Mentioned in dispatches

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Current Biology. Editor Peter Newmark. *Current Biology. 12/yr. £180, $300 (institutional); £60, $99 (personal); £29.95, $49.95 (student).*

THE first issue of this journal appeared in February 1991, and although the journal is still fairly new, it has already made its mark, if only with its attractive and colourful covers. *Current Biology* aims "to inform its readers of outstanding developments in all areas of 'modern' biology"; each article is written by an expert in the field. I noticed that several of the articles had more than one author — one as many as four — which suggests that, in the minds of some of the authors, the article may not simply be a review of the outstanding development but that it may have developed something outstanding itself; and, as in all other scientific work, there seems to be a requirement that this be communalized to make sure that both honour and blame are correctly apportioned. The accepted way of both doing scientific work and writing about it has forced a rigid conventionality on us, and has stifled the individual. However, I am happy to report that the corporate contributions are very much in the minority. Most of the articles are extremely well written with an individual style and are what the cover claims — dispatches from the front lines of biology. I suspect that there is some considerable activity in the editing department, but, if so, it has been subtly applied and the articles do not read as though they had all been squeezed out of the same tube.

By far the most distinctive feature of the journal is the illustrations. Colour abounds, not only on the covers but also in photographs and in the special illustrative diagrams and cartoons provided for the articles. Some issues also contain a section called "Biology in Pictures". For example, in the March 1992 issue there is a display of ethereal panels of zebrafish development and another of striking photographs of genetic disease in mice and men. I do not like the portrait of Fred Sanger featured in the May 1992 issue; he looks too posed and fixed, as though cast in concrete, and he would normally not be looking at a gel with such vacant intensity, but instead would have been very pleased with what he was seeing.

Current Biology comes from the publishers of the *Current Opinion* series, which carry more organized and specialized reviews. The authors of these reviews choose and annotate important papers, and a selection of these references appears in *Current Biology*. This digest of digests is useful although, like some distillates, it can be quite heady; but perhaps some of the articles will drive readers back to the original papers for a longer drink.

The reviews cover all areas of biology. The very first has the title "DNA recombination in the brain?" — was this perhaps an unconscious hint of what the journal was aiming to do but with different technology? There is a very good article on "Miocene DNA sequences — a dream come true?", another archive we are trying to read. Everything is covered and even if there are reviews of similar fields in other journals, it does not matter, because the pace of advance is so rapid that we need such reviews in regular doses. An example is the field of cell signalling, and especially the G and GAP proteins, which need continuous treatment. As in so many other fields of research, an arcane tribal language has developed and the primary papers have become totally indigestible.

When I first started doing science, and even later in the 1950s in the early days of molecular biology, there was no rush about acquiring information. There wasn't very much of it about anyway, and a few months here or there made little difference. Perusing the *Annual Reviews of Biochemistry* sufficed to keep one up to date, and some of us actually read books to learn about other fields. We also had friends that we talked to about science, and scientific news also travelled in letters and preprints. But everything was doomed to success; the field deepened and widened, journals and meetings multiplied, and the whole impossible managerial structure of science as we know it today came into being. Francis Crick once told me that he had stopped reading the literature in molecular biology because he was sure that if anything important happened, somebody would tell him about it. The trouble is that today he would have an endless queue outside his door and would listen to nothing else. Most scientists have survived because they live in what I once called 'reading communes'. Fortunately, graduate students are compelled to read the primary literature and so, in the large laboratories, with their journal clubs, seminars and visiting speakers, it is possible to keep up. Those who do not enjoy (or suffer) that privilege need something like *Current Biology*. I only

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