

The Winners of the 3 Quarks Daily 2009 Prize in Science - 3 Quarks Daily

3quarksdaily (<https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2009/06/the-winners-of-the-3-quarks-daily-2009-prize-in-science.html>) · by S. Abbas Raza



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Professor Steven Pinker has picked the three winners:

1. Top Quark, \$1000: Daylight Atheism: Bands of Iron
(<http://www.daylightatheism.org/2009/02/bands-of-iron.html>)
2. Strange Quark, \$300: Southern Fried Science: The ecological disaster that is dolphin safe tuna
(<http://southernfriedscience.com/2009/02/16/the-ecological-disaster-that-is-dolphin-safe-tuna/>)
3. Charm Quark, \$200: Bad Astronomy: Ten Things You Don't Know About Hubble
(<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/badastronomy/2009/05/13/ten-things-you-dont-know-about-hubble/>)

Here is what Professor Pinker had to say about the winners (he even manages to include a charming mini-science essay of his own!):

When I edited *The Best American Science and Nature Writing* (<http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/books/basnw/basnw/index.html>) a few years ago, here's how I characterized what I look for in a science essay:

The best science essays give readers the blissful click, the satisfying aha!, of seeing a puzzling phenomenon explained. When I was a graduate student the antiquated plumbing in my apartment sprang a leak, and an articulate plumber (perhaps an underemployed PhD) explained what caused it. When you shut off a tap, a large incompressible mass moving at high speed has to decelerate very quickly. This imparts a big force to the pipes, like a car slamming into a wall, which eventually damages the threads and causes a leak. To deal with this problem, plumbers used to install a closed vertical section of pipe, a "pipe riser," near each faucet. When the faucet is shut, the water compresses the column of air in the riser, which acts like a shock absorber. Unfortunately, gas under pressure is absorbed by a liquid. Over time, the air in the column dissolves into the water, which fills the pipe riser, rendering it useless. So every now and again a plumber has to bleed the system and let air back into the risers, a bit of preventive maintenance the landlord had neglected. It may not be the harmony of the spheres, but the plumber's disquisition captures what I treasure most in science writing: the ability to show how a seemingly capricious occurrence falls out of laws of greater generality.

By that standard, Daylight Atheism's Bands of Iron (<http://www.daylightatheism.org/2009/02/bands-of-iron.html>) is my top pick. He starts with something that attracts your attention purely on aesthetic grounds – stripes in a rock. He explains it by invoking deep, non-obvious, yet understandable principles, at the same time illuminating one of the most interesting phenomena in science – the coevolution of early life and the planet Earth –with a nod to a current issue for good measure.

My second pick is Southern Fried Science's The ecological disaster that is dolphin safe tuna (<http://southernfriedscience.com/2009/02/16/the-ecological-disaster-that-is-dolphin-safe-tuna/>). It's a fine example of one of

what I consider to be one of the most important lessons of science: that emotional moralization can lead to outcomes that are morally worse than those based on hard-headed analyses.

Third prize goes to Bad Astronomy's Ten Things You Don't Know About Hubble

(<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/badastronomy/2009/05/13/ten-things-you-dont-know-about-hubble/>). I liked the unassuming style, the slew of interesting facts, and the window it provides into the life a working-day scientist – and not the Alpha Primate, but the unsung graduate students and postdocs who actually do the work of science. Finally, a good blog should not just present text but take advantage of its medium, including page structure and graphics. I liked the use of a captioned slide show, and the varied photographs, particularly the gorgeous opening shot of the Hubble Telescope against the curve of the Earth and the closeup of a lavender Venus. It's one of the greatest displays of philistinism in human history that so few people appreciate the breathtaking photography made possible by probes like Hubble and Cassini (and, of course, the large terrestrial telescopes). Not only are the photographs beautiful in their own right, but just think about what we are looking at!

[Thanks to the members of my lab group — Brian Atwood, James Lee, Rebecca Sutherland, and Kyle Thomas – for their votes and comments.]

Congratulations to the winners (Please contact me by email, I will send the money later today! And feel free to leave your acceptance speech as a comment here!), and thanks to everyone who participated. (We've added the winners to our blogroll – hint!) Thanks also, of course, to Professor Pinker for doing the final judging. The whole thing was fun, and we learned of some great blogs we didn't know about!

The striking three prize logos at the top of this post were designed, respectively, by Vicki Winters, Carla Goller, and Sughra Raza. Our thanks to each of them. I hope the winners will display them with pride on their own blogs!

Details about how the 3QD prizes work, here

(<https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2009/05/3-quarks-daily-announces-4-annual-blog-prizes.html>).