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Letters

On Dietrick Thomsen

Standing by the door, catching a bit of SCIENCE NEWS on the run as always, I noticed Dietrick Thomsen's picture on the first page and figured he had just won another award (SN: 8/6/88, p. 83). Then I read that he had died. I have to tell you that brought tears to my eyes. I have been reading SCIENCE NEWS for 10 years or so, and it has always seemed to me that the sheer energy of his writing made literature of science. Besides, I've always been a sucker for whimsy.

Guided by the clarity and integrity (to use Aquinas' terms) with which he presented the subject he loved so much, I was able to incorporate some physics into a book I wrote on the philosophy of piano tuning. I feel certain he has helped many, many other people turn their heads "from the evil to

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Cover: The radiotelescopes of the Very Large Array (VLA), near Socorro, N.M., have been instrumented to listen to the faint radio signals of the Voyager 2 spacecraft as it flies past Neptune next summer. Equipping the VLA for the Neptune encounter, however, has also made it capable of improved solar observations, planetary radar maps and other studies. (Photo: Geoffrey R. Chester)



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contemplate a pattern." I hope he knew how good his work was.

Anita T. Sullivan
Corvallis, Ore.

Over the years, while I never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Thomsen, I had come to feel as though he were an old friend. When SCIENCE NEWS would arrive I would quickly thumb through and read his articles first, for I knew I would find not only a scholarly scientific article but one written by an obviously poetic and deeply philosophical individual — a thinking man.

How often I wanted to write to him and express my appreciation and admiration. And now it is too late.

Excellent though SCIENCE NEWS may be, it will never be the same without Dietrick Thomsen.

Edward J. Lawless
Harleysville, Pa.

Mr. Thomsen wrote a lucid, elegant prose that illuminated for the lay reader whatever subject he treated. Many of us longtime subscribers feel a personal loss in the passing of this special person. Shakespeare said it best: "He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again."

Sara Meric
Santa Monica, Calif.

Dietrick Thomsen seemed, from his writing, to be a person not really looking for a lot of praise. Maybe that's why I didn't send something like this earlier. Not having known him, I assume he was like his writing—relaxed but intense, incisive, able to focus on the essential and interesting parts of a situation, with a searching eye for the implications, and able to express himself with that superb clarity, and frequently with wit and a calm,

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even reserved, good-natured and hopeful wonderment at what we've learned, how we're trying, and the remaining mysteries.

I would have thought he was older. His writing had such a lively ease that it seemed it must have come from long, long familiarity with so much of the great science and math, and from a long lifetime of hanging out with words, carrying the best of them into combinations so right for their purpose. At any rate, his writing made beautiful and large use of the years he did have.

*C. Dahlgreen
Oak Park, Ill.*

I discovered SCIENCE NEWS while a college dropout in 1969—and immediately learned to look for Dietrick Thomsen's byline. I frequently wished I could have talked/argued with him in person.

There are many brilliant researchers. There are many people who can look at life from a different angle, and so explain things more clearly. But very, very few of the latter have any extensive knowledge of advanced physical sciences, so they frequently believe in the myth of the cold, aloof, uncaring science persona—and quite simply are blind to the fun and games.

Please make sure his successor knows, as Mr. Thomsen did, that physics is fun!

*Fran Tabo
Kalispell, Mont.*

The clarity of Mr. Thomsen's reporting was remarkable. I could read through his descriptions of recent results in particle physics easily. And at the end I felt I really understood what was going on.

I enjoyed the many flashes of humanity, of the personality of the scientist, that came through his writings. I got a picture of physicists as real people with hopes and fears and motivations like anybody else. And I got a sense of the sheer enjoyment of solving puzzles and delving into mysteries.

I also enjoyed the philosophical pieces. I see plenty of wild-eyed mystics and plenty of cold-hearted agnostics in our world. Mr. Thomsen showed a different way. He was passionate about his beliefs, and at the same time erudite and completely rational.

The occasional photo gave me the impression of an impish personality, one that was amused, and probably not bound, by social conventions and sensibilities.

I am sorry that I never got to say "thank you" to Mr. Thomsen. I will say it to the rest of the SCIENCE NEWS team: Thanks!

*Chuck Kollars
Palo Alto, Calif.*

It is with deep regret and a sense of irreplaceable loss that I read of the death of Dietrick Thomsen. I shall miss his unique ability to explicate complex concepts and to make them more understandable to those of us in different disciplines of science. His philosophical contributions were also a delight in explorations "off the beaten path." I would have deemed it a privilege to have known him personally.

