

Idol imaginings: academics reveal the childhood heroes who inspired their careers

Many an academic will be dragged to the cinema this summer by bored offspring determined to see the latest superhero film. But what kind of childhood heroes did scholars themselves have? Here, five reveal who and what inspired their career choices

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Source: Alamy

Dian Fossey's unconventional methods hinted at the importance of women's perspective in intellectual pursuits

When Sigourney Weaver played primatologist Dian Fossey in the 1988 Oscar-winning movie, *Gorillas in the Mist*, my teenage heart and mind were transfixed.

Although Hollywood felt it necessary to include a human love story in the film, the deepest love existed between Fossey and the Rwandan silverback gorillas. When researching these magnificent animals, she eschewed the previously undisputed rule that primatologists focus on groups, rather than individuals. Fossey came to know the gorillas as she had known the autistic children with whom she had once worked; she sat with them in their habitats, mimicked their sounds, ate their plants, played their games and gained their trust. Digit, whom she named because of his damaged finger, was her favourite.

As a teenage girl who babysat often, I related to Fossey's nurturing approach. Her unconventional methods not only led to groundbreaking new insights that reshaped the field of primatology: they also hinted at the importance of girls' and women's participation and perspective in intellectual pursuits.

But, personally, I never envisioned falling in love with a smelly gorilla. And my own fascination with nature was more about the mathematical patterns it displayed: the sequential Fibonacci numbers you could see in sunflowers, pine cones, cacti and pineapples; the fractals that reveal themselves on coastlines, ferns, tree limbs and the human circulatory system.

I also spent inordinate amounts of time using mathematical techniques to make and break secret codes. I took time to get to know individual ciphers, including the Caesar shift cipher, the tic-tac-toe diagrammatic cipher and the book cipher. I sat with them on a rock wall in the woods behind my house, mimicking their patterns, digesting their lessons, playing their games and learning which to trust.

My favourite – my Digit – was my spin-on-a-scytale cipher, which involves a piece of paper wrapped around a cylindrical object. My modified scytale cipher required a bent stick that I found in the forest, ensuring that no enemy could decode my messages without that unique, natural key.

I did not envision becoming a mathematician in 1988 – a year when only 18 per cent of new US mathematics doctorates were earned by women. However, when I did take that path, I was bolstered by my memory of Fossey. Her legacy assured me that, as a young woman, I might nurture my interests and add an all-important new perspective to the field of mathematics.

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