



RUNNING, BAKING, WRITING  
MADELEINE BEEKMAN

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Madeleine Beekman was born in 1964 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where she started a school career in the Montessori system. Normally, children only go to Montessori kindergarten and primary school, but Madeleine did it all and attended the Montessori Lyceum in Amsterdam. Being a Montessori student meant that she had a ball, as learning was only of secondary importance, particularly in primary and secondary school. At least that is how she saw it. Despite, or perhaps because of her Montessori school experience, she somehow made it to the University of Amsterdam, where she studied Biology, majoring in Entomology (the study of insects) and Population Biology. During her PhD, she studied bumblebees, combining theoretical and experimental work. In between her MSc (1991) and PhD (1998) and straight after her PhD she tried to figure out what “real” life would be like by working in a commercial business that tested the side effects of pesticides on beneficial insects and mites. She soon found out that real life paid well, but was too boring for her liking, so in early 1999 she moved to the University of Sheffield, UK, to do a postdoc. From Sheffield she moved to Sydney in 2001, where she became a full professor in 2013. Madeleine may not have moved many times, but she did move a long way. Surely that counts for something. – Address: School of Life and Environmental Sciences, The University of Sydney, Macleay A12, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia. E-mail: [madeleine.beekman@sydney.edu.au](mailto:madeleine.beekman@sydney.edu.au).

Sometimes within the pile of boring and insignificant emails, a gem appears in your mailbox. I received such a gem on November 20, 2016, an email from Raghavendra Gadagkar, asking if I had ever considered applying for a fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Well, no. I hadn't. Of course I knew about Wiko, had visited briefly in 2005 when my former

postdoc adviser Francis Ratnieks was a Fellow, but never thought that I would make the cut. And even if I did, what was I going to do, being an experimental evolutionary biologist? But I thought about it and reckoned that I should give it a go. So, I dug up an old idea to write a book on how evolution works and sat down to write a pre-proposal. That pre-proposal became a real proposal, and the idea of writing a book became an exciting but daunting prospect. Then all I could do was wait to hear.

I wouldn't be writing this yearbook entry if the outcome had not been positive, so in August 2020 I moved to Berlin with my partner and fellow Fellow, not without hiccups (see Ben Oldroyd's entry), first to find out if I would survive three weeks of intensive German language classes and then if I could actually write a book. My expectations about learning German were more realistic than the expectations I have been told I had for my first day at kindergarten (which in the Netherlands we also call "school"). Apparently I came home disillusioned that after a whole day of school I still could not read. I was pleased to realise that my high school German was still in my head somewhere; I just had to find it. Locating my rusty German was greatly helped by my wonderful teacher Reinhard von Bernus, and my only co-student Michael Cant. Sadly, but probably not surprisingly, my ability to know when to use the *Dativ*, *Akkusativ*, or *Nominativ* had not improved in the intervening time. The three weeks were seriously intense, but a wonderful way to start a fellowship at Wiko and a good entry into Berlin.

Before my 9:00 German classes, I would explore the Grunewald forest on my bike or on a run. Once you make it out of bed, it is glorious to be out there in the early morning, before most humans have made their appearance and when many of the animals have not yet gone into hiding. Every morning I would greet the elderly man who would be coming out of the forest by the time I went in (doesn't he sleep at all?). A nice new routine in what was still an unknown place.

Grunewald did not remain unknown for long. I got to know the place very well, because in early October my wonderful neighbour-times-two, Bettina Schwab (Bettina later also became my office neighbour), suggested a running club. Now that was scary, as I knew that she liked to run for a long time, and I was just happy to do short runs by myself so I had time to contemplate life. But not to worry, I had a way out of this conundrum without coming across as rude, so I just said that her proposed time was too late for me, being an early morning exerciser. "Not a problem," she said, "what time would you prefer instead?" That excuse gone I came up with a new one. "Well," I said, "I cannot run as fast and as long as you can, so I can't join." Clearly not one to give up easily, she again said, "Not a problem,"

followed by “you can run for as long or as short as you wish and at your own pace.” With no more excuses to think of, I was clearly defeated and reluctantly joined what would soon become known as the Wicked Wiko Runners. (Yes, we are real, with a logo and official merchandise; contact Daniel Schönplflug, the Wicked Wiko Runners’ President For Life, for more information, also on memberships (which are actually free)). As our numbers increased, so did the number of kilometres we ran, cumulating in a half-marathon. In distance only, as Covid restrictions soon threw the kybosh on all our plans. The Wicked Wiko Runners kept me sane (and made me fit) through the long and harsh winter in Covid times. Who would have thought that running 14 kilometres at minus 14, in the snow, would be so much fun if you share the experience with wonderful people and can then take a picture of your frozen eyebrows and eyelashes? That is Wiko for you. Or, that is what Wiko could be for you if you are open to new experiences and challenges.

