

2007 Keynote Speaker



Photo by Phyllis Christopher

Mary Roach

Mary Roach is an American original, an uproariously funny writer with a trenchant wit and an eye for the oddball. In her monthly column for *Readers Digest* and in her essays and feature articles for *Outside*, *Wired*, *GQ*, *Salon.com* and *The New York Times Magazine*, her writing gravitates toward the peculiar: flatulence, Eskimo food, vaginal weight-lifting, carrot addiction, amputee bowling leagues, and the question of how much food it takes to burst a human stomach. Her first literary nonfiction book, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, explores the scientific uses of the body after death in such a clever and dignified way that it “welcomes readers back to the world of the living,” as one reviewer put it. The book was a *New York Times* Bestseller, a 2003 Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers pick, and one of *Entertainment Weekly*’s Best Books of 2003. *Stiff* has been translated into 16 languages, including Hungarian (Hullamerev) and Lithuanian (Negyveilai).

Roach considers her latest book, *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*, a giggly, random, utterly earthbound assault on our most ponderous unanswered question: Does the soul survive our physical demise? The book balances Roach’s skepticism and her endless curiosity about the unexplored nooks and crannies of forensic medicine, science and nature. As a contributing editor at the science magazine *Discover*, Roach likes to write about anything she can’t understand. She has received numerous writing awards. A 1995 article by Roach called “How to Win at Germ Warfare” was a National Magazine Award Finalist, and in 1996, her article on earthquake-proof bamboo houses took the Engineering Journalism Award in the general interest magazine category, for which she was, she readily admits, the only entrant. Her column “The Slightly Wider World of Sports” (*Sports Illustrated for Women*) did not garner any awards, Roach says, but afforded her an opportunity to learn alligator wrestling, jousting, dirt biking and knife throwing.

Roach didn’t take the normal path to becoming a storyteller. After graduating from Wesleyan University in 1981, she drove out to the Bay Area with some friends “just because we had heard it was a nice place.” She says she had no job prospects – “or skills” - and spent a few years working as a freelance copy editor before landing a part time job in the public relations office at the San Francisco Zoo. On the days when she wasn’t writing about elephant wart removal surgery and baby koalas, she wrote freelance articles for the local newspaper’s Sunday magazine. The magazine editors eventually moved on to more prestigious publications, and took Roach along with them. When she isn’t writing, Roach enjoys bird watching, backpacking, thrift stores, overseas supermarkets, Scrabble, mangoes and that late-night *Animal Planet* show about horrific animals, such as the parasitic worm that attaches itself to fishes eyeballs but makes up for it by leading the fish around.

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