

## Why read stories? For poetic “knots,” new landscapes

by Patricia Andres

Many people think of short stories as whittled-down novels. But the literary short story—the very ground that *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* treads—is a genre all its own, perfectly suited for deep exploration and dialogue in the 90-minute format of our sessions.

Carlos Fuentes writes that “urgency and brevity embrace in the short story...The short story has to reveal its beauty, its meaning, its intensity, almost instantaneously.” In other words, the short story is more like a poem than a novel. Raymond Carver, one of the outstanding writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, noted, “There’s compression of language, of emotion, that isn’t to be found in the novel.” It is the saturation of language with layered meaning and textured resonance that gives the short story its sheer force.

When founder Sarah Hirschman designed the method for *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* dialogues, the poetic quality of stories was at its heart. She wrote, “The deepening understanding of a story is attained not only through debates of issues. A couple of words nested in a sentence may upset equilibrium. Why are they there? How do they affect us? Similarly a recurring repetition, a cliché that becomes comical in a certain context, a fresh metaphor, an unusual turn of speech or one that is especially familiar, are all important stopping points that may open unexpected vistas.” Hirschman often said it is the “knots” and “sparks” in a story that create its poetic landscape and move readers into places where the imagination can fly.

An example of poetic language is seen in the opening line of James Joyce’s story,

Eveline,” which concerns the turmoil of a character faced with the prospect of leaving her home: “She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue.” The word “invade” carries the fear that pervades Eveline’s inner landscape, putting the reader in touch with the story’s theme through that intensely compressed moment.

Another use of poetic language occurs in Milly Jafta’s “The Home-Coming.” As the main character returns to her native village after years of absence, the rhythmic line, “It was Friday, end of the week, end of the month, end of the year, and the trip from Windhoek to the north was hot and unending” conveys, through the repetition of “end” and the shift to “unending,” that the story is about beginnings and finalities.

Even the title of Toshio Mori’s very brief and lyrical story, “Abalone, Abalone, Abalone,” demonstrates this economy of language and meaning. The story explores a mentoring relationship between an older Japanese carnation grower and a younger man, the narrator. The younger man seeks to understand the elder’s devotion to polishing and collecting abalone shells. When he finds a shell of his own, he discovers, “I could not do very much with the exterior side. It had scabs of the sea which would not come off by scrubbing... But on the other side, the inside of the shell, the more I polished the more luster I found.” Once the young man has found three shells, he realizes that “they are very much alike and very much different.” The discovery of new ways of seeing is deeply embedded in the title itself.

Because short stories use the power-packed language of poetry, with its shadows, ambiguities, sensory images, deeply layered symbols and musical resonances, participants in our programs are invited to move beyond their assumptions and into more visceral responses that trigger both memories and longings and that open new imaginative landscapes. Our dialogues lead us to generative and often surprising spaces.

## Thoughts from P&S coordinators spark imagination

by Stephanie Hanzel Cohen

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***“The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t that make life a story?”***

--Yann Martel

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As the program manager for People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, I have the good fortune of reading the reflections that coordinators send in as part of each program’s reporting requirements.

Though we are just a three-person staff, we have approximately twenty coordinators who implement the program, in English and Spanish, in sites throughout the Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York region. “Reflections,” also known as the “final report,” are essentially a collection of narratives the coordinator has written after each P&S/GyC session. While some coordinators prefer to chronicle each session’s “story arc,” citing poetic moments that sparked discussion, others structure their reports by offering a sampling of moments that underscore the literary categories of the P&S methodology: *poetics, tensions/contrasts, shadows, issues and life experience.*

Either style works for me. These reports serve several functions. First, they help us effectively report to funders the “how” and “why” of our program. They offer the coordinator the opportunity to reflect upon the session: what worked, what didn’t and what are the “take-aways”? Did a shy participant, who had never spoken in the group before, share for the first time? Was there a literary interpretation of a short story that was new and thought-provoking? (This happens quite often and is the treasure of being a coordinator: exposure to multiple ways of understanding a story based upon participants’ experience.) Finally, these reports help connect the office staff to what is happening “on the ground.”

