Why I've learned to love the novel

BECOMING a writer of novels, even novels fuelled by science, was far from any destiny I would have chosen if you'd asked my younger self what it wanted to be. While I always loved fiction, as a child I thought of it as frivolous, pure make-believe. When I was given my first library card at the age of 6, I even made a rule to try to keep the seductive things from enchanting me too thoroughly and making me go soft-brained.

Every time I visited the library I allowed myself to take out one work of fiction. To balance it, I had to take out a book that was good for me, something I could learn from. I forbade myself from reading the storybook before completing the good-for-me book.

But before long I stumbled on a good-for-me book every bit as enchanting as a storybook. It was called Our Friend the Atom by Heinz Haber, and I brought it home one Friday afternoon only because it seemed nutritious enough fare to justify the Nancy Drew mystery that I'd chosen as dessert.

I never did get around to reading Drew. Instead, I reread Our Friend the Atom two or three times, marvelling. That weekend, I learned the world was much further away than I had thought, that the world consists of multitudes of neighbourhoods of spinning atoms, of protons, neutrons, electrons, and charges that came in three flavours.

I learned that there was a whole lot more happening out there than I'd had any idea
I always try to abstract ideas indeed, and yet ideas that, once our natural ways of thinking prompted by quantum mechanics, by ideas such as of Light and Quantum Physics, though, as the sub-title of the book is, for fiction and scholarship, including a grandeur (and pettiness) of the lives, hoping that by doing so I can draw the "two cultures" just a little bit closer to one another.

There is something noble about the scientific enterprise represented in art as a hero, the scientist is rarely so. I happen to believe that there is something noble about the scientific enterprise, about submitting oneself to the discipline and openness to falsification, about the often single-minded passion.

There is something lofty and inspiring in the enterprise itself, and to the extent that people honestly and steadfastly engage in that enterprise, a bit of the loftiness can't help but cling to them. "There's a grandeur in this view of life," Darwin said, allowing himself an emotional response to his theory of evolution.

And so, I would argue, there is a grandeur in the lives of those who pursue a clear-eyed scientific view. I don't mean to idealise scientists as people. Of course, I know all about the pettiness and rivalry, the childishness and egotism that stubbornly cling, along with the grandeur, to the greatest of scientists. This only makes them more interesting to me as characters, though. Their very contradictions serve as a means to learn something interesting about human nature.

Even since I finally gave in to the story-loving side of my own nature, I've felt myself lucky to be able to help myself to scientific ideas for my themes and characters, trying to do justice to the beauty of the theories, the grandeur (and pettiness) of the lives, hoping that by doing so I can draw the "two cultures" just a little bit closer to one another.

When she was a child, Rebecca Goldstein made herself read a "good-for-me" book before starting a novel.}

Rebecca Goldstein has received numerous awards for fiction and scholarship, including a MacArthur fellowship. Her non-fiction books are on Baruch Spinoza and Kurt Gödel. Her fiction includes The Mind-Body Problem (Random House), Strange Attractors (Penguin) and Properties of Light (Houghton Mifflin). She is working on a new novel, The Afterlife of Skeptics, on science and religion.

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