

AND THEN THERE WAS YOU...
**A CHILDREN'S STORY OF
SCIENCE AND EMOTION**

Erika Gronek

*A*nd *Then There Was You ...* is a story about everything.¹ It was written and illustrated for my son about six months after he was born. One sleep-deprived night, I nursed him in a rocking chair while pondering the design of his room. I had decorated the top half of the room with Maxfield Parrish styled clouds and a layout of the summer constellations set in glow-in-the-dark paint on the ceiling. I wanted this design to say 'the future is wide open' and 'there is nowhere else to go but up'. The border of the room had wallpaper that was a replica of a Victorian time chart of all human history. It started with Adam and Eve, and it was updated with the on-goings of the present day. Staring into my son's eyes, I pondered all of the events that had to take place for all of his atoms to be aligned into his tiny form. That is when I decided to write and illustrate a children's book that, by accident, hit upon the major themes contained in Big History.

1 Erika Gronek, *And Then There Was You ...*, Raleigh: Lulu.com, 2010, San Francisco: Blurb.com.

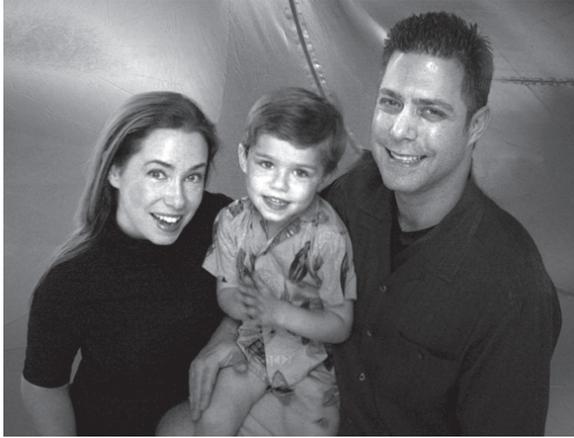


Plate 1: Erika, Adrian and Brad Gronek at the Mesa Center for the Arts, Mesa, Arizona (USA), 2012.

I wanted my son to be firmly grounded in understanding where he came from. My quandary was where to start. There was always something that came before. I had no choice but to start at the utmost beginning—the Big Bang. Out of blackness came something. It was binary—on or off. Either something existed or it did not. I was about to shove the deepest arguments that the world’s best philosophers, thinkers and theologians could come up with into a children’s book.

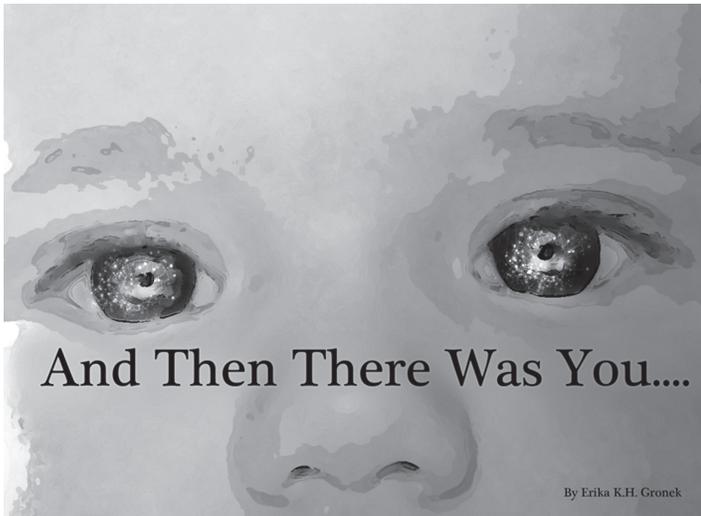


Plate 2: Cover of And Then There Was You.... Erika Gronek, 2010.

The first page I illustrated was in black with a white-hot explosion in the middle, captioned by the solitary word: ‘Spark’! It did not answer any questions; it only created them. The reader had the rest of his/her life to ponder that page. Was it the mechanical spark that created the Big Bang? Where did it come from? What, if anything, came before it? Or was the spark divine? It works in any of these ways, depending on the reader.

After illustrating the formation of our solar system and our planet, the spark returns. This time, it is in the form of lightning, as it sets off the chain of events that led to life, along with the raw materials of carbon and water, as well as various molecules and amino acids. One-celled organisms are illustrated, followed by a jump in the timeline to the time of the dinosaurs. This is my son’s favorite part of the story, and it causes him to roar.

Life occasionally has die-outs though, so the Cretaceous-Tertiary event is depicted with a giant meteorite heading for the Gulf of Mexico. A small, fuzzy mammal survives, looking a bit traumatized. Life recovers and is represented as a phylogeny that is constructed out of photo-montages. This family tree starts with one-celled organisms and leads up to one of the highest branches, showing a man and a woman looking much like the ones etched on the side of the *Voyager 2* satellite.

The rise of humanity is ignited with another spark. I manipulated a photo of my own hands to look like the dirty and weathered hands of (presumably) a *Homo habilis* smashing flint together and making a spark for fire. Language, writing and farming images segue into a map that shows the human diaspora out of Africa and the rise of human civilization.

A new phylogeny image morphs into a large family tree by the next page, displaying a variety of primates and the generations leading up to one family and one union. The final page combines science and emotion in the form of a sleeping baby. One is left to ponder all of the steps that had to go right in order for that one little life to exist. Life is complex. I want my son to understand that. There are books out there, such as *Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Biological Origins*, and then there were the school board hearings in Topeka,

Kansas that espoused the idea that evolution is too complex to be true.² Evolution is complex, beautiful and profound, as well as accidental and logical. Once one understands that, then the natural world makes sense.

Needless to say, this children's book has many layers that adults will also enjoy. Children, however, will be dazzled by the images and—with the help of their parents—it can help explain where they came from. 'Where did I come from?' It is not an easy question to answer if you want to be accurate and thorough. I remember playing the question game, 'What came before that?' with my mother. The poor woman was exhausted by the endless questions, but she made her best effort to answer them.

I hope that my son will cherish the keepsake I created for him. I used my talents of graphic design, photography, and photo manipulation to create the story that I self-published for him. I even photo-shopped snippets of images from the zoo, pictures of him, pictures from our backyard and images of his ancestors into the piece. I hope he tells his grandchildren about these 'Easter Eggs' that I left behind for him to locate. The book lays a groundwork for understanding the world, as well as provides a fascination with science and, potentially, philosophy. There is truth in both art and science, and I hope I included some of it.



Plate 3: 'Not Just a Family Tree but a Phylogeny' from And Then There Was You..., Erika Gronek 2010.

² Percival Davis and Dean Kenyon, *Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Biological Origins*, Dallas: Haughton, 1993.

Erika Gronek is a web-designer, filmmaker, and educational technologist in the United States. She holds a bachelor's degree from Arizona State University in political science and anthropology, as well as a master's degree in educational technology leadership from George Washington University and a certificate in film-editing. Her creative work started in web-design and then merged into photography, filmmaking, and education. She won best commercial and best documentary at the SCC MP/TV Film Festival in Scottsdale, Arizona in 2007 and 2010. She also worked as an educational technologist for over eight years and taught at the Art Institute of Phoenix. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona with her husband and her son. Her hobbies are her occupations, because she believes that they should be one and the same. Her e-mail address is <erikakay@gmail.com>.