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21W.777 The Science Essay

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Homework #1

Due for class Th 2/5

- 1) WRITE a letter to me introducing yourself as a writer. What are your hopes, expectations, anxieties re: this class? Recent good and/or bad experiences with writing? Approx. 1 page double-spaced.

- 2) READ the first set of essays [handouts], which reflect on science in varied ways. These are:
 - Alan Lightman’s “Smile.” With a doctorate in theoretical physics, Lightman was an active researcher in astronomy and physics for two decades; he has taught physics at both Harvard and MIT. In recent years Lightman has turned his attention to writing; the author of the novel *Einstein’s Dreams* and many essays, he currently teaches writing at MIT.
 - Lewis Thomas’s “Crickets, Bats, Cats and Chaos.” Thomas (1913-1993) was a doctor who wrote several best-selling collections of essays and a regular column in *Natural History*, which is where this essay first appeared.
 - Brian Doyle, “Joyas Voladoras.” Doyle, an essayist, also edits *Portland* magazine at the University of Portland.
 - William Speed Weed’s “106 Science Claims and a Truckful of Baloney,” which originally appeared in *Popular Science*. Weed is a writer who sometimes writes on science topics.

FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Why did these writers write these essays? –i.e., What’s the main idea of each essay, and what do you think the writers want readers to think about (and do)? What grabs you about these essays? Why? How? What puzzles you?

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Homework #2

Due for class T 2/10

- 1) READ the 2nd set of essays:
 - Alan Lightman, “Prisoner of the Wired World.” The essay appears in his recent collection, *A Sense of the Mysterious*.
 - Walter Kirn, “The Autumn of the Multitaskers.” A novelist and critic, Kirn has written often on topics relating the quality of contemporary life to technology. [in Groopman]

- 2) FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Think about the contexts the writers create for their essay topics, and also about the ways the writers get—and keep—the reader’s attention. What writerly techniques do they use? Do the concerns of Lightman and Kirn resonate with you? In what ways? Why might it be useful to write about topics like this?

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