



Author and scientist David Suzuki.

Suzuki Metamorphosis

Interview by Dragos Ruiu

Not many people know that David Suzuki was once a professor at the U of A. It was only for one year, and he only taught one class while he was setting up his lab. Shortly thereafter he was whisked off by an offer at UBC — he left because Vancouver was warmer. But Dr. Suzuki calls that time in Edmonton "priceless." It was his reintroduction to Canada after his education and biological research in the U.S.

This is all explained in his latest book, his autobiography *Metamorphosis*. Originally intended to be a collection of essays from his various newspaper columns, the publisher persuaded Dr. Suzuki that a biography was saleable.

"It was difficult to start, remembering everything. Some things you don't want to remember. There is a huge body of things you are not entirely proud of in a life. But once you get rolling it is very easy to recount your life story. From the original intent of a book of essays, it migrated into a book that is about me."

Most people know David Suzuki as the host of "Nature of Things." Some people might remember him from "Quirks and Quarks,"

the CBC science radio show he started. But soon people might know him from his books. He still intends to publish a book of essays, and he has another book entitled "Genetics" that is due to come out in several months.

Some children might know Dr. Suzuki from a series of four children's science books he has written: "Looking at...Plants, Insects, Sense, Your body." Children are very important to David Suzuki.

"We need to get our children plugged back into nature," he says, glancing at his portable computer. "Children don't need computers in elementary schools. It's a dangerous model to subscribe to. Speed of retrieval is what matters to a computer. We are different; we have to develop our brain to be able to judge what is shit. Even now, some people have a mistaken belief that computers are never wrong.... I wrote those books for children so they could learn that they are biological creatures. That nature is fascinating."

"All children have an inborn curiosity, they are all biologists and astronomers.... We have to nurture that. Instead, kids are taught that nature is dirty and disgusting. I have yet

to see one of my children's friends not go 'Oh Yuck!' when they first see my daughter's pets, 2 frogs, and 3 salamanders.

"This is learned from their parents. I mean, what would your mother do if she saw a cockroach in the kitchen? When we see mice or insects, we bring out a devastating array of chemical weapons to fight them...."

David Suzuki's life long love affair with nature started when he was very young, and eventually led him to become a biologist. As his biography stresses, "This is something I learned from my father."

The first thing you notice about Suzuki's biography is that almost every picture of him or his children has them holding a fish. "I love fishing, I've been a fisherman all my life. My father was a fisherman. I like to think that it is a common bond I share with my children as well," he says.

His family also influenced his great knack for making complicated subjects seem clear to an audience. Says Suzuki: "Whenever I would come back from school, my father would ask me what I've learned, and I would have to tell him."

"Even now, whenever I do a show, I pretend to talk to my dad. Though he is immensely wise, he never had a formal education past high school, so he is my audience. And whenever I do a show that he didn't understand or thought was confusing, he calls me up and gives me shit."

"Obviously there are some subjects you can't cover because they are too esoteric." But Dr. Suzuki's science journalism has brought us an amazing number of complex subjects. "On the Nature of Things, we assume a basic high school level of science literacy. We don't keep defining atoms and cells. Scientists tend to use a lot of jargon. It becomes a form of shorthand for them. We have to explain these terms."

Suzuki's great passion for science also causes him to gnash his teeth at current affairs and the media. In his book, he recounts a meeting with a vice-president of the CBC. He pleaded for more funding and airtime for science shows. Pointing out the multi-faceted aspects of the influence of science on our lives, he received the rebuttal:

"That's not science, that's current affairs!"

"There is very little science on television, in newspapers. It's like a large blind spot. People need to learn that it is very important and interesting. The need to be educated in science."

"Part of the problem stems from the people that rise to power in the media traditionally coming from a journalism background, an arts background. They tend to dismiss science."

But things could be worse, we could be living in the States. "The Nature of Things" would never survive in the States. The audiences there have been ruined by all the glitter and glitz of the major networks. Even their epic specials are simply not challenging," says Suzuki.


"You might argue about PBS (which replayed some episodes of *The Nature of Things*), but the truth is that PBS panders to a minuscule population. To them 2-3% of the audience is a success, but in Canada the Nature of Things captures 15-20% of the viewers."

Very quickly, Dr. Suzuki's discussion of media delves energetically and passionately into politics. His views on the politics of science are very strong. "Believe everything I do is political. Very, very, political, and I make no bones about it."

"Science is very underfunded in Canada. Research grants are a mere pittance here compared to the States. We are like starving Ethiopians. And this government promised us food...it was a major part of their campaign."


A subject Mr. Suzuki often explores is the fine line between science, ethics, and politics. The controversial, and acclaimed eight part series, "A Planet for the Taking," has launched him into the spotlight as a leading spokesman for science, and the responsibility it brings.


As for the medium that is responsible for his fame, Dr. Suzuki has some other qualms. "I'm often shocked when I learn that families even watch TV when they are eating dinner. TV eats into the communication we have with our children. You can't blame television — it's the parents who control the dial."



Suzuki Records

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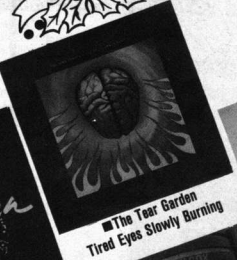




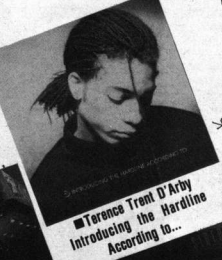
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