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# Portrait of a scientist

There's a new Potions master at Hogwarts as Harry Potter returns for his sixth year at the school for witchcraft and wizardry. Professor Slughorn appears for the first time in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the latest in her phenomenally successful series of children's books. Slughorn seems to hold secrets that may have a bearing on Harry's future, and this means his potions classes form a significant portion of the book. Making a potion involves following a protocol, weighing and preparing the reagents carefully, having the right equipment, and adding everything in the correct way at the appropriate time. But a certain knack or flair makes all the difference in gaining a successful result. The same is true of scientific experiments, of course. But why is the image of wizards brewing concoctions in cauldrons so familiar, while the reality of scientists' day-to-day graft is, for many, obscure and mysterious?

The legions of scientific and technical staff employed at all levels around the world in universities, government laboratories, and industry lead working lives that are alien to a lot of people. It can even appear that scientists are hidden away, working on exotic or outlandish projects. Partly to counter this, a working DNA sequencing lab was recently set up as an art installation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, UK. *Genes Talking* was intended to 'give a feel for the everyday life of a scientist, which is at times humdrum, often frustrating, but occasionally exhilarating'. I find the need for such exhibitions profoundly depressing.

A new UK project, *SciTalk*, has just gained funding from the National Endowment for Science, Technology, and the Arts. The aim is to bring writers and scientists together in person, and a website ([www.scitalk.org.uk](http://www.scitalk.org.uk)) has been set up to

facilitate these contacts. The idea, conceived by Ann Lackie, a novelist as well as a zoologist and parasitologist, is to allow novelists, playwrights, and poets to ask all the questions they need to be able to introduce science and scientists into their fiction convincingly and believably.

With this initiative, Lackie hopes to combat the lack of science in fiction and, still worse, the inaccurate or crudely stereotyped depictions of scientists. It can be so different, of course. Philip Pullman, Michael Frayn, and Douglas Adams spring to mind as writers who have blended science into their work to great effect.

"If more science is used in fiction, if scientists are included as believable characters, then it will have been a success," says Lackie.

Science has much to gain from portrayal in fiction of all kinds. If it helps the public to have some concept of the scientific enterprise, then researchers may not seem so distant and removed. New results may no longer be treated as an unknown sort of dark magic whose consequences should be feared rather than understood.

Jonathan Wood

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