I often read these final coordinator reports while walking the indoor track at the YWCA in Trenton, conveniently located steps away from our office space

on the Y’s third floor. It’s a talent, I know, being able to walk and read, but it helps break up the computer-centric focus of administrative work. When I read these reports—as when I read a short story—my imagination takes flight.

While reading about a senior program at Architects Housing in Trenton, conducted by coordinator Pat Smith, I envision the twenty-two seniors sitting in a circle, laughing when one participant shares an age-appropriate twist on the familiar Serenity Prayer: “Grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway, the good fortune to run into the ones I do, and the eyesight to tell the difference.” This group of seniors had just read Gerald Haslam’s short story, “The Horned Toad,” about a boy learning to live with his great-grandmother.

I am transported to Guatemala when I read Ana Mejia’s reflections on sharing the story “Mamá de niebla,” by Poldy Bird, with Latina parents at Trenton’s Children’s Home Society. Ana’s report captured how Bird’s story connected to a participant’s experience of being separated, as a child, from her mother and homeland. This participant said that as a child, her new city residence made her feel isolated, but that she would go to the highest part of her house to see the mountains that reminded her of the Guatemalan countryside. I imagine what she saw and my mind wanders—when and how have I tried to “feel home” when I was far away?

Rumi, a favorite poet of mine, wrote,

*This being human is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!...  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

Reading coordinators’ reports involves the unexpected visitors to my imagination: participants from New Jersey, the New York metropolitan area and Philadelphia offer their wisdom and life trails. I am grateful to the coordinators for sending these “guides” my way.

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# Faraway setting of "Girl" provides mirrors of home

by Anndee Hochman

We were a long way from Antigua.

On a brittle January night, I read Jamaica Kincaid's story, "Girl," with a group of Philadelphia women in an intensive six-month residential substance abuse program. Later, I used the story in a very different setting: a subsidized housing complex for older adults in southern New Jersey.

"Girl" takes place in a world geographically and culturally removed from our own: an island under the harsh thumb of British rule, a place where women grow okra and know which herbs make a good medicine for a cold. Yet in it, two disparate groups of readers found their own lives reflected.

At Interim House, where part of the women's recovery involves contending with the labels imposed on them by self and others ("addict...whore...criminal"), the term "wharf-rat boys," used by the mother in "Girl," pushed us to look hard at stereotypes.

Rebekah said, "My mother used to tell me not to go with riff-raff, but that's exactly who I was attracted to, the riff-raff boys. I got together with one, and I learned that they can't help being who they are. Maybe they didn't come from good families or get an education, but that doesn't mean they're bad people." She could understand the character's prejudiced view and, at the same time, go beyond it; even the riff-raff, she knew, weren't always what they seemed.

It was the story's final line that drew the most intimate response. "*You mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?*" the mother questions. When, I asked, did you start to think of yourself as a woman instead of a girl?

For Rebekah, it was when her mother began giving her hot toddies; for Wakeyah, it was "when my stepfather lay down on me, telling me I was a whore, and

I decided to prove him wrong."

Womanhood, in these tales, came with a coercive shove. But as we talked, the women began to reclaim the word in a way that put power back in their hands. AnnMarie said, "I didn't become a woman until two years ago, when I came here [to Interim House] for the first time and started opening up." And LaWanda agreed: "Now, I'm becoming a 'lady,' someone who knows who she is and stands up for herself."

At Elkis House, readers were initially preoccupied with the story's foreignness, but as we talked, aspects of "Girl" rang familiar.

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## "For these parents, too, the question begged: Would the kids be all right?"

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"I always ironed my clothes," Art said. "My mother taught me." That led to reminiscence, some of it still charged with resentment, about a gendered division of chores. "My brothers did nothing," Anne practically spit. "Never peeled an apple, never took out the trash. They just expected everything to be done for them!"