Speaking of challenges. Who could bake the best cake? Starting with the best *Käsekuchen*? One of the many reasons why the Wicked Wiko Runners was so successful, or so insane, depending on your perspective, was because of our coach, Shamil Jeppie. Shamil, when he is not being an historian of Africa, is a long-distance runner, and for that, he claims, he needs a lot of fat. And that fat should, or at least could, come from *Käsekuchen*. So Shamil and I set out to find out what the best recipe is to bake the best-ever *Käsekuchen*. Clearly the results of our experiments are not yet peer reviewed, and they never will be, as we keep the secret of our success to ourselves. What a way to spend a lockdown at Wiko: run and bake yummy cakes.

I guess some work also needed to be done, so what about that book? I soon realised that I did not want to write an academic book. To be honest, I had become bored with academic writing quite a while ago, when reviewers started to criticise my work as being “too colloquial.” So, you mean that you should *not* be able to understand what I am trying to say? When you think about it, doesn’t it give you enormous pleasure to read a well-written book about a topic you don’t really understand but would like to understand? Well, I am going to write such a book. That was the decision I made very early on after arriving at Wiko. But how? What do I know about writing books, especially for a lay audience? Nothing, as it turned out.

Some of us were contemplating writing books for a general audience, and we got together to start the Not Your Average Book Club, headed by Daniel Schönplflug, who is not only the quickest person ever to get back into long-distance running by joining the Wicked Wiko Runners, but is also an experienced nonfiction writer. At some stage we

had weekly meetings, which we soon renamed our “therapy sessions,” during which we read and commented on each other’s writing. I must say that it has been a true privilege to have been part of this small group of people who trusted each other enough to lay themselves bare. Without the Not Your Average Book Club, my book definitely would not see the light of day (given that it has not yet seen the light of day, I just wanted to get this in to make it clear than any potential failure would be due to me and to me alone).

That was the running, baking, writing part of my year at Wiko. Of course there was more. Much more. Wiko makes you realise how siloed we all are, happily staying in our own intellectual bubbles, regurgitating our thoughts to the converted who reassure us we are correct. As soon as you move out of that bubble and start to interact with others outside of your normal sphere of influence, you realise that not everyone thinks the way you do. Of course, deep down you know that not everyone thinks the way you do (and if you find that statement surprising, I suggest you go and seek professional help), but such people can be dismissed because of their lack of education and experience, or whatever excuse you want to use. Enter Wiko where you soon realise that you are having conversations with intelligent people who think completely differently from you. As an evolutionary biologist, that will be your lot if you are happy to open up and be challenged and to challenge. I soon learned that the humanities tend to dislike almost anything to do with biology and evolution when it comes to humans. As I happen to be a “radical, reductionist, naturalist” (thank you Christel Fricke for the epithet; it makes me proud!) I got into trouble many times. But then, after we decided we could not agree, we still liked each other. That has been one other essential lesson for me from my time at Wiko. There are still people out there with whom you can disagree well, and with whom you later can share a wonderful glass of wine in Villa Jaffé or the courtyard of Villa Walther.

Which brings me to my last point: Villa Walther. Why Oh Why did I never find out how to get into the tower of Villa Walther? Is it because someone did hang themselves up there for a reason I now cannot remember and the tower is forever locked? Is that why, despite looking for every possible way to get up there, I never found an entrance? What secrets lurk up there, in the tower overlooking the lake where the swans and coots successfully raised their young this spring, while we experienced the magic of being Wiko Fellows for ten amazing months? This is a story I sadly cannot follow up on, but perhaps one day, someone will find that secret door, leading to the secret staircase, and look out over the lake and think for a moment what a privilege it is to be a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.