

A scientist's life for me

Forty years after the publication of James Watson's *The Double Helix*, **Georgina Ferry** asks why the life stories of so few scientists make it into the bookshops.

In 1968 Peter Medawar, Nobel prizewinner and author of many witty reflections on science and its practitioners, consented to write a preface to Ronald Clark's biography of the influential British biologist J. B. S. Haldane. Imagine Clark's consternation when he read its opening line: "The lives of academics, considered as Lives, almost always make dull reading." Later, Medawar recycled the opening paragraph for an essay in his collection *Pluto's Republic* (1982), claiming further that scientists' lives, unlike those of "artists and men of letters", were "not a source of cultural insight".

James Watson's *The Double Helix*, a book that broke the mould of scientific life-writing, also appeared in 1968. It provided abundant 'cultural insight' into the combination of good contacts, brilliance, luck, hard work and ruthless competitiveness that brought to light the DNA structure. It was panned by many of Watson's contemporaries — if Francis Crick had got his way, the book would never have been published. Yet in his own memoir *What Mad Pursuit* (1988), Crick later admitted that he was wrong: "I now appreciate how skilful Jim was, not only in making the book read like a detective story, but also by managing to include a surprising amount of science."

In *A Life Decoded*, published last year, genomic entrepreneur J. Craig Venter recalls choosing *The Double Helix* for a college assignment. Intending to train as a doctor on his return from military service in Vietnam, he sensed from its pages the adrenaline thrill of research. Generations of scientists have pointed to books that opened up this new world to them, notably the 1926 classic *The Microbe Hunters* by Paul de Kruif.

Where should today's bright 16-year-old, ambitious graduate student or interested general reader look for a personal insight into

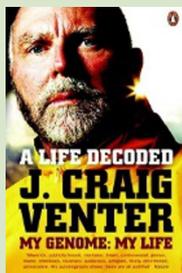


modern laboratory life? Scientific life-writing is now a small and shrinking enterprise. Publishers agree that the market for scholarly biography has suffered from the onslaught of celebrity memoir, with ghost-written autobiographies of models, sporting heroes and television personalities enjoying sales that a serious study cannot hope to match.

Selling biographies of scientists is particularly difficult, thinks Jenny Uglow, author of *The Lunar Men* (2002) and *Nature's Engraver* (2006), and editor at Chatto and Windus. "People look for subjects that are close to their interests, and they perceive scientists as just not of their world," she says. Booksellers face the same problem. Their choices of books to stock, now largely in the hands of a select few in the head offices of the major chains, influence the

publishers. Most people have heard of very few scientists, so those that they do recognize — Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein — seem the safest bets. The rankings of online retailer Amazon show that of the top 100 scientific biographies in the United Kingdom, ten are by or about Darwin; in Germany, the first five places are all occupied by Einstein, whereas Richard Feynman and Benjamin Franklin feature strongly in the United States. None comes close to making the top 100 biographies.

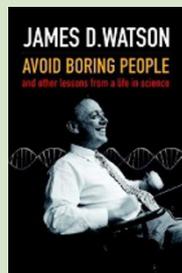
Biography shelves in bookshops are well stocked with volumes about recently deceased or living figures in politics and the arts. A handful of scientists are represented: Venter's memoir joins well-received biographies of the crystallographer J. D. Bernal by Andrew Brown (2005)



A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life

by J. Craig Venter (Penguin, £9.99)

In his review of the hardback edition, Jan Witkowski wrote: "Four decades on, our infinitely more vulgar media has called Venter many things: maverick, publicity hound, risk-taker, brash, controversial, genius, manic, rebellious, visionary, audacious, arrogant, feisty, determined, provocative. His autobiography shows that they are all justified." (*Nature* **449**, 785–786; 2007).



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

by James Watson (Oxford Univ. Press, £9.99)

Watson's frank autobiography covers personal areas as well as the discovery of DNA and his later controversies. It "weaves a deliciously detailed account of his life both in and out of science with a series of lessons drawn from those experiences," wrote Huntington F. Willard (*Nature* **449**, 787; 2007).

and of Francis Crick by Matt Ridley (2006), and Eric Kandel's autobiography *In Search of Memory* (2006) sold well in the United States. These books are few in number, increasingly the preserve of academic rather than trade publishers, and often relegated from the store's biography section to the obscure corner labelled 'science'.