These older adults—high school graduates, raised working-class, with adult children who had gone on to college and beyond—were sensitive to the class striving in Kincaid's story.

The mother in "Girl" cautions her daughter to sew a loose hem "so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming." Art suggested, "maybe she's talking about not wanting her daughter to look like poor people. It seems like the mother doesn't have a very high station in life, and she wants her daughter to be on a higher level, to achieve more."

Gradually, the distance between our world and the world of "Girl" shrank. "...after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" For these parents, too, the question begged: Would the kids be all right? "You never know," Art said. "You can tell [kids] everything you want, but in the end it's still a question mark."

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**"Stories are light. Light is precious in a world so dark. Begin at the beginning...Make some light."**

--Kate DiCamillo

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### Coordinators:

#### New Jersey

Patricia Andres  
Stephanie Hanzel Cohen  
Alma Concepción  
Suzy Dwyer  
Margaret Griffin  
Ana Graciela Mejia Guillon  
Shelley Kiernan  
Angélica Mariani  
Assenka Oksiloff  
Gloria Perez  
Jo L. Schmidt  
Marcy Schwartz  
Patricia Smith  
Diane Wilfrid

#### Pennsylvania

Scott Feifer  
Anndee Hochman  
Lawrence McCarty

## Pushing beyond stereotypes to “the whole story”

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**“Poetry is not a luxury...[it] is the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives.”**

--Audre Lorde

The men spent five minutes on the title. The text was Raymond Carver’s minimalist short story, “Fat.” The setting was the Father Center in Trenton, in a building tucked between a pawn shop and a convenience store, where fourteen men gathered for their final session of People & Stories.

At the Father Center, the men—mostly unemployed fathers who do not live with their children—receive case management, computer training, job counseling and parenting education.

There was Michael, who said he’d loved the stories for their poetry. “I’m a musician, a drummer, so I find it to be like lyrics. They get in your mind.”

A few seats away was Andrew, who remembered that when he was young, he’d listen to presidential addresses with a dictionary in his lap, so he could look up any unfamiliar words.

“I’m a big who/what/where/when guy,” he said. “When I listen to the stories, I see how they apply to anger management, prioritizing, relationships, the underlying effect of things. I look at what’s not exactly said.”

Next to him sat Julius, who said the stories and discussions “make you think outside the box. A lot of them, when you read the title, you think one thing. When you read the story, it’s totally something different. That’s the mystery of it.”

Today they would plumb the mysteries of Carver’s enigmatic story, about a waitress’s encounter with an obese male customer in the diner where she works. When one reader suggested a literal meaning of “fat”—“If you’re overweight, you either have an eating problem or a problem with your bodily functions”—Julius read the title another way. “That’s only one meaning of ‘fat,’” he said. “It could be something good.” Mike added, “Do you think it could be wealthy, like ‘fat with cash’?”

Andrew probed deeper. “Maybe it’s about dealing with something you’re overwhelmed with, something extra that you don’t need.” And Sean said, “What comes to my mind is misery: fat and miserable.”

Coordinator Suzy Dwyer read the story—a short piece packed with shadows and strangeness. The fat man refers to himself as “we.” Most of the minor characters have names, but not the waitress or the fat man. The waitress, at one point, lifts the lid of the fat customer’s sugar bowl, thinking, “I know now I was after something. But I don’t know what.”

The story ends with the waitress and her boyfriend, the diner’s cook, having sex, “though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all.” She seems resolved to do something different: “It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it.”

This group began with the waitress’s first impression of her customer: “This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough.” That line opened the door to a discussion of stereotypes about overweight people and others.

“That implies that fat people are sloppy, that they don’t care about appearance,” said Sean. “But what about people who don’t have control over their weight?” Julius wondered.

