



Deborah Blum

There was probably no way for Deborah Blum to grow up as anything but a science writer. Her father, an exuberant entomologist, liked to bring his research home and her mother was a freelance writer.

She was born in Urbana, Illinois, on October 19, 1954, while both her parents were still students at the University of Illinois. But the family moved to Louisiana after her father took a job at Louisiana State University. Deborah and her three sisters kept snakes as pets, grew tadpoles into frogs and collected butterflies. The family went on bug hunting adventures to Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, England, and Canada, where the girls helped their father in his research.

At first she wanted to become a scientist and, in 1972, started college at **Florida State University** studying chemistry. She still thinks chemistry is the most astonishingly beautiful science but she did discover that a laboratory is no place for an absent-minded klutz. Therefore she transferred to the **University of Georgia, graduating in 1976 with a major in journalism and a double minor in political science and anthropology**. At first she worked as a journalist for several smaller newspapers, but she soon learned that **she wanted to write about science**. She quit her job and went to graduate school at the **University of Wisconsin-Madison, studying science writing in the journalism program**.

She began reporting on science for the **Sacramento Bee** in 1984 where she stayed for 13 years, **going to Alaska to cover glaciers, Hawaii to observe volcanoes, Houston to report on the tragic explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, and writing about global climate change**, but her most influential work was a **series on ethical issues in primate research, called The Monkey Wars**, for which she was awarded the **Pulitzer Prize**.

The series became the starting point for a book, also called **The Monkey Wars**, published in 1994. By then, she'd learned to value the way a book allows a writer to delve deeper into complicated questions and published a book exploring gender differences, called **Sex on the Brain**, in 1997. That same year, she returned to the University of Wisconsin as a journalism professor where she stayed for 18 years. While there, she wrote for **The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, Slate, Time, Scientific American, Nature, and New Scientist**, while also serving as co-editor of a widely used guide to science journalism, **A Field Guide for Science Writers**.

Blum began working on books that used moments in history to explore the way that science works. She wanted to look at the way new ideas in science can change human culture. The first such book, **Love at Goon Park** was published in 2002 and was a finalist for the **Los Angeles Times Book Prize**. The book is both the biography of a complex and driven psychologist – Harry F. Harlow – and the biography of an intellectual idea, the idea that love actually matters.

Her next, **Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death**, published in 2006, looked at a band of brilliant 19th century scientists who were willing to risk their careers to investigate the idea that the dead can communicate with the living.

Her latest book, **The Poisoner's Handbook** is a story of two pioneering scientists determined to solve poison mysteries and murders. **The book was named one of the top 100 books of the year by Amazon**. She is currently working on a book about the story of poisonous foods and food politics at the turn of the 20th century.

In July 2015, she was named director of the Knight Science Journalism program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she is planning to launch a new science magazine, Undark, in 2016.