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## Obituary

### **Evelyn Fox Keller (March 20, 1936 – September 22, 2023)**

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Evelyn Fox Keller, scientist, physicist, and feminist scholar, died on Friday, September 22, at the age of 87. Professor Emerita of the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (STS-MIT), Dr. Keller is survived by her children, Jeffrey and Sarah, granddaughters Chloe and Cale, and her sister, Frances. Having received several prestigious awards in recognition of the importance of her work, including a MacArthur Fellowship in 1992, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2000, a John Desmond Bernal Prize in 2011, and a Dan David Prize in 2018, Dr. Keller authored and co-edited more than a dozen influential books and more than 100 important papers,

essays, and book chapters, establishing, together with a generation of other scholars, ‘gender and science’ as a legitimate subject of inquiry.

Born in New York City on March 20, 1936, the youngest of three children of Russian Jewish immigrants (Rachel and Albert Fox), having all of her siblings became academics and scientists, Maurice Fox (1924-2020), a biologist, and Frances Fox (born on October 10 1932), a political scholar-activist, Dr. Keller told us in an interview that, once they came from a family of modest means, academic success was their only way out (Rocha and Rocha 2022). Accordingly, she obtained a B. A. in physics from Brandeis University in 1957 and an M. A. from Radcliffe College in 1959. After earning her Ph.D. from Harvard in 1963, she began teaching physics at Cornell University Medical College and working as a research assistant to Joseph Bishop Keller (1923-2016), with whom she married in 1963 and had two children, Jeffrey Keller (born in 1965) and Sarah Keller (born in 1966).

Dr. Keller taught over the following years at several institutions, including, in addition to Cornell University Medical College (1963-1969), New York University (NYU) (1962-1972), State University of New York (SUNY) (1972-1982), Northeastern University (1982-1988) and the University of California, Berkeley (1988-1992). Dr. Keller became a professor of History

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and Philosophy of Science in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT (STS-MIT) in 1992 where she retired. She was also a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (1987-1988) and a Fellow in Stanford (1991-1992). During her tenure at MIT, she was also a Radcliffe Institute Fellow (1995), a Visiting Professor at the California Institute of Technology (1996-1998), and a Visiting Scholar at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, Germany (1998).

She received honorary doctoral degrees from several institutions, including Dartmouth University (2008), Wesleyan University (2001), New School University (2000), Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (1995), Simmons College (1995), the University of Amsterdam (1993), and Mount Holyoke College (1991). Dr. Keller's broad fields of research and publication included theoretical physics, molecular biology, mathematical biology, and history and philosophy of science. Dr. Keller's transition from theoretical physics to molecular biology began during the time she spent at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory while completing her Ph.D. dissertation, conducting experiments on bacteriophages, first with Frank Stahl and then with Matthew Meselson, leading her to her Ph.D. dissertation on this subject formally advised by Walter Gilbert.

Dr. Keller first met biologist Nobel Prize winner Barbara McClintock at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, of whom she would later write a biography, her first book published in 1982, titled *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock*, translated in several languages, including Spanish, French, Dutch, German, Italian, Finnish, Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese. Dr. Keller's transition to molecular biology resulted in some of her first scientific publications and research collaboration with Lee Aaron Segel (1932-2005) and the Keller-Segel model for chemotaxis in the 1970s. In 1977, she published an article titled *The Anomaly of a Woman in Physics*, in which she chronicles her experience as a physics Ph.D. candidate at Harvard. She also published an essay titled *Gender and Science* in 1978.

Her second, now classic book, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, published in 1985, summarized her reflections on gender and science since the early 1970s and epitomized her turn to the intersection between science studies and feminism. Dr. Keller kept her interests in biology and history and philosophy of biology, as found in her books *Refiguring Life* (1995), *The Century of the Gene* (2000), and *Making Sense of Life* (2002), focused on how geneticists discussed causation.

Keller's work could be summarized as three main contributions: i) an analysis of the relationship between gender and science, ii) an analysis of relationship between science and society, particularly with respect to the mediation of language between the two, as embodied in her book published in 1993, *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender and Science*, and iii) a series of case studies in the history of science, particularly the biological sciences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 2010, Dr. Keller published *The Mirage of a Space Between Nature and Nurture*, a critique of the nature-nurture debate. In the 2000s, she also turned her attention to the crisis of climate change, having published in 2017, with co-author Philip Kitcher, *The Seasons Alter: How to Save Our Planet in Six Acts*. In addition to receiving numerous grants and fellowships, including an Andrew Mellon Fellowship at the Wellesley College Center for Women Research in 1984 and a National Science Foundation (NSF) Visiting Professorship for Women in 1985, Dr. Keller served on many professional committees and editorial boards in journals such as *Hypatia*, *Woman's Review of Books, Biology and Philosophy*, and the *Journal of the History of Biology*. In March 2023, she published her last book, *Making Sense of My Life in Science: A Memoir*.

Among other career honors, Dr. Keller was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society. As a visiting student, I first met Dr. Keller in 2005 at MIT, as she very kindly invited me to visit her office. I last talked to Dr. Keller in 2018, as she gave me an interview at her home. Dr. Keller played an instrumental role in

reshaping discussions of science, gender, and objectivity, as well as biological determinism, and I will always remember her kindness and brilliance.

## Reference

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