“Fat people are just as human as normal-weighted people,” said Andrew, the group’s who/what/when guy. “Some are sloppy; some are neat. Once you get to know someone, you don’t think, ‘Oh, you’re fat,’ all the time.”

“Why do we label people?” Dwyer asked. “Why can’t we just look at people and say, ‘There’s a human being?’”

“We label something in order to understand it,” Sean said. “Or even out of respect,” added Andrew. “Like if there’s a guy called ‘Big Red’ out of reverence, you might think, ‘I’m in Big Red’s territory. I’m going to be all right.’”

“Sometimes labeling people makes us feel better,” said Roger, a quiet participant with glasses. And Andrew finished his thought. “Because then we don’t have to

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### Coordinators:

#### New York

Alma Concepción  
Deborah Salmon

#### France

Katia Salomon



look in the mirror and see ourselves.”

Dwyer asked about the fat man’s odd habit of speech, referring to himself in the plural: “I think we will begin with a Caesar salad... We’ll see about dessert later.”

“I noticed that,” said Sean. “Why is he using ‘we’? That probably reflects a belief he has about himself. He probably feels like more than one person.”

Andrew thought the use of “we” expressed the man’s self-consciousness. “He knows he’s big. He knows everybody realizes that.” As a black man, he said, “When you’re the only spot in the milk, people are reacting to you. This guy is aware of his own shortcomings.”

The waitress, initially fixated on the man’s size, comes to appreciate his politeness and warmth; she starts to defend him against the other workers’ taunts. When Rudy, the waitress’s boyfriend who also cooks in the diner, says, “Harriet says you got a fat man from the circus out there,” she snaps back, “Rudy, he is fat, but that is not the whole story.”

“She began to realize there was more to him than being a fat person,” Sean said. Others said her encounter with the fat man changed her relationship to Rudy.

“Rudy is not ‘really there,’” said Joe. “Rudy is very regimented,” Andrew added. “Her life is so routine. Rudy is in his own world. But the fat guy is polite and congenial.”

Some thought the story’s final words—“My life is going to change. I feel it”—indicated that the waitress might be pregnant. Others were sure she was planning to leave Rudy. Andrew thought the character had experienced an internal shift: “The light just came on. She’s going to make a move. I think she’ll keep her job, but look for someone she can relate to.”

“Someone compatible,” added Roger.

And why, Dwyer wondered, do neither of these important characters have names in Carver’s story?

“Because then we put ourselves in their place,” Julius said.

“The story makes you think about the interactions you have—what you might take away from your interactions and gain from them,” said Andrew. He said it wasn’t the first time he’d found something personal in a People & Stories text. When the group read Chinua Achebe’s “Marriage Is a Private Affair,” about a young man

who, against his father’s wishes, marries a woman from a different tribe, Andrew thought about his own daughter, an accomplished college graduate who “took up with a guy who doesn’t have a GED. I had to think about what she is looking at in him and just allow it to evolve.”

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Dwyer remembers the spirited discussion that followed Achebe’s story. “I knew that this was a group of guys who were not afraid to talk. They were really engaged and opinionated. They wanted to grapple with the hard questions.” Over the course of eight weeks, the group has delved into issues of gender (“Spilled Salt,” by Barbara Neely), family relationships (“Marriage”) and racial stereotyping (“Breaking and Entering,” by Sherman Alexie).

For some, the Carver story stirred up memories of significant encounters with strangers. Mike remembered a time when, after drinking several beers on a Florida beach, he tossed the beer cans in a trash barrel, and a stranger came over to thank him for not littering.

Andrew recalled being hospitalized and deciding to sneak out for a smoke. In the elevator was a woman who immediately caught his attention. “She was a sister with a speckled Angela Davis ‘fro and crystal blue eyes. We had a three-and-a-half-hour conversation. A very intimate discussion. I never did get my smoke. I think she was an angel.”

