

Great Minds: Reflections of 111 Top Scientists, Balazs Hargittai, Magdolna Hargittai, and Istvan Hargittai, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, 416 pp, 978-0-19-933617-3, \$34.95.

Great Minds is a collection of excerpts from conversations the authors had with 111 scientists in the late twentieth century; the complete transcripts of these conversations can be found in *Candid Science*, a six-volume work published from 2000 to 2006 (London: Imperial College Press). *Great Minds* is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on individuals who worked within a specific discipline—physics, chemistry, or biomedical science—and there are roughly equal numbers of excerpts within each section. The authors readily admit that in many instances, a scientist situated within the physics section, for example, could also have been placed within the one that focuses on biomedical science quite justifiably; these disciplinary distinctions were not meant to constrain perceptions of scientific work but simply to serve as a general principle for organization. A brief biography and a photograph of the scientist precede each excerpt, and, on average, each excerpt is two pages in length. The content of the extracted conversation varies greatly, so greatly, in fact, that any themes that emerge—such as mentorship, science and the public, and gender and scientific practice—are purely coincidental, another detail to which Hargittais allude in their preface.

What the book is missing, though, is any discussion of context: why certain questions were asked during the conversations and others not, why these specific passages were of interest to the authors, and why, other than being “top scientists” (which in itself was not defined, though one can assume it is because over two-thirds of the scientists were Nobel laureates and many of the others worked with Nobel laureates), anyone should care about what these people said in their conversations. Take, for example, the excerpts from Mildred Cohn and Roald Hoffmann: Cohn worked with a number of Nobel laureates throughout the course of her career, and so the selection the Hargittais chose focuses on Cohn’s reflections about Harold Urey; Hoffmann grew up in Europe during the Second World War, and the Hargittais decided to emphasize his schooling and learning foreign languages while avoiding Nazis. But the reader is given no understanding of what made these specific passages of such great interest to the authors. Stories told are not just about what is said, but *why* they are being said, especially within a broader conversation. Having read these passages, a reader is able to learn a bit about Urey and about education available to Jews in hiding in Nazi-

occupied countries during the Second World War, but a greater understanding of the relevance of the excerpts in a broader context and of the individuals themselves is much harder to know since the interviewees’ words were extracted from conversation, from context.

I have not read any part of *Candid Science*, but I am quite familiar with the oral history of Mildred Cohn that the Center for Oral History at the Chemical Heritage Foundation conducted and I am in the process of interviewing Hoffmann so as to include his oral history within that same collection. Comparing the content of those oral history interviews to the excerpts that the Hargittais provide raises a number of questions. For example, did the Hargittais ask about Cohn’s work with Nobel laureates and other scientists only or did they ask Cohn about being a female scientist in a male-dominated career? Did the topic of the sexism she experienced in her first job after completing her degree come up in conversation? Were Hoffmann’s experiences of the war different from other Jews avoiding the Nazis? Did these experiences, in some way, affect the way he undertook the scientific enterprise? What about his work in the humanities? Did he talk about that at all or was the conversation solely about his childhood experiences in war-torn Europe? Distilling interviews down into short pieces for consumption without discussing intent—the interviewer’s or the interviewee’s intent—or creating a purposeful organizational structure diminishes what can be learned from speaking with and to others about their experiences, beliefs, thoughts, and practices. The Hargittais do not convey what made these specific selections more interesting than other content from the conversations, and, as such, make them into abstractions instead of situations for learning.

The power of interviews does not come from individuality but from collectivized knowledge: it is easy to dismiss what one person says as unique but much harder to do so when multiple voices are all saying similar or the same things. I fully admit that many of the passages in *Great Minds* are interesting as vignettes about the lives of these scientists, but I finished the book not knowing why the authors wanted me to care about any of these men and women or what I was supposed to learn from them. Again, the authors did mention that they noticed themes emerging in their selections, even pointing out several for the reader, but you need more than a couple of pages extracted from an interview in order to fully appreciate a person’s relevance and learn about the significance of what he or she said—elucidation helps create meaning that can lead to understanding.

It is without a doubt that many of the 111 scientists whose extracts make up this book would be known to other scientists, but there are a number whose relevance to the scientific enterprise may not be as well known. The Hargattais tell us in their preface that there were different motives for why *they* wanted to interview these men and women, but they go no further, blinding the reader to an understanding of the historical value of the interviewees and what they had to say. Outside of the scientific community, the names of a few of these people may resonate from a memory of a chemistry class, but mostly they will not, making the utility of such a text quite limited

to the general public. I fully believe that scientists have very important things to say, not just about science, but about politics, religion, culture, and the arts, for example, which is why I interview them for a living. Explaining to others why what scientists say matters is not self-evident: it needs to be contextualized and communicated. The Hargattais, regrettably, did neither in an effective way.

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