Nathan Efron is one of the UK's best known commentators on contact lenses, but he very nearly didn't enter the profession at all. Chris Bennett caught up with him at the BCLA conference to discover the man behind the books.

Chris Bennett: How did you first get the idea of a career in optometry?
Nathan Efron: It was almost serendipity really. For my A Level equivalent qualifications in Australia I had chosen science subjects. My marks weren't good enough to get into medical school and that's when I first thought optometry might be interesting. Unfortunately, I didn't get into that either. I eventually got onto a law degree, I enrolled and I was about to buy all of the textbooks when I got a call. Someone had dropped out of the optometry course leaving one final place, so I thought 'yes, I've done all the sciences, I'll give it a go'.

CB: Once on the optometry course which aspects did you enjoy the most?
NE: It was the science that underpinned it all. There was one lecturer in particular, Professor Barry Cole, who inspired me. He was a father figure of optometry in Australia and he headed the optometry school at the University of Melbourne. All of his lectures were evidence-based. It's a funny thing because the in-phrase now is 'evidence-based' - Barry Cole was teaching evidence-based optometry in 1977.

CB: How did you first get into research?
NE: I was fascinated by the knowledge base and how we relate research of various types to the way we end up doing things. I had to make a choice then as to whether I went into practice or whether I contributed to this underpinning of knowledge. At Melbourne there was an outstanding academic by the name of Professor Leo Carney, so at the end of the optometry course when I was thinking about what to do next I thought it would be great to work with him.

CB: How did you decide to specialise in contact lenses?
NE: It was at the time I decided to work with Leo Carney. He was kind of a nice guy and contact lenses were interesting. In the 1970s soft lenses had only just come in so there was a lot of excitement around the subject.

CB: What made you decide to start writing books about contact lenses?
NE: I suppose what drives me to write books is something that people have said to me. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and one of my strengths is the ability to be able to translate complex concepts and make them interesting for clinicians. I have an easy writing style and I have a good backside, a good bum, so I can sit down and do the work. I love scientific writing. I love sitting down and constructing the sentences and putting something together. The challenge is to make it easy to read, so it's logical, obvious and self-evident to the reader. I realise I have got a gift and this is one of the best ways of expressing it. This realisation is encapsulated in one phrase by Brien Holden in my first book, Contact Lens Complications. It says: 'Nathan Efron is one of the most prolific and effective translators of research into clinical pearls.' Simple as that.

CB: How do you rate the quality of books available now compared to when you were a student?
NE: There has been an explosion of books in recent years. I have a love of books and a very extensive library, which contains every contact lens book that has been published since about 1970 - even in foreign languages. I collect them. It's a hobby. This gives me a good appreciation of how books have evolved from the fairly staid text, to the magnificent productions of today.

CB: What are some of those changes?
NE: I think the biggest development in academic books in the last two decades has been the technology that has allowed the incorporation of colour into books. You can have books now completely illustrated in colour - that is a huge step forward. The design, the way that publishers work with art houses and design houses to make the books look good, is incredible. That is so important. I see a book not only as a device that imparts knowledge but also as a work of art. A book shouldn't be a tool to get information. I really believe that. I am very proud of my books in that way, not from a sales perspective. It should be a pleasure to
read them. I feel privileged to have been able to work with Butterworth-Heinemann. They are a fantastic publisher. The resources they put into a book, and the fantastic art people they work with have made it a pleasure putting these books together.

CB: Has this explosion in books had an impact on the quality of information?
NE: There is a bit of that. I suspect 15 or 20 years ago it was a privilege to write a book. These days anyone with a bit of an idea is going to be encouraged to bring a book along. Perhaps it's more of a gamble commissioning books from people who aren't well known, whereas 20 years ago it would have been the man at the very top. The simple answer is market forces. Books will swim or sink. Word quickly gets around if a book is no good.

CB: Is CET driving the book market?
NE: The knowledge base is continually expanding and there is going to be a great demand for continuing education, so yes, there is a need for more books.

CB: Which authors do you admire?
NE: That's a very hard question to answer. Wolf's Anatomy of the Eye and Orbit is the starting point for anything to do with optometry so that has got to be there. Ed Bennett has written a number of good books too.

CB: What would be your fantasy book to write?
NE: It would be 'The Encyclopaedia of Optometry', a multi-volume effort, maybe 10 volumes, one on each area of optometry. There are so many fantastic optometry books but it would be nice to cover the whole field in one style.

CB: What's a very traditional approach to learning. Do you think the internet will have a big effect on the way people use books?
NE: It is offering an alternative. The internet is great for finding a specific bit of information quickly but it is very constrained.

CB: What would you say to readers before they started to read one of your books?
NE: Use it just as you would use a dictionary. It's there to help you sort out specific concepts and specific ideas quickly without having to wade through a textbook.

CB: What is your next venture as an author?
NE: At the moment I am writing the second edition of Contact Lens Complications. Another book on the drawing board is Optometry A to Z. It will be different to Millodot's Dictionary of Optometry which has specific definitions. Mine will have more discursive entries, say half a page on a particular issue.

CB: But you aren't just an author. What else is happening in your professional life?
NE: I am an academic and the currency and all of the brownie points centre around published papers in refereed scientific journals. Books count for next to nothing. What they count for is my popularity, as a clinical hero, as it were.

CB: Which of these two worlds mean most?
NE: I am forced into a corner because in the university I must publish papers. We have to have the highest ranking in the research assessment exercise because that will determine how much money is coming in. When you go to a conference my peers want to know what papers I have published, not what books I have written. Being an author of books is important to me and I have made a decision that I am going to continue. I will continue to contribute to optometric science but I am not going to compromise my books.

CB: So are you more interested in applied or pure science?
NE: I am trying to straddle that fence. I don't want to do exclusive science. It's a difficult balance.

CB: What interests you apart from optometry?
NE: I am a pragmatic sort of character. I love sport. I'm keen on English football and Australian football, and I have a lovely family.