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Bibliography. Book review

Grandes comunicadores de la ciencia. De Galileo a Rodríguez de la Fuente

Bienvenido León

Published by Comares, Granada (2024), 291 pp.

“The most useful science is that whose fruits are most communicable.” This quote from Leonardo Da Vinci resonates well with this book because it precisely conveys how renowned communicators have made the fruits of science communicable. *Grandes comunicadores de la ciencia*, by Bienvenido León, is a selection of men and women who both made and communicated science. Ten great figures from history whom the reader will primarily approach in their role as communicators.

The author has a long career in studying science communication, and what he presents in this book is an idea that has been in his mind since he prepared his doctoral thesis; therefore, it is a very well-thought-out work. Each chapter addresses a figure, introducing biographical details and their historical, social, and scientific context. It then dissects their main works of science dissemination, analyzing the characteristics that make them remarkable. Finally, under the heading “point of view,” León interviews an expert on each communicator.

The first communicator the book approaches is Galileo Galilei (16th-17th centuries), a Renaissance man considered the founder of modern physics. The author tells us that he invented the scientific article, writing clear and direct arguments. Anglo-Swiss Jane Marcet was not a scientist, but she was the first writer of books for the dissemination of scientific content in her time (17th-18th centuries), aimed at those who needed an introduction to these subjects, especially women and young people. The next chapter is dedicated to Alexander von Humboldt, a Prussian who lived between two centuries, being an Enlightenment thinker of the 18th century and a romantic of the 19th. As an Enlightenment thinker, he compiled encyclopedic knowledge about various natural sciences, and as a romantic writer, he also wrote with emotion. Next, Bienvenido León defends Darwin’s (19th century) figure as a disseminator because the author of *On the Origin of Species* achieved a simple writing style that progressively built an argument, a key factor in making his ideas as popular as they were.

The following six chapters focus on communicators of the 20th century, including two contemporaries: David Attenborough and Jane Goodall. But, following chronological order, we encounter a universal Spaniard, Ramón y Cajal. The father of neuroscience used the grandiloquent language of his time and his realistic drawings to disseminate the idea that neurons are not a connected tissue, but individual cells. Another Spaniard, Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente, did not stand out as much for his contributions to science as for his genius as a communicator. He managed to have an entire country in front of the television set to watch the documentaries of “El hombre y la tierra”. He was capable of improvising stories, with pauses and changes in intonation that mesmerized audiences. Between these two Spaniards, there is a chapter for Rachel Carson, a precursor of modern ecology with her book *Silent Spring*, in which she presents writing between reality and fiction, seducing the reader with a poetic language.

In the last chapters, we find an American and two Englishmen. Astronomer Carl Sagan was catapulted to fame for his appearances on television and for his series “Cosmos: A Personal Journey”, although he popularized science through all available media at that time. His book *The Dragons of Eden* stands out, awarded with a Pulitzer Prize. Many vocations of astronomers are attributed to his popularizing efforts.

David Attenborough graduated in Zoology and began working at the BBC. Now he has eight decades under his belt as a writer, presenter, commentator, and television producer. His documentaries are a global reference due to their quality and innovation. Finally, with Jane Goodall, we approach a life marked by a passion for chimpanzees, a passion she knew how to convey in publications and documentaries, and through her commitment to conservation and animal welfare.

The distance from Galileo’s century to our days offers this publication the possibility of referring to the dissemination of science through the means –and methods– of communication of each era. In this sense, the author’s interest in documentaries and television is evident. Through figures like Attenborough, Rodríguez de la Fuente, Carl Sagan, and Jane Goodall, the role of documentary genre and television as eminent transmitters of science communication in the 20th century is highlighted.

Some readers may miss other prominent communicators; obviously, a selection of ten people must leave out others who indeed have sufficient merits to appear in a book of masters of science communication. However, this selection provides a broad and inclusive vision since there are men and women from different eras and countries, researchers in different fields, or simply science communicators. For those approaching science communicators for the first time, this book will be an interesting discovery. For those who already know the scientific contributions of these figures, this reading will be an opportunity to see them from another perspective, in their roles as writers, illustrators, photographers, scriptwriters, presenters, announcers..., that is, as communicators.

It seems to me that, while there are many books on science communication, there are not as many books about science communicators. They wrote books to disseminate their knowledge; Bienvenido León has written a book about them as scientific communicators. What did they communicate? How? Why did they do it well? The author does not explicitly tell us; he expects us to deduce it, to find some pattern that explains the effectiveness of communication by the great communicators.