*Julius M. Tesi
Buckeye Lake, Ohio*

In the summer of 1979, I appeared on the doorsteps of SCIENCE NEWS, graduate degree in physics fresh in hand, in an attempt to master that enigmatic art known as science writing. I vividly recall being directed to a small office, overflowing with books and journals, and being told that Dietrick Thomsen would soon arrive to take me under his wing during my internship that summer.

Upon hearing this news, I was torn between delight and dismay. In those pre-*DISCOVER* and pre-*SCIENCE '80* days, Thomsen was a lone pioneer whose byline appeared over a wealth of physics history. I was fearful of writing my first amateurish copy under the eyes of such a veteran. But from our first introduction, I acquired a patient and thoughtful teacher, whose lessons stay with me to this day. I am still trying to emulate the rare combination of scholarship, philosophic reflection and wit that could always be found in his writing. The field of physics has lost a valuable communicator. I shall miss him.

*Marcia F. Bartusiak
Norfolk, Va.*

I am a microbiologist/biochemist/technical writer/mother. But when I read SCIENCE NEWS, I read Dietrick Thomsen's physics articles first. The progression of logic in each piece made me understand and see significance in even the most convoluted aspect of physics.

*Karin Everett
Memphis, Tenn.*

I am a 32-year-old housewife with a B.A. in classics and no academic science background at all. Dietrick Thomsen's clear, interesting and often intentionally funny articles always made me feel less like a leper in a technological society. He was my favorite writer from the day he used "hypostatic" to describe the particle nature and the wave nature of light. When he wrote about particle physics I understood, at least while I was reading the article. I was looking forward so much to reading what he would say about the Space Telescope (if it ever gets up there). Although I will still look forward to SCIENCE NEWS, it was his articles that made me especially happy.

If he was anything to talk to like he was to read, you must all miss him deeply.

*Laura Jefferson
Melrose, Mass.*

It is rare to read someone who can write on science as clearly and as interestingly as Dietrick Thomsen did. In reading SCIENCE NEWS, I quickly got so I could recognize a Dietrick Thomsen article by its opening paragraph. He always gave in that initial paragraph enough information both to ground and to enhance my knowledge while at the same time engaging my interest.

I have enjoyed and appreciated his work. I will miss it in the pages of your fine magazine.

*Patricia Williams
Covesville, Va.*

For the most part, I must confess, I pay little attention to bylines. But there was one writer whose name I did start to notice associated with especially well-written articles on physics and astronomy—that of Dietrick

Thomsen. I particularly enjoyed his writings on the philosophical aspects of physics and quantum mechanics, for they yielded insight along with the nuts and bolts of reporting. It is truly a loss for the scientific world that we will no longer be treated to little gems authored by one of its great reporters.

*Brad Benton
Austin, Tex.*

When I was in high school, my father would bring copies of SCIENCE NEWS and I would devour anything about particle physics. As a result, I majored in physics for a while in college, and I am now an educator at the Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia. My goal is to someday inspire a love of physics in some student the same way Dietrick Thomsen inspired it in me.

The world of science is a little less illuminated with his passing; perhaps one of the sparks he sent off will ignite the fire of genius.

*Susan M. Petroulas
Runnemede, N.J.*

Dietrick Thomsen was one of my favorite writers. He made many complex phenomena understandable. If he was half as good a person as he was a writer/editor, there will be much grief.

I don't usually write notes such as this, but somehow through the years, I guess I came to regard him as a caring teacher with a playful sense of humor. The impact of his articles snuck up on me. I am truly sorry he is gone and will miss his contributions.

*Eric R. Sigmond
Inverness, Ill.*

The passing of Dietrick Thomsen is a great loss not only to those of us who knew him but to all readers of SCIENCE NEWS. Dietrick had his own following of readers who respected him and read his work faithfully. Dietrick's stories always elicited the greatest number of letters to the editor—a sign of his popularity but also of the impact his stories had. One reader even suggested Dietrick be nominated for a Nobel Prize.

Dietrick did win his share of prizes, but this was not the most important thing to him; in fact, he seemed somewhat embarrassed by prizes. What was most important to him was simply his writing. His stories made readers think because Dietrick *thought* about what he was writing. He often wrote analyses or commentaries linking physics to his other area of great interest: religion. He did this not out of any need to espouse a certain doctrine but because he wondered about the overall picture. Physics is not separate from religion, biology or psychology, Dietrick believed; they are all part of what we call life. And this, above all else, is what inspired his writings.

Dietrick was an intense person who worked extremely hard at what he did best. This alone is a position many strive for but few achieve. He was among the best at his craft and had been so for more than 20 years. That the next 20 years of his distinguished career were taken from him is a tragedy we will feel for a long time.

*Joel Greenberg
Science/Medicine Editor
Los Angeles Times
Former Editor, SCIENCE NEWS
Altadena, Calif.*