Some people are born great, while others just thrust it upon themselves

As in baseball, a reviewer must "call it as he sees it". My call is that this book is pretty awful. However, reviewers sometimes nod off, missing qualities in a book with cover plaudits by Kurt Vonnegut, V. S. Ramachandran, Floyd Bloom, James Watson and Howard Gardner. If I am wrong and Gardner is right about "a clear, readable, synoptic account of current knowledge in human creativity", then here are some maxims for emulating Nancy Andreasen's way of communicating science.

- You must not be underestimated. In the preface, say how in kindergarten you were "IQ-tested and declared a 'genius'". Then emphasise medical and scientific credentials by saying how "most people think of me as a well-known neuroscientist", but "people also know me as a dedicated physician-scientist... who has devoted much of my life to caring for people"
- Don't hide your talents. Stress that your PhD is "not in biochemistry or biology, as many assume, but instead in Renaissance English literature", making you "an established scholar in the field", and for five years "a professor of English literature at several different universities". Do not worry about using phrases such as "a somewhat unique perspective"
- Lay it on thick. Some puddings cannot be over-egged, so do say: "In my mind I walk the streets of Elizabethan England or Renaissance Florence as readily as I walk the corridors of hospitals or scientific laboratories. And I read Shakespeare and Sophocles as readily as I read brain
The Creating Brain: The Neuroscience of Genius

By Nancy C. Andreasen

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Let the reader know your few expectations of them. Ask direct questions and do not expect them to read a human thought? Have you ever thought to ask yourself that question? Probably not. If they have, this book is not for them anyway. Also acknowledge your readers’ reaction to your advice and taking the first creative, simple steps in using a computer for writing will not encourage to hear: “You probably haven’t done this sort of thing since you took freshman composition in high school or college.”

Don’t expect readers to know anything. Just help them out. Few will have heard of Prospero, but it helps to call him “the conceptually ancestor of...” Dumble-dore in Harry Potter”. Do, though, assume they have seen the films Shine, A Beautiful Mind and Lord of the Rings.

And of course it is true everywhere that “as schoolchildren, we all learned about how Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin transformed the economy of the South”. In North London. We talked of little else.

Never resist a cliché. Cliches are a mark of good writing. Referring to “Mother Nature” is good science (although if Francis Galton had done so it would have been “a vivid snapshot of an era in which prejudices abounded and the concept of ‘political correctness’ did not exist”)

Include a graph that is wrong. Use some technical terms “continuous dimension” and “discrete category” – to argue for a separate category of extremely gifted individuals. The graph showing this should have no separate categories, being continuous and skewed the wrong way, with a long tail of extremely uncreative individuals. Readers do not look at graphs or brain scans, which are merely corroborative detail giving scientific verisimilitude

Feel free to speculate. Quoting Have-luck Ellis’ 1926 study of the British Dictionary of National Biography shows scholarship, and readers will marvel when you speculate that Bertrand Russell “may well have been one of Ellis’s... ‘men of genius’”. Only pedants will object that in 1926 Russell was alive, whereas the DNB includes only the dead

Rhetorical questions never have answers. “What ever happened to the Parthenon, just ask: “How did they ever chisel those huge columns?” Few readers expect such questions to have answers, and none will type “Parthenon...” to find and manolos Korres’ fascinating book The Stones of the Parthenon, which is not a book about the Parthenon.

Scientific history is bunkum. No one cares about the history of science, least of all scientists. The year 1926 was centuries ago, and therefore “pre-epidemiologi-cal” – for John Snow removed the handle of the Broad Street pump only in 1854 – and “pre-neuroscience” – for Paul Flechsig described association cortex, the cornerstone of only, in 1900.

Talking to celebrities is research. Meeting playwright Neil Simon by chance on a plane is definitely research. Readers will not notice the inconsistency if elsewhere researchers are criticised for relying “primarily on anecdotes”.

You need to include some ideas, although ideas actually matter very little – at least other people’s, which are mostly wrong. Scientific ideas are also hard work, so pad them with rambling accounts of Renaissance Italy, uninspired thoughts on human evolution and brief case studies of creativity in Coleridge, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Poincaré, Keats and Stephen Spender (who can be called “formerly British Poet Laureate”, even if he was not and the laur- eate-ship is of England)

Show how science is based on evidence. Include a few PC comments on gender equality and then state “I cannot believe that women are innately less creative than men.” That makes the scientific method perfectly clear

Confront the difficult. Devote nearly a whole chapter to basic neuroanatomy and neu-rophysiology, fetishising brain complexity (a trillion neurons, a quadrillion synapses) while making throwaway remarks about chaos theory, butterflies and non-linear systems – the right figure for popular science. There is grandeur in this view of life. Your own research is the best. Your own research is all anyone cares about. Describe a study of subjects lying in a darkened brain scanner at REST – “random episodic silent thought” – where activity is found not in the brain region associated with “association cortex”. From there to the promised explanation of “the neuroscience of genius” is a small step, as long as “posses- sors of extraordinary creativity belong to distinct brain networks...” and brains that are more facile at creating free associations”. Don’t fret that this is pure speculation.

How to build a better world. Say how intelligence is unrelated to creativity – reasserting those readers – and have a chapter of folkly suggestions on “building better brains”, “tips for teaching kids”, and ways to nurture the creative nature that we all share”. Few among the book-buying classes think “plant vacations that occasionally take you to great natural locations – to the ocean or the mountains”.

Ensure that the book cover is right. After your name, it must, must, must state in large letters “MD, PhD” – readers trust no one else

Ask Kurt Vonnegut to do your blurb. If Vonnegut says: “Our leading authority on cre-ativity reveals herself with this splendid book, as one of the most valuably creative persons of our time”, then few reviewers will dare to disagree. So it goes.

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scans or Science magazine.”

ignore post-naturalist stuff about the death of the author – make clear upfront who you are.

Don’t forget the common touch. Add some cutely McDon-ald’s-speak. After a long para- graph containing only questions, purr and say: “There are grand questions. It’s your job in guiding them to answer them. I am thrilled that I am able to do it.” But, hang on, this isn’t just for fun. Also use some Nasa-speak. “It’ll be at the side as we emb-ark on a wonderful exploratory adven-ture... Our mission is ex-ceptionally exciting and novel because... we are exploring the neurocience of creativity, a difficult mission that few have as yet attempted.”

A small step for one Renaissance woman.