

Don't steal this book

Jeffrey Mervis

Stealing into Print: Fraud, Plagiarism, and Misconduct in Scientific Publishing. By Marcel LaFollette. *University of California Press*: 1992. Pp. 298. \$30.

THE modern era of scientific misconduct began in 1974, when William Summerlin, a dermatologist, used a felt-tip pen on two mice that had received skin grafts to create a result that could not be achieved experimentally. Since then, all sorts of questions have been raised about the prevalence of misconduct, its origins and its impact on society, and much has been said about how the scientific community can prevent it or, failing that, respond quickly and effectively.

Marcel LaFollette does an admirable job narrating these debates, pointing out their high and low points and commenting on their importance. What she does not do is suggest any answers or provide a roadmap to the next stage. Instead, the reader is offered innocuous advice on how misconduct should be handled, with each player in the drama being told to act wisely and responsibly.

Such restraint need not be the case. LaFollette has followed most of the incidents of the past dozen years that have captured headlines, filled congressional hearing rooms and generated an untold number of panel discussions. As the editor of *Science, Technology and Human Values*, she was briefly a participant in one notorious episode — the attempt by Ned Feder and Walter Stewart, two scientists at the US National Institutes of Health, to publish their investigation into the co-workers of John Darsee, a cardiology researcher who fabricated data in dozens of papers.

There is no question that LaFollette knows her stuff, and she is not afraid to scrutinize the actors. She correctly scolds the scientific press for being too trusting, calling them “drowsy watchdogs rather than hyperactive pit bulls” in uncovering misconduct, and she captures the smugness among those who have followed the issue for years by describing the “knowing glances” exchanged by those “trying pretentiously to look like insiders” at public gatherings.

Regrettably, the author ignores her own observation, offered about scientists as a whole, that “they apparently do not learn political lessons as easily as they learn new lab techniques”. Government bodies are being forced to deal with scientific misconduct because the scientific community — journal editors,



The coyote *Canis latrans* from Audubon's *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (1845–46). The picture is reproduced here from P. T. Stroud's *Thomas Say* (University of Pennsylvania Press, \$24.95), a biography of the pioneering New World naturalist who gave the animal its scientific name.

laboratory directors, peer reviewers, professional societies, university administrators and so on — have repeatedly made a mess of things. Politicians, even the US Representative John Dingell (Democrat, Michigan), focus on the occasional instance of misconduct not out of meanness towards science but because they take seriously their stewardship of public funds, of whatever amount.

What US legislators are waiting to see is evidence that the scientific community is capable of rooting out and dealing effectively with misconduct. Once assured of that, they can turn their attention back to the likes of savings and loan scandals and defence overbillings. LaFollette would have done better to point out reasonable, or at least provocative, solutions. Instead, she offers such bromides as “Where does the responsibility for thorough evaluation [of manuscripts] lie? An obvious response is ‘everywhere’”. The questions that she raises at the outset, including whether authors, referees and editors are sufficiently accountable, whether the literature can be trusted if peer review cannot detect fraud and whether the data are sufficiently accurate to be used for public policy decisions, are important, but they go unanswered.

It seems likely that the attention paid to misconduct will wane once scientists show an ability to deal with the problem. But it seems unlikely that *Stealing into Print* will help them much in achieving this goal. □

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People and places

A. M. Mannion

Late Quaternary Environmental Change: Physical and Human Perspectives. By M. Bell and M. J. C. Walker. *Longman*: 1992. Pp. 273. £15.99, \$39.95 (pbk).

IT is encouraging to note that at a time when many texts are preoccupied with current and possible future environmental change, more than lip-service is being paid to past environmental change. Such is the main focus of this well written and well produced book.

Although a wide range of topics is covered, including many almost hackneyed themes such as the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion, there remains a commendable emphasis on scientific method: scientific rigour is all too often lost amid the overwhelming volume of issue-based literature; and students often shy away from theory and philosophy. Also examined are the evidence (fossil, sedimentary, recorded and so on) for environmental change and the usefulness of the dating techniques used to cover the past 20,000 years, which provide the temporal setting for the book. There is, however, little overt criticism of these methods or much discussion of their limitations.

The subsequent narrative on natural environmental change, particularly climatic change, makes interesting read-