

# Congress Quarterly

SUMMER 2009

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Neurosurgery and the Media



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STRADDLING THE FENCE:  
LIFE IN NEUROSURGERY  
AND THE MEDIA

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MEDIA EYE ON TRAUMATIC  
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Education and Innovation

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## ANOTHER DAY IN NEUROSURGERY: TELLING STORIES ABOUT WHAT WE DO

Like many neurosurgery residents, I made a habit of carrying 3x5 cards in the top pocket of my white coat. On occasion, I'd jot down a few notes to myself about an interesting patient, a peculiar comment overheard in the ICU, or a clever joke circulating among the residents. Every few weeks, I would collect the cards and enter the notes into a journal on my laptop. Although the entries were usually brief, I found that it didn't take much — "former engineer"... "head injury"... "tombstone sandblaster" — to bring back an entire patient and his story.

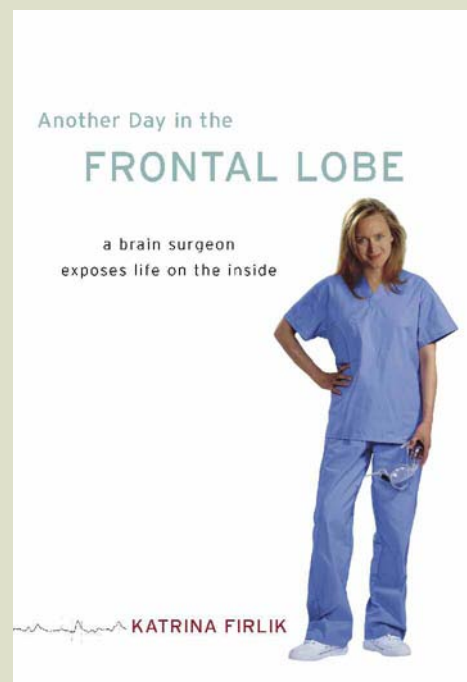
> AT FIRST I  
WONDERED: WHAT  
INTEREST WILL THE  
GENERAL PUBLIC  
HAVE IN A BUNCH  
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STORIES FROM AN  
UNKNOWN AUTHOR? <

At the end of seven years I had compiled enough to form the basis of a book, without even knowing it. I started by writing an essay, which ended up in the hands of a literary agent in New York, who actually liked it. She convinced me to write an entire book.

At first I wondered: what interest will the general public have in a bunch of neurosurgery stories from an unknown author? This question was answered during two back-to-back days in New York, where my agent, Alice, and I literally walked from publishing house to publishing house in Midtown, pitching the book proposal to curious editors. Luckily, a short time after that, five of those publishers were interested enough to place bids, resulting in a lively bidding war that punctuated an otherwise routine day in the office with updates from Alice.

I had three motivations in writing my book: to educate, to entertain and to broaden my audience beyond friends and family at the dinner table. On top of that, how could I waste seven years' worth of valuable stories? During residency, I often realized that as neurosurgeons we are privy to experiences that 99% or more of the population will never share. I felt there was value in bringing this inside world to the outside.

The best books, I think, are the ones that teach and inspire on the sly, through stories. I first discovered Oliver Sacks' writing in college. His stories about patients and the brain were, in part, what inspired me to take my first course in neuroscience. Although I'm no Oliver Sacks, I

