

Ivan Amato: Prose, Poetry, and Puppetry

“Renaissance man” may be a cliché, but for science editor Ivan Amato, it’s a perfect fit. In addition to editing for *Science News*, Amato freelances science-based articles and books, writes poetry, and is a puppeteer for a troupe that has performed at such Washington, DC, venues as the National Theater and the club HR 57.

Editing Career

Amato is in his third year of working half-time as an associate editor at *Science News*, a job he describes as “part-time work with full-time benefits”. He says the weekly magazine aims to satisfy the reader’s desire to know about last week’s science news in the time it takes for a daily commute.

Amato touches roughly 50% of the articles that appear in any given issue of *Science News*, usually contributing the first of two editorial treatments for news articles, shorter notes, and features. He’s not involved in deciding which stories will be written for each issue, but he helps writers to streamline, polish, and otherwise craft their stories.

“*Science News* is produced in a writer-centric culture”, Amato says. “It’s my job to help guide the writers by asking the ‘So what?’ question that readers will bring to the story. I look for engaging leads, good nut ‘graphs [topic paragraphs], and a line of logic that extends throughout the story.

“To me, a good science article flows like a smooth stream running straight downhill. It doesn’t wind around the bend to get to the point, and it doesn’t plateau, losing readers’ interest. To that end, good transitions are key. So, I try to help the writers achieve this flow, making the stories reader-friendly and eliminating superfluous details, making reading the story like taking a slide down that stream.”

Amato varies his editing approach to fit the individual writer with whom he’s working. Often, he’ll work in “approval mode”, rewriting and redlining news stories for authors’ final review. Sometimes, he’ll sit down with a writer and negotiate changes in a more real-time manner.

“But my goal is always the same”, he stresses: “to make the piece better for the



reader, and one that also will make the writer more proud of his or her work.”

Amato has been a writer-editor since receiving his master’s degree from Indiana University in history and philosophy of science in 1986. He had received a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Rutgers University in 1983. After serving as a staff writer for the news service of the American Chemical Society, he took his first editing job in 1988 as an assistant editor for *Analytical Chemistry*. Next, he served as chemistry and materials-science editor for *Science News*—in fact, he and the editor at the time, Patrick Young, created the beat for the magazine. Just before returning to *Science News* in his present capacity, he worked as a half-time editor for *Science*, developing a special series of essays called “Pathways of Discovery”, which were published together as a book in April 2002.

Writing Ventures

Because he works part-time in the offices of *Science News*, Amato can devote the other 3 days of the workweek to freelancing.

“Three days of the week, my commute is 12 steps down my basement stairs to my home office”, he says. “I love working at home, but sometimes I must admit it’s a bit of a gnome-like existence, as light filters dimly through the basement windows into my lair.”

Other Than Editing

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Amato's articles, primarily about science, have been published in *Science*, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Fortune*, *Discover*, *Technology Review*, *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Los Angeles Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Scientific American*, *New Scientist*, *Wired*, *Men's Fitness*, *Omni*, *Garbage*, *Compton's Encyclopedia*, *Chemistry and Industry in Britain*, and *The Materials Research Society Bulletin*.

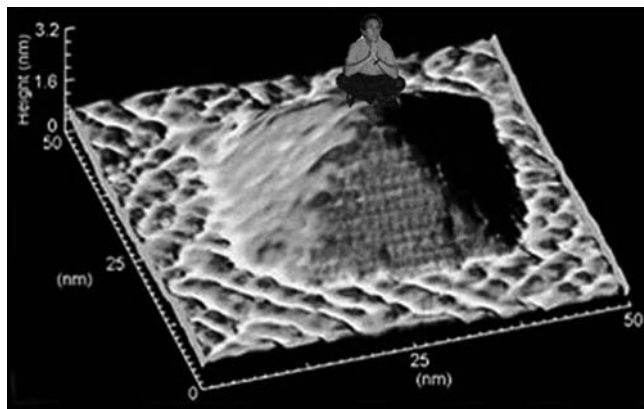
He has also written two other books: an institutional history of the Naval Research Laboratory (*Pushing the Horizon: 75 Years of High Stakes Science and Technology at the Naval Research Laboratory*) and *Stuff: The Materials the World Is Made of*. And he has crafted radio pieces for National Public Radio, speeches and op-ed pieces for the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and even a nonproduced pilot for a television series and an equally non-produced screenplay.

"Our series was to be an ensemble drama, like *ER*, only the subject matter focused on science, scientists, and the scientific society we live in", he says. "The pilot was considered by the likes of Steven Spielberg and Chris Carter, of *X-Files* fame, but Hollywood just never picked it up."

Amato's latest and biggest freelance project, his fourth book, is an "art book" titled *Super Vision*, which captures science imagery in photographs. He collected the photos and provided captions and four essays "illuminating the beauty of visual data". The book is scheduled for publication in late summer or early autumn of 2003.

Poetry

Amato also has been writing poetry for some time. And even in his poetry, he can't get away from science. His first public reading was at the open microphone of a poetry reading he'd been lured to by his son, whose teacher was reading his own work that night. As luck would have it, the poetry editor of the *Potomac Review* was in



the audience and asked Amato to send her some of his work. Thus, if not a star, at least a published poet was born that night, as his "Suspended Reanimation" appears in the magazine's Fall/Winter 2003 issue.

Last December Amato read some more of his growing portfolio, which spans such subjects as the "divine" nature of the periodic table of elements, at a local bookstore event also sponsored by the *Potomac Review*. And he has been involved in planning a science-poetry event for the DC Science Writers Association.

"I've written poetry intermittently for a long time", he says. "But the climate of the world today has compelled me to return to verse to explore the multiple dimensions of science in our society."

Puppetry

Amato began his career as an intern at *Science News* and served as a science-writing fellow at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole. But he became a puppeteer in his kitchen, assisting his wife (the troupe's chief puppeteer) with a hobby that has become a creative outlet for them both.

Mary Amato is also a writer, primarily of children's books (*Word Eater*), and she and her friend Andrea Caspari have been providing shadow-puppetry programs for children. Ivan Amato describes their art form as an eclectic synthesis of modern technology and ancient traditions from such cultures as those of China, India, and Bali.

The troupe, which includes Andrea's husband, likes to experiment with different light sources, such as an overhead projec-

Other Than Editing

continued

tor, for background scenes. In addition to helping to write the scripts for the show, Amato often composes original music to accompany the productions.

From their original focus on children's plays, the troupe—the Firefly Shadow Theater—has branched out into more adult themes and venues. They've presented several shows at local bars, one an adaptation of an English bogeyman folk tale and another an original story about a man who loses his head and then tries to find out who he really is.

“Our performance at the National Theater on 9 December centered on a circus where a lion tamer and a lion are each undergoing a personal identity crisis and

in which each helps the other to find an authentic self”, Amato explained. “Doing these productions has become a form of play for us and a creative way to spend time with another couple who have become our best friends.”

Amato likes the mix afforded by his present job situation, which allows him time to spend with his two sons, 8 and 10, both of whom love soccer; he coaches the 8-year-old's team. He says he plans to continue improving his storytelling abilities and to remain open to new ways of telling stories.

JUDITH MCINTOSH WHITE *wrote this profile while a Science Editor fellow.*