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***“...the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets...In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t. And yet you want to know again. That is their mystery and their magic.”***

--Arundhati Roy

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## Multi-lingual board member loves cultural link

Cynthia M. Hendrickson brings global experience to P&S/GyC

Her first language was Haitian Creole. As an adult, she dreamed in French. While living in Rio de Janeiro, she learned Brazilian Portuguese well enough to help write a manual on mobility training for the blind.

When Cynthia Minor Hendrickson first heard of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos twenty years ago, it was the connection of language and culture that intrigued her—the way stories can become a link to a new land or a bond to a distant home country.

“I think it’s awfully hard for people going into a country where they’re not necessarily familiar with the language or, even if they grew up speaking English, didn’t have a chance to learn it well or learn to read. [Gente y Cuentos] could open up great horizons for them,” she said.

Hendrickson was living in Pennington by then, following her family’s stints in Colombia, Brazil and French-speaking West Africa. She attended a few People & Stories benefits and met founder Sarah Hirschman. But she was too busy with the League of Women Voters and the local planning board to be more involved in the organization. This year, after two decades of admiring People & Stories from afar, she joined the board.

Hendrickson brings her multi-lingual fluency and a lifelong love of reading. In Haiti, where she grew up—her father ran the electric company for the entire island—she listened to household servants telling folk tales in their native Creole. The family didn’t have a telephone, and Hendrickson was an only child. Books became both sources of entertainment and companions.

She remembers one beloved children’s book about a recalcitrant duck named Ping; to her delight, she recently came across a copy of the book in the Princeton Library. As an adolescent, she discovered her parents’ old copies of Dickens and was immediately hooked. “They weren’t easy,

and I was very taken with them.”

Living amid so many different cultures and languages, Hendrickson said, helped her understand how words and stories can help people bridge geographies and make sense of differences.

“I was very aware of how important it is for people to have an opportunity to hear other languages and literature that’s different [from their own]. I also felt it was important to read to my children.”

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**“What I love is that... the sessions...open up possibilities for people to speak, referencing their own experiences, without being judged or feeling that there’s anything wrong with doing that.”**

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Hendrickson is still an avid reader, though she says her “antique brain” has become impatient with dense, gloomy non-fiction—the sort of books chosen by a reading group she belonged to for a while. “I now love deep mysteries and fiction.”

As a child, Hendrickson was home-schooled by her mother; as an adult, she taught others in turn, working with deaf children in Haiti and with nursery school teachers in Jamaica. In Rio, she led a Girl Scout troupe and volunteered as a reader at the Institute for the Blind.

While Hendrickson has yet to attend a People & Stories session, she has read extensively about the organization and its history, mission and method. She looks forward to seeing how people of different ages and backgrounds react to the stories.

“What I love about P & S is that...the sessions are entirely non-judgmental. They open up possibilities for people to speak, referencing their own experiences, without being judged or feeling that there’s anything wrong with doing that. Many people don’t get a chance to do that, ever.”

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***“Stories you read when you’re the right age never quite leave you. You may forget who wrote them or what the story was called. Sometimes you’ll forget precisely what happened, but if a story touches you it will stay with you, haunting the places in your mind that you rarely ever visit.”***

--Neil Gaiman

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# Stories expand perspective for one Bo reader

## Talking with Joel Prins

In Raymond Carver's story about a husband with limited perspective and a visitor who is blind, Joel Prins could "see" through the eyes of both characters.

Prins, 25, said he used to feel like the husband in "Cathedral"—skeptical, narrow-minded, guarded against intimacy. But lately, he said, he is more like the blind man, open-minded and gregarious.

He credits *People & Stories* for that change. Three weeks into his second series at the Bo Robinson Assessment & Treatment Center, a correctional facility in Trenton, Prins recalled his initial reticence in the group.

"At first, I was a little leery of participating. Sometimes I don't want people to know what I'm thinking." But Prins found that, when he did venture to speak, "I was getting positive feedback. Now I say what's on my mind."

