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Stefan Klein, science writer

THE FACE: Leigh Dayton | February 23, 2008

STEFAN Klein's laugh zips down the phone line, links to a telecommunications satellite, downloads to a ground station, then wiggles along the wire to a phone in The Weekend Australian's office.

In the process the laughter switches from analog to digital and back to analog, as easily as Klein switches between German and English and from science-speak to casual conversation.

Klein is a science writer and he is laughing with delight that he can support himself in such a pleasurable and rarefied field, and do so from home in a trendy part of Berlin, surely one of the trendiest of trendy cities.

"Yes, I make a living," he says, confessing he finds this as fascinating as the topics he tackles. Time, chance, happiness, in fact anything that captures his multi-modal mind is converted from fundamental science and analytical philosophy into a ripping read.

And this ability to tell a tale packed with scientific discovery is exactly why books such as his latest, *The Secret Pulse of Time*, are well regarded and on bestseller lists in 24 languages. "Humans are creatures with brains built for processing stories rather than facts," Klein explains. "That's hard for scientists, who are very much in love with details. But with complex ideas the important thing is to think of concepts. Think of it as a story and don't move away from everyday language."

That's precisely Klein's forte, the intellectual shift from digital to analog. He's a master of going to hard science and pulling out a thread, a concept that can be turned into a tale human ears can hear and human brains can comprehend. Take his 2002 book *The Science of Happiness*. Klein says, "I found it a very nice way of telling a story about our brains."

His background certainly set him up for a scientific career of some kind. His grandmother was a chemist, his grandfather was the head of a large scientific institution in the days of imperial Austria, and his parents were both chemists.

Born in the town-and-gown city of Munich in 1965, Klein initially studied theoretical physics, breaking with the family tradition. "It was a small rebellion, a very small one," he jokes. And his siblings? "I have a smaller brother." Is he a scientist? "Oh no, he's the real rebel. He's in business, doing reasonable things and just earning money."

Despite Klein's small rebellion, or perhaps because of it, he soon found physics limiting. To broaden his intellectual horizon, he made a "quite conscious decision" to learn a few tricks of the philosopher's trade. But finding traditional philosophy too rubbery for his liking, Klein turned to analytic philosophy, especially the work of the American philosopher and logician Willard van Orman Quine. "It shaped my thinking," says Klein, who put his two Ps -- physics and philosophy -- together to earn a doctorate in biophysics from the University of Freiburg.

While philosophy and physics were busy making new neurological connections in his graduate student head, Klein began to write, first out of necessity, then out of pleasure. "I found that writing is at least as much fun as doing the research, which is pretty uncommon among scientists," he confesses. "I found it very rewarding. It keeps your curiosity alive."

Klein continued to indulge the writer in him, shooting off freelance articles to German newspapers, as he trained the scientist in him. Given the lack of competition from his fact-loving colleagues, Klein eventually came to the notice of the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. "I simply couldn't resist that offer," he admits. "I thought, 'Let's try it. I can always go back to science.'"

"It was a good decision," Klein adds in wry understatement. Not only is he paying his bills, Klein believes he's helping to clarify the critical role science and technology play in contemporary culture. "I can make a much bigger impact than I would have if I stayed in science."

As well as finding a new career path at *Der Spiegel*, that's also where Klein met Alexandra: they got married, and she is now a freelance journalist and the mother of their four-year-old daughter, Dora.

After three years as *Der Spiegel*'s science editor, Klein moved to *Geo* magazine as a staff writer in 1999. By then his passion for writing was honed and hungry. So it was perhaps inevitable that Klein would give up his day job at the magazine and move to the world of freelance writing. He made the jump in 2000, when a collection of his newspaper articles appeared as *The Creation Diaries*.

Proving you can take the boy out of the laboratory but not the laboratory out of the boy, Klein applies rigorous protocols to his writing. Since *The Creation Diaries*, Klein has produced a new book every two years: *The Science of Happiness* in 2002, *All by Chance* in 2004 and, most recently, *The Secret Pulse of Time*.

According to Klein, the seemingly ruthless two-year schedule is just right. It gives him the time to delve into the research, find his narrative line and bring science and story together, without driving him and his family crazy. To do so demands a gripping subject. "I do need a strong personal relationship with a topic. It has to really interest me."

And that's regardless of whether a topic and the resulting book are likely to be exciting to the general public.

"The success or not is very uncertain," Klein says, his equivocation echoing another European physicist, Erwin Schrodinger: "A book can be both successful and unsuccessful at the same time."

His uncertainty also reflects literary superstition: "The money's not in the bank until you cash the cheque." And never reveal the topic of your next book. "All I'll say is that it will have to do with science and the arts and a very great man," Klein says secretively, sending more analog and digital signals laughing through the ether.

Stefan Klein appears at the Perth Writers Festival today.

CLOSE-UP

- **Career highlight:** The fact that my first big book, *The Science of Happiness*, sold so well.
- **Career lowlight:** Fielding ill-informed questions on talk shows.
- **Favourite scientists:** My family. My parents were chemists. My grandmother was one of the first women to do chemistry in imperial Austria and my grandfather was the head of a science agency in Austria.
- **Guilty pleasure:** Wine.

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