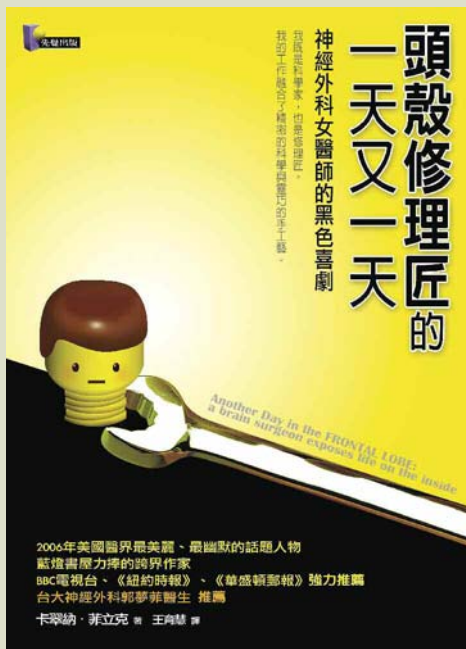


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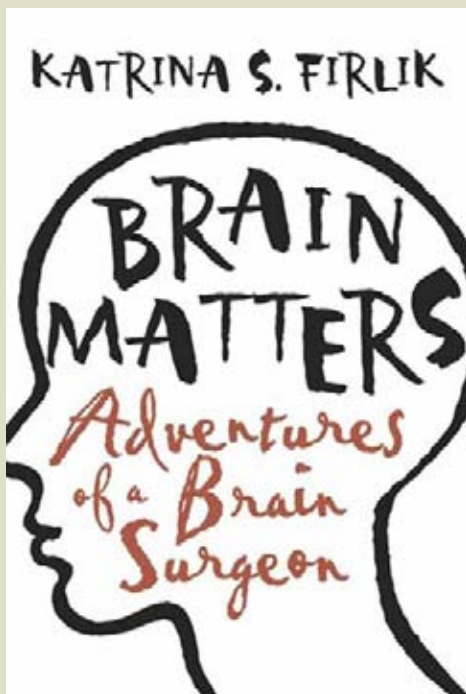
did hope to use my stories to a similar end.

I receive emails from readers on a regular basis, and their feedback convinces me that the book was worth the effort:

"This is not the kind of book I would normally read ... I'm a musician ... I haven't moved a muscle but I feel like I've already been through med school & residency ... I learned so many different facts about the brain that I never would have known ..."



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## > THE BEST BOOKS, I THINK, ARE THE ONES THAT TEACH AND INSPIRE ON THE SLY, THROUGH STORIES. <

my brain. That's a strange sentence, but in the end it's true."

"I'm a mechanical engineer from Denver, I found myself entertained while my curiosity was being fed like an IV drip ..."

Although I wrote the book for the general public, I was concerned as to how it would be received by fellow neurosurgeons. To that end, I placed two requests with my editor: I didn't want the term "brain surgeon" in the subtitle, and I didn't want a picture of myself on the cover. She gently informed me that I would stick to writing and that Random House would handle marketing.

The title of my book, *Another Day in the Frontal Lobe*, resulted from a prolonged brainstorming effort, a group effort. In the process, many of my ideas were politely rejected, like my original suggestion, "*Brain Matters*," which actually didn't go to waste as my British publisher used it for their version of the book. I then proposed *Another Day in the Hippocampus*, to which the CEO of Random House quipped, "too egghead."

When the *New York Times* published a review of my book, I was thrilled, save for one minor detail. Although it was a very positive review, in an effort to attract eyes the headline ran: "Maybe brain surgeons aren't as smart as you thought." The next day, I noticed that the review had been torn out of the paper and tacked onto the bulletin board in the physician's lounge of the hospital where I worked. Someone had scrawled next to the headline: "We already knew that."

I also received a little flack for one addition to my author web site. My editor thought that my book could benefit from some simple line drawings, which I offered to do myself. However, reminiscent of my "hippocampus" title, my drawings of neuroanatomy and surgical instruments were deemed too "strange" and were not included in the book. Rather than isolate them in a drawer, I added them to my web site, and partnered with a service that prints them on things like t-shirts and book bags. Silly, yes, but I thought there might be an egghead or two out there who might want to display the venous sinuses on their person. I

am proud to report that, among others, there is now a woman in Texas who owns a Circle of Willis barbecue apron. There is also at least one neurosurgeon who owns a pair of craniotome boxer shorts (you know who you are).

The flack came from a general surgeon reader who said I had gone too far in offering these items. He later sent me a second e-mail, retracting the first. He admitted to jealousy as he had wanted to write a book of his own but was worried that "*Another Day in the Colon*" wouldn't sell.

Although I can't claim any greater expertise than any other neurosurgeon, the simple fact that I wrote a book — rational or not — has led to radio and television interviews including, on occasion, as commentator on CNN and Fox when a brain-related story breaks. And, a television documentary producer is interested in having me host a series about the brain, which may or may not come to fruition, largely depending on the economy. Although this all amounts to more of a hobby than a career, it does represent a fresh and fun challenge.

Unrelated to my book, but in seeking another new challenge, I've recently shifted away from my practice in order to focus on medical device innovation, in pulling good ideas out of universities and out of the brains of creative clinicians and scientists. Although seemingly less relevant at first, I'm finding that an ability to communicate well is critical here too, particularly in rallying support around a new device idea.

Neurosurgeons are a rare breed with remarkable insight and experience. I see great potential in broadening our unique influence through the media. And we should tell stories along the way. Stories are what people want to hear. <

"... with all the additional questions I had to the contents of your book, it has inspired me to go back to school ..."

"I wrote to you once before about how much your book meant to me as I made my decision to have a right amygdalohippocampotomy ... that sure was a lot to say in order to show how much of a difference your book continues to make in my life. I'm not afraid of

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