoir, I wasn't particularly urgent or topical compared to books coming out on current events, like politics, etc. What eventually became clear was that to get anywhere near the top of their to-do list, I would need to first prove that my voice could raise an audience; that I could use my writing to grow a group of people who wanted to read more from me. I decided to start a blog about some things that I really care about, and see what happens. \$99 to WordPress and give it a shot—that was basically the plan. And it worked pretty well. Within a year I could say—look, every time I write a 2200-word essay, there's about 9,000 people that voluntarily mobilize to read it within 48 hours—and pretty reliably at that. Soon after that, I started to move up in their list of priorities. I was a voice with an audience.

**SCB:** The blog is focused on “interactions between women and men and Academia.” What made you want to focus on that particular set of issues? Why not write about issues related to your fields of study?

**Jahren:** I knew that I had to be careful to keep the content of the blog separate from the content of the book—it wasn't hard because I thought of them as two different pieces of work—and they are written in different voices, as well, though it's all me, in the end. The blog is more unfettered and more immediate, it's about stuff I'm dealing with now, as a rule. Posts are often a reaction to something that just happened, if you look at the introduction to each one. I also wanted the blog to be useful, I wanted to give practical advice (imperfect though it may be) for some of the stickier situations one finds oneself in, as a woman in this business. Stuff I say a lot to students and colleagues one-on-one, but hadn't had the chance to write down.

**SCB:** Are there specific things that reporters and science writers could, or should, be doing to address inequality and harassment in the research community?

**Jahren:** They should follow up on the stories they write. I get the feeling that a lot of journalists are just pressed to break a scicomm story, but not that they genuinely care about the issue at hand. Perhaps they somehow think telling the world about injustice is enough – but you know, that's just the beginning. Nice story, lotta clicks, but what comes of it? Listen, people already know harassment happens—trust me on that. Women in science aren't surprised by stories about harassment, and every time we see

the outrage die down and nothing happen after one of these “bombshells,” it makes morale that much worse. I’m down here in the trenches—and I want to say—this stuff is more than just clicks to me, and your deadline isn’t the end of the story.

Why not follow up to write a story about how the institution handled your breaking news?

**SCB:** You run an active research lab, write and publish papers, apply for grants, do fieldwork, oversee students, as well as maintaining a good relationship with the other humans who live in your house. How did you manage to set aside time to write the book?

**Jahren:** People ask me this a lot and honestly, it is a question I just don’t understand (i.e., “When did you find time to write this book?”). When my publisher first met me, they asked me this, and I answered, “You know, that’s like saying to someone ‘You ate 78 ice cream cones last year. When did you find time to do it?’” Whenever I could!!! is the answer. For me, writing is easy and it doesn’t feel like ‘work’; it is the most joyful thing that I do. I often write something in my head—I can see shape of the whole thing clearly—and then it’s just a race to get it out of me, through my fingertips, and into text. I would love to write every day all day, that’s my dream. But I don’t know if such a thing could exist. Where do you sign up for that? And I fear that the Puritanical core of me will always be programmed to perform labor anyway, in order to regulate pleasure and seek peace, it’s the Pioneer way, it’s why my ancestors didn’t freeze to death, I guess.

**SCB:** The book goes back and forth between chapters about your life and chapters about science and the natural world. How did you come up with that approach? Did you have that structure in mind from the beginning, or did you develop it while you were writing?

**Jahren:** I get that question a lot. My answer is always that this was the only structure that makes sense to me, the only one I ever thought of using, because that is exactly what my life is... I think about plants for a while, do some experiments, deal with the people in my lab, juggle my family, try to make sense of my own life. Each day, I go back and forth and back and forth between all of these tasks, each one synergizing with the others. I think that’s what a scientists’ life is—at least if they’re going to be honest about it. And if you’re not going to be honest in your writing, why write? We don’t need books that “sort of” say something. We need writers who are willing to say it all. To set it out as an offering, a sacrifice, to the reader, and let go, and respect them enough to let them make of it what they will.

**SCB:** Are there any stories in the book that you had considered omitting? How did you decide which stories to include and which to leave out?

**Jahren:** I remember writing a chapter about grasses—I love grasses—essentially forests with no wood... but in the end it just wasn’t to the level of wonder as the other stuff. It was good but not great. So I was careful not to include anything that didn’t make

the high bar of the bulk of what I'd written, and it was pretty easy to see where the drop-off occurred.

**SCB:** What—if anything—do you think you learned about yourself, and/or about writing, from writing the book?

**Jahren:** I really recommend that everyone write a book. Not to get it published, but in order to make sense of your life. Before I started the book, there I was—in my forties, I'd lived all these different places, moved around, done all this stuff, knew some people, some of it strange and well, what for? Then I gave myself a present, I said to myself, I am going to stop withholding this writing from myself, I am going to let myself have this. It took about 9 hard months to write it all out as a careful draft and then—bang—my life suddenly made sense. For the first time my life was a story with a beginning, middle and—well—an end. All these crazy things that I did, I guess I did them for a reason—and the reason is the way that I am able to think now, the reason is the stuff I know that I wouldn't have learned otherwise.

**SCB:** How was the experience different from what you expected?

**Jahren:** Well, the difference between a file on your computer and a book on the shelf is basically two years of very hard work by a bunch of people who are not you. The folks I turned the manuscript over to were great. They had a great love of books for books' sake, and I trusted them completely. I had no expectations for after publication. I knew that once the book was out, and people were judging me, and people do judge you when you write a book about your life. They judge your identity, they judge your youthful decisions, they judge your picture, jeez, they judge the title. The only comfort you will have is in knowing that you wrote the book so carefully that you wouldn't change a word after the fact, even if you were given the chance. So I wrote it, then gave it to the publisher (I am such an easy author to work with), and I truly let it go. I don't read reviews, I don't obsess over sales, I don't get involved with that end of it. I was hoping the book would do well commercially because my agent and publisher had taken a big risk on me—me being an unknown, first-time book author—and I wanted their hard work and faith in me to pay off for them. So I am glad that the book did have some success, but only because I want them to be happy. The publishing business has been so, so good to me.

**SCB:** If you could pass on some tips to other scientists who are thinking of writing a book, what would you tell them?

**Jahren:** No one can say to you “Yes! Write a book! That is a good use of your time and something will definitely come of it!” In fact, it's kind of silly to have conversations about unwritten books. No one can judge a book that doesn't exist, so you do have to write it before people can tell you if it was worth writing. And publishing is a business, in which there are no guarantees. If you write a book, maybe it won't get published. If it gets published, maybe no one will read it. So you'd better write for the sake of writing. Write because you can't help it. Write so that you can honestly say, after the whole thing goes

nowhere, “I am glad I did that. I am glad that I have that experience in my life.” That is definitely how I feel about my writing.

**SCB:** Has your writing—for the blog or the book—created any opportunities for you as a scientist? Or do you feel that it has hurt your scientific work in any way?

**Jahren:** I can’t tell yet. I want to write. It would be really hard to go back to writing peer-reviewed scientific papers for a relatively teeny-tiny audience now that I’ve tasted what it feels like to talk to lots of readers and move them. But how do I get that gig? Where do I sign up? I am lucky to have an agent that I trust completely, who can help advise me when opportunities appear. I am taking my time and seeing what happens. And keeping myself happy by writing, always writing.