

March 9, 2003
POSSESSED

POSSESSED; Stars In His Eyes Over A Pen

By ELAINE LOUIE

NEIL DE GRASSE TYSON, an astrophysicist and the Frederick P. Rose director of the Hayden Planetarium, is a big guy. He stands 6-foot-2 and has hands that can palm a basketball. He speaks in a booming baritone. In his TriBeCa loft, he ambles around a space with 14-foot ceilings. When he studies the stars, he goes to the tops of mountains like Palomar and Cerro Tololo to look through their powerful telescopes. He thinks big.

He even writes big, with scrolls and flourishes. A calligrapher, he is adept with quill pens made from fluffy ostrich plumes and, lately, a Nightline fountain pen made by the Japanese company Namiki.

"This is the pen," he said. On his desk was a wooden box tied with purple cord. He lifted the top and slowly unfurled a crimson cloth to reveal a black pen inlaid with seamless strips of abalone and sprinkles of gold dust. If you hold the pen vertically, the abalone slivers glint like city apartments at night, some bright, some dark. The gold dust shimmers like stars. As you turn it, the colors shift and change, constantly.

"It's a schematic city," he said gleefully. "The lights in windows change depending on who's staying up late."

It is the right pen for the man whose memoir is titled "The Sky Is Not the Limit: Adventures of an Urban Astrophysicist." "I'm a city kid, born in the Bronx, yet my whole career is about studying the universe," said Dr. Tyson, who is 45. "Proof that I'm truly urban, emotionally and philosophically, is that when I go to the telescope on the mountaintop, and there's this beautiful star-filled sky, I say, 'This reminds me of the Hayden Planetarium.'" (When he was 9, he went to the planetarium for the first time, saw the Milky Way and meteors shooting through the sky and knew, as the lights came up, that he would become an astrophysicist.)

Four years ago, when he signed the contract to write his memoir, his wife, Alice Young, a computer programmer, gave him the pen as a gift. (The pen, which cost \$6,000, is no longer made, but smaller versions are sold for \$2,000 at the Fountain Pen Hospital in TriBeCa.)

Dr. Tyson's passion for fountain pens is not about collecting, but about wanting to be expressive. "People think a word is just a word, but depending on how it's written, you can convey emotion," he said. "Because writing is now done on computers, we've lost the edge of conveying emotion. I like to slow down and remove myself to another era, and that gives me context for the present."

He is convinced that if you have to dip a pen after every six to eight words, you form parcels of text that have a natural rhythm, a rhythm that listeners are used to. "Listen to the Gettysburg Address," he said, his eyes bright.

His voice boomed. "Four score and seven years ago." He counted the words. "Six!" Never mind that Lincoln was a brilliant speechwriter. He proved a calligraphic point.

Each night, before he goes to bed, Dr. Tyson uses the Nightline pen to practice numbers, curves and random words. Boy. Betcha. Wow. And what does his wife do each night while he's scratching away with his flexible nib?

He just hooted with laughter.

Photos: IN THE FLOW -- Neil de Grasse Tyson thinks he writes more eloquently using a fountain pen, like his Nightline. (Photographs by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times)