It is regrettable that readers are not more alive to the cultural significance of scientists. But who maintains this gulf? Scientists publish their work in places where only other scientists will read it, in language that only other scientists understand. Many fear that attracting public attention will lose them the respect of their colleagues; others dismiss tales of scientific rivalry as gossip. Some argue that individuals are irrelevant to the progress of science: anyone could have discovered the double helix, but only Leonardo da Vinci could have painted the *Mona Lisa*.

In practice, science is done by real people, as different from one another — except in their devotion to their field of study — as any other sector of humanity. Telling their stories transforms the stereotype of the scientist into vivid individuality. Truthful biographies scotch the myth of the solitary genius: any contemporary scientist's story is threaded through the network of exchanges and rivalries within and between labs that makes it such an intensely social activity. Parents, children, spouses and lovers feature as prominently in the lives and careers of scientists as in those of artists.

Little hint of personal background emerges in the memoirs of deceased fellows written by close colleagues and published by scientific academies. These essays are useful research tools for historians, but not widely read by outsiders. Occasionally a scientist, having achieved some level of distinction, decides that it might be worth documenting his or her experiences for the public. But most have no name recognition and therefore no market beyond



their immediate academic circle. Even within science, students learn so little of the history of their subjects that they have no real sense of the people behind the classic references they cite.

Biography and autobiography, it seems to me, offer an ideal opportunity to engage people's natural curiosity about the lives of others and so draw them into the quest to understand the physical world. Name recognition remains a barrier, but there are some encouraging pointers. Palaeontologist Richard Fortey has written a succession of brilliantly accessible personal reflections on his field of study and London's Natural History Museum. He admits that nobody had heard of him until he started writing popular books. For less gifted

communicators, success depends on giving the job to a writer with an already formidable reputation. Simon Winchester is doing well with his new biography of the biochemist and Sinophile Joseph Needham (*The Man Who Loved China*, entitled *Bomb, Book and Compass* in the United Kingdom), as will Samuel Taylor Coleridge's celebrated biographer Richard Holmes, who has chosen Joseph Banks, Humphry Davy and William Herschel as subjects for his first major work in ten years, *The Age of Wonder*. The television tie-in works for science too, with Simon Flynn of Icon Books reporting that the BBC4 series that accompanied Piers Bizony's strongly biographical *Atom* (2007) "made a huge difference" to sales.

Alternatives to the cradle-to-grave biography or memoir are to be welcomed. The Internet is ripe for exploitation, and is a much more likely port of call for the young and impressionable. Short autobiographies of Nobel prizewinners are available on <http://nobelprize.org>. But any scientist can include on their web page or in their blog the story of how they got into science, who inspired them, and the joys and frustrations of their working lives.

The medium is not the issue, however. Presenting the reality of the scientific life depends simply on the willingness of scientists to appear as individuals — and of their colleagues to applaud their doing so.

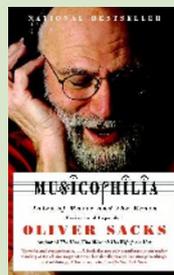
Georgina Ferry is a writer based in Oxford, UK. Her most recent biography is *Max Perutz and the Secret of Life*.

Discuss science biography online at <http://tinyurl.com/3j6y44>.



Suffer and Survive: Gas Attacks, Miners' Canaries, Spacesuits and the Bends: The Extreme Life of J. S. Haldane

by Martin Goodman (Pocket Books, £8.99)
Physiologist John Scott Haldane deliberately exposed himself to toxic gases. His results saved many lives, from mine-workers to deep-sea divers. Reviewer Andy Meharg commented: "It is a fitting tribute to a pioneer who enabled the human body to survive at the extremes of modern life." (*Nature* 449, 981; 2007).



Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain

by Oliver Sacks (Random House, \$14.95)
Neurologist and medical writer Sacks delves into the world of music. Reviewing the hardback edition, Laura Garwin wrote: "Sacks is the consummate storyteller, and his extensive network of patients, friends and correspondents — supplemented by a magpie-like erudition — keeps him well supplied with raw material." (*Nature* 449, 977-978; 2007).