

On the Track of the Elusive Slime Mold (Book Review)

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Knock, knock, knock — I look up from my desk and am handed a package. Opening it, I immediately realize it's a book, but what? Squinting (where are my glasses?), I see what appears to be an image of Dr. Steven L. Stephenson riding an elephant (Fig. 1). Scanning further, I see colorful images of a plasmodium and myxomycete fruiting bodies - Yep, that's Dr. Stephenson! Flipping through his memoir, "On the Track of the Elusive Slime Mold," I was welcomed by a plethora of vivid images and quickly gained a sense that this was not a technical treatise of the myxomycetes, but rather a collection of stories providing us a peek behind the curtain at the life, career, and globetrotting expeditions of a prolific myxomycetologist Dr. Steven L. Stephenson.

Stephenson sets the stage by sharing some of his earliest formative recollections (a) farm life with the family in rural Virginia, (b) staying with his grandmother and discovering his love of forests, (c) a childhood friend who incited his love for books through Burroughs' "A Princess on Mars," and (d) two high school teachers who encouraged his pursuit of science while imparting an appreciation for academic rigor. These early experiences combined with his training in the National Guard infantry served him well as he put the lessons (e.g., discipline, persistence, reflection, and personal growth) he learned to practice as he moved through his college experiences en route to obtaining his PhD.

In his book Stephenson shares stories that illustrate the serendipitous nature of life, such as the time he volunteered to assist a doctoral student with his fieldwork so that he could learn how to identify plants. Unbeknownst to him, that PhD Student (Harold "Steve" Adams) would go on to become an influential lifelong friend and colleague. He also provides feel-good anecdotes like beginning his first post-graduate position (as a high school science teacher) and meeting a young lady (Barbara Creel) to whom he quipped a few remarks about her being from West Virginia. Two years later she became his wife and enduring partner for life. We also learn of personal and professional relationships that fuelled his work and facilitated a myriad of broader impacts through activities such as training graduate students (myself included), providing educational workshops, and interacting with the public.

Many facets of research are not exciting and even monotonous — countless hours staring through a microscope, preparing reagents, waiting for reactions to finish, reviewing literature, interpreting data, and writing manuscripts. While not fodder for Hollywood’s next action flick, those of us engaged in the scholarship of discovery, understand that these activities are necessary to produce new information and sometimes (especially in the case of fieldwork) provide us with true adventures. The bulk of Dr. Stephenson’s memoir focuses on his adventures and experiences conducting international field-based research and cover a period of more than four decades. His stories are anything but boring.

Through Stephenson’s illustrious career he has conducted research across all seven continents and collected from every terrestrial biome that planet Earth has to offer. In addition to his indelible scientific contributions (over 450 publications and 12 books), he is filled with an abundance of tales stemming from his work. Some stories, like those of his early field work across West Virginia, offer insight into the humble beginnings of what would become an epic career. Other accounts like his multi-month expedition to the extremely remote subantarctic Macquarie Island (four days at sea strapped to his bed traversing waves exceeding 12 meters just to reach the destination!) detail true adventures.



Figure 1. Me immediately after opening my copy of Dr. Steven L. Stephenson’s, “On the Track of the Elusive Slime Mold”.

This memoir is an intriguing and enjoyable read that can be appreciated by both seasoned researchers and the general public. It provides the reader with the human perspective behind the life of a teaching scholar. Life lessons, friendships, mentorships, and watershed career and life moments are shared

through a plethora of interesting stories, many of which occur in the context of field research expeditions. This perspective is rarely provided, and I think we should encourage anyone interested in science (especially students) to read this text and gain an appreciation for the adventures that could be hiding behind the data in scientific manuscripts. If nothing else read this book to learn —the what, the when, and the where about the first slime mold Dr. Steven L. Stephenson ever knowingly observed in nature.

This book is available from Amazon as an ebook or hard copy.