In a summertime discussion of "Cathedral," Prins listened intently as coordinator Stephanie Hanzel read; the men sipped coffee Hanzel had brought as a nod to the characters' avid consumption of food, alcohol and marijuana in the story.

When Hanzel asked the group what associations they had with cathedrals, Prins said, "Bleak. Gloomy. Quiet. Vast." He spoke often and freely, sometimes amplifying another man's point, other times disagreeing with quiet firmness.

When someone suggested the husband may be jealous of the blind man, a friend and former employer of his wife's, Prins said, "Robert [the blind man] is a part of his wife's past that he had nothing to do with. The blind man ties her to her past."

Later, in an interview, Prins said that aspect of the story struck home. "I had a negative view of my ex's best friend, who was a man. But he became a really good friend of mine."

In "Cathedral," he said, the husband's stereotypes of blind people bump against the reality of Robert, who is social, self-sufficient and wise. Robert does not wear

dark glasses or use a cane. At the story's close, he helps the narrator to draw a cathedral on an old paper bag—a feat of art and imagination the narrator never would have attempted alone.

The narrator closes his eyes as he draws. "My eyes were still closed," Carver writes. "I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything."

For Prins, that moment signaled a crucial shift in the husband's perspective. "His perceptions started to change the minute the blind man walked out of the car. At the end...he was perceiving things without opening his eyes."

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**" 'In here,' he said, gesturing toward the windowless walls, 'if you want to change the atmosphere, just pick up a book.' "**

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Prins said *People & Stories* has altered the way he thinks. "The first course was a beautiful experience: seeing everybody's viewpoint on everything. You got to think outside your own horizons. It made you open up your own imagination...Before, I'd be close-minded and not care what other people thought. Now, I see things from other people's points of view."

As a child, growing up in Hoboken, Prins preferred baseball to books. Later, though, he discovered "how a book could become your friend." Sometimes he eavesdropped on his ex's book discussion group, but until *People & Stories*, "I never really picked up a book and looked at chapter four, line 37."

Favorite stories from his first series include "How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl or Halfie)," by Junot Diaz (he liked the humor) and "The Things They Carried," by Tim O'Brien, which "helped you think about what you're carrying on the inside—your emotions—and your physical burdens."

He reads differently now. "In here," he said, gesturing toward the windowless walls, "if you want to change the atmosphere, just pick up a book. Your imagination takes over."

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***"When we read a story, we inhabit it. The covers of the book are like a roof and four walls. What is to happen next will take place within the four walls of the story. And this is possible because the story's voice makes everything its own."***

--John Berger

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## On the Bookshelf...

*The Age of Wonder*, by Richard Holmes.  
New York: Vintage Books, 2008.

by Heidi Atkinson

When Richard Holmes set out to explore the second scientific revolution—an exciting period of breakthroughs in the 18th century—he did so through a series of vignettes that follow the lives of the leading scientists of the era. He begins with Joseph Banks, a botanist whose fascination with and respect for the culture of Tahiti foreshadowed the later development of anthropology. Later, Banks served as president of the United Kingdom’s leading sponsor of scientific study, the Royal Society.

Banks was patron to some of the most important discoverers of his time, including such diverse talents as William Herschel, whose advanced telescopes led him to discover Uranus; his sister Caroline, dubbed “the Great Comet Finder;” and

Humphry Davy, inventor of modern chemistry. The narrative is enriched by appearances from the great writers of the day. Advances in studies of the physical world were a source of inspiration and, as the title indicates, wonder for the creative artists. The chemist Davy never lost a youthful passion for poetry and often connected science and storytelling. He maintained a lifelong friendship with the poet Coleridge. Coleridge himself was part of an influential debate that coined the new term “scientist.” One chapter revolves around Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the novel’s connection to contemporary ideas of vitality, pain, and the gruesome potential of electrical reanimation.

Combining personal idiosyncrasies, thrilling discoveries, and eager delight in the potential of science, Richard Holmes produces an absorbing history that truly creates a sense of wonder.