

and complicates his narrative with stories that either offset or flatly contradict his thesis. Rather than close a case with some glib conclusion, he reminds the reader that the course of environmental history is intertwined with human power and inertia, that it is a mix of decline, ascension and stability and that crisis is often contrived. Radkau keeps the reader off balance: "All simple pictures of environmental history are open to challenge."

Rarely, it seems, have we acted to prevent environmental crises. An exception was the 1987 Montreal Protocol to cease production of chlorofluorocarbons and other compounds that deplete the ozone layer. Will concern over climate change — a greater, more complex and more diffuse issue than destruction of ozone — also produce a pact for change? Given the cost of ramping up such efforts, this seems unlikely before climate change becomes a

worldwide cataclysm. Whereas Ehrenfeld may give you cause to hope, Radkau is likely to leave you gloomy. He might even be said to turn philosopher George Santayana's observation on its head: even those who remember the past seem condemned to repeat it. ■

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## Q&A: Acting the part

Actor and playwright **Anna Deavere Smith** has pioneered documentary theatre through her one-woman plays constructed from interviews. As she prepares to portray biologists Edward O. Wilson and James Watson at the World Science Festival in New York next week, Smith talks about life, death and the influence of science on her work.

### Watching Wilson and Watson

Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, New York City  
11 June 2009. Part of the World Science Festival, 10–14 June.

### When did you start writing plays based on interviews with real people?

Nearly 30 years ago, I created a project called *On The Road: A Search for American Character*. The idea was to travel the country with a tape recorder, talk to people and invite them to see themselves performed. Originally it was going to be with a company of actors, but I thought I'd do all the parts until I figured out how to raise money to pay them. As a kid I was a mimic. I find my expression through others.

### How do you get people to open up to you?

In the early days I wanted people to talk to me in individual, peculiar ways. A linguist gave me three questions to ask to ensure that would happen: have you ever come close to death? Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do? And do you remember the circumstances of your birth?

### When did you get interested in science?

As a child, I wanted to be a psychiatrist, or an inventor like Thomas Edison. I admire scientists' sense of experimentation, their tolerance for not knowing. While teaching drama at Stanford University, California, in the 1990s, I became infatuated with a geneticist there, Marcus Feldman, who studies evolution using twins. He told me he'd spent ten years of his career trying to shoot down the views of William Shockley



Playing solo: Anna Deavere Smith.

and Arthur Jensen, who argued that intelligence varies by race. Feldman became a muse for me.

### Why did you decide to impersonate Edward O. Wilson and James Watson?

Watson is one of the forces behind the celebration of Wilson's 80th birthday at the World Science Festival this year. He invited me to do a 20-minute performance of each of them. When they were young scientists at Harvard University, there was a rift between them. Watson wouldn't speak to Wilson, and Wilson later wrote that he had thought Watson was "the most unpleasant human being [he] had ever met". They've reconciled over the years.

### What is Wilson like?

He's fashioned himself as a southern gentleman: very friendly, patient, charming and with a ready smile. He was a boy scout,

and in some ways he's still a grown-up boy, in that he has that restlessness and excitement about learning something new. He developed a work ethic as a child when he had to get up at 3 a.m. for a paper route, and he now gets up very early with great purpose. Just look at all those big fat books he has written.

### Why did you choose the topic of health care for your next play, which opens in New York City later this year?

*Let Me Down Easy* is about the beauty of life and the fact that it has an expiration date. In the late 1990s, Yale University School of Medicine asked me to interview doctors and patients and portray them at medical rounds. Since then, I haven't had the desire to make a play about anything else. The project has expanded in my mind from medicine to a long excursion into the human body, its resilience and vulnerability. The play ranges from portraying people who have physical prowess, such as cyclist Lance Armstrong and long-distance swimmer Lynne Cox, to people who are dying for no reason other than chance. And I too have had to come to grips with the fact that I'm going to die.

### Has your work raised questions for you?

It has left me with unanswered questions about the relationship between speech and inner life. I don't understand exactly what happens when a word enters my imagination, or when I reiterate the word as it was said. There is probably a psychologist, neurologist or linguist who would offer a lot to my study. I should talk to some experts. I'm the machine but I don't know entirely how it works. ■

Interview by **Jascha Hoffman**, a writer based in New York.

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