

Honest Jim talks manners

Avoid Boring People: And Other Lessons from a Life in Science

by James D. Watson

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The opening line of James D. Watson's *The Double Helix* — "I have never seen Francis Crick in a modest mood" — has become part of scientific literary folklore. As I re-read my dog-eared and musty copy of his 1968 kiss-and-tell about the discovery of the structure of DNA, I was more drawn to his closing line: "I was twenty-five and too old to be unusual." Now, decades later, Watson has apparently decided that he is no longer too old.

His latest book, a memoir with the playfully ambiguous title *Avoid Boring People*, weaves a deliciously detailed account of his life both in and out of science with a series of lessons drawn from those experiences. Each chapter ends with a homily (the title being but one) recounted in an appendix that serves as a sort of '108 commandments' to younger scientists. Some are silly, some are off the mark after so many decades, and some are painful to acknowledge. But most are insightful, useful and on target about science, competition, leadership, teaching and academic success.

The book runs from Watson's childhood in Chicago, through largely familiar accounts of his years in graduate school and then in Cambridge, to tales of political intrigue at Harvard, and finally to his decision to head the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York. Each chapter title has a manners theme ("Manners learned...", "Manners followed...", "Manners demanded...", and so on), an ironic twist for those who have witnessed the author in high dudgeon. (Only Watson's advice on manners could include an injunction "to be forthright and call crap 'crap'".)

His remarkable recall of events, both important and trivial, gives the reader the feeling of being there. He first used this technique in *The Double Helix*, a book he originally wanted to call *Honest Jim*. The details, in interwoven paragraphs that alternate between academic science and his social escapades, reveal conflicting moments of deep insecurity and robust confidence in "using my head".

The book is full of insight into Watson and into a life in science. My favourite is his reading of *Arrowsmith* by Sinclair Lewis, the tale of a young man who enters science to save the world from cholera. Watson discovered the book as a teenager and was still assigning it to his biochemistry classes at Harvard some 30 years later. With pride, he recalls one colleague comparing *The Double Helix* to the earlier classic.

We learn who and what has earned Watson's



Gossip, manners and passions shape Watson's mischievous memoirs, but some tales are yet to be told.

respect, affection and tenderness: his father, his wife Liz, the University of Chicago, former Chicago president Robert Hutchins, teaching, Harvard students, art, and those he injudiciously refers to as 'girls'. And also what earned his ire, jealousy or disregard: episcopalian Republicans, religion, Harvard, former Harvard president Nathan Pusey, and athletes. He is at all times blatantly but entertainingly honest about his likes and dislikes.

Sadly, and without explanation, the book ends too soon, at the point where Watson leaves Harvard in 1976. I was ready for another 30 years of tales untold — about his years at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, being the first leader of the US Human Genome Project, run-ins with Craig Venter and with the National Institutes of Health director Bernadine Healy, and deciding to sequence his own genome. There is no reflection on the bookends of a life in science that has spanned just over half a century — at one end standing beside the first, crude model of the double helix and at the other contemplating his own DNA sequence. There's another book yet to be written to complete Honest Jim's story.

One revealing part of the book is an odd epilogue, odd because it focuses not on events in

Watson's but in Harvard's life. Watson is highly critical of science at Harvard, while expressing sympathy for the demise of former Harvard president Larry Summers. These events would seem to be largely irrelevant to the rest of the book, had Watson not been in hot water in the mid-1970s over 'girls' in science, and had he not been curious about the role of the genome in shaping human intellectual ability and in predisposing to such 'developmental failures' as autism, schizophrenia and Asperger's syndrome. He tellingly concludes: "If Summers' tactlessness does, in fact, have a genetic basis, much of the anger toward him should rightly yield to sympathy." In genome, *veritas*.

Crick once famously complained that *The Double Helix* presented "the history of science as gossip"; *Avoid Boring People* might be viewed as the history of gossip presented as science. Lessons can still be drawn from gossip by those who have known Watson or by those who are the poorer for never having seen him in action. Unusual or not, Watson remains one of the most fascinating scientists of our time, as iconic in some respects as his double helix. ■
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