

Climate Changer

Scientist and writer
Tim Flannery talks
fossils, fossil fuels,
fatherhood and
finding his true calling.

I WAS A pretty awkward 16-year-old. I went to an all-boys Catholic school, which I was hating at that point, because I realised that the old man in the sky didn't really exist. Also, I had discovered sex at least, if not girls. And I was also kind of a solitary kid. I didn't enjoy sport, I was interested in science, and there weren't many other people in my universe who were like that. I think generally I was pretty unhappy and a bit lost.

My father left when I was 14. He was an alcoholic with some serious issues. I was home with Mum and my two younger sisters. He moved to the North Coast of NSW and basically lived a bit down and out for a number of years. I did [have a relationship] with him much later in life.

Nature was my great refuge. I was always in the bush making cubby houses or looking for fossils or wandering the beach. I was pretty solitary. Back then [bayside Melbourne suburb] Sandringham was more or less the edge of the suburbs. I did lots of snorkelling. When I was very young there was still a lot of bushland around Sandringham. So I spent quite a bit of time in the bush catching frogs and spotting birds and that sort of stuff. But by the time I was a teenager that was all gone.

I was almost expelled from school. We'd had a lecture about abortion, which was rabidly anti-abortion. A friend of mine put something up on the school noticeboard asking if Dr Bertram Wainer could come the school to present the other side. He was summarily expelled. I was outraged enough at



TIM IN ANTARCTICA PHOTO BY DOUG GIMESY

that, I put another notice up. I thought it was completely wrong to expel someone for asking for more debate. Then I was expelled. It was only my mum going to the school and fronting the principal – and I think my dad putting some money into a sports complex the school badly wanted – that had us both accepted back to sit the HSC. They were the good old days.

I performed badly enough in school that I couldn't get into a science course. I did okay at science, but the prerequisites were a foreign language or mathematics. So I went and studied English and history. Without that I wouldn't have been able to write my books. Learning to write science is one thing, but learning to write for a wider audience is something quite different. I wouldn't have done it without those years of studying English literature I think.

I was really saved by a museum. I'd started volunteering at the Victorian museum years earlier as a school kid. And there was one scientist there who thought I had some merit. He could see how unhappy I was, and he said at the end of it, "Look, there's a real minerals boom on. So why don't you enrol in a geology masters degree? They'll probably even take an arts graduate they're so desperate." So I did. I loved it. I loved earth sciences, but by the end of that the boom had turned to a bust, and so I went and did a PhD in biology.

Palaeontology was the common theme running through it all. [Flannery also did a palaeontology PhD.] It's just this incredible and imaginative world that you can enter. It was the wonder of holding a fossil and just thinking, *wow that was a living thing, millions of years ago, in a different world.* It's like a time machine, a fossil.

It's amazing to look into the face of a living animal and know that no one has seen it before. That happened to me once, where not even the native people with me knew the animal, that was quite incredible. That was in the Solomon Islands, on the island of Guadalcanal. It was a monkey-faced bat that lives high in the mountains. It's still known just from a single specimen that I collected way, way back. I discovered other species that the native people knew about, but were

unknown outside their area, like four species of tree kangaroos. So that was very exciting.

I was too deeply involved in my own science to fully understand climate change.

I was trying to make a career as a taxonomist. I saw the climate impacts, but hadn't put them in any broader context. It was only when I was asked to do a job that involved reading the literature that I realised what a big issue it was.

I just couldn't believe it. I walked around in a daze for weeks, looking at people doing crazy things like running their car so they could keep the air conditioning going. It was madness, you know?

I think anger is pretty powerful. And we need to be angry, and the other side needs to see our anger, because they need to change. They can't get a free ride anymore, lying about climate change and continuing to pollute without cost, and that's what needs to change.

Writing *The Weather Makers* was a big, big change in my life, really. Timing is important. But also I think it just took people through the full story [of climate change], in language they could understand. It was the second-best-selling book on climate change ever, translated into 30-odd languages. It was quite big. I then became 2007 Australian of the Year and Climate Commissioner – it was a quantum leap really.

I've thought about [getting into politics], but I think I'm probably better off doing other things. Part of what I'm doing working at the Australian Museum is just talking to school after school about climate change, and that's having a significant impact. Museums are great places to reach out to young people. There's nothing that frustrates me or worries me more than meeting young people without a sense of hope. We have to engage them, and reassure them that, the facts are, we *can* do something, we just need concerted action to do it.

I reckon I'm better at parenting now. [Flannery had his third child in 2013, his other two children are adults.] The main asset you have doing it again is that you know everything is a phase. It all passes, it all changes, so there's no point



getting frustrated with things. It was very difficult the first time around. I was doing three- or four-month stints of field work in remote parts of New Guinea. That was before we had mobile phones or anything, so I was incommunicado for long periods.

For me, people are the most important thing in the world.

Biodiversity is important, but people are the motivation for my work. I was already on board, but I guess climate change becomes more personal when you realise your child is likely going to be alive in 2100. We're talking about 3°C of warming by then – it makes you more determined to do something. You only do it for people.

Last year was extraordinary for me. After working in Melanesia for 20-odd years I was invited by a tribal group in the Solomon Islands to participate in a reconciliation ceremony that was to put an end to 91 years of violence. That was a really amazing 10 days, dressing up in tribal clothing and going to the ancestral shrine. That felt as big to me as being Australian of the Year.

If I could say anything to my 16-year-old self I'd say, find an older male mentor. I wish I'd had a wise uncle who could advise me about women and life in general, because that was totally lacking from my life. I was a bit of a failure all round with that sort of stuff. Imagine a Catholic boys' school – no sex education, no nothing. No dad to tell you about any of that. I was lacking someone to talk to. I think if I'd learned early on about women and what they want and how to treat them, I might have saved myself much misery in life.

by **Katherine Smyrk** (@KSmyrk)
photo by **Doug Gimesy** (gimesy.com)