

had little option but to do the same and that academics are guilty of either blindly accepting the same orthodoxy as the bank or of being too timid to voice any opposition, not least because that might mean being struck off the bank's list of consultants. So, according to George and Sabelli, the bank is to blame not only for its own actions but also for everyone else's. This claim is absurd.

The record of development is indeed disappointing, but ditching either the World Bank or economic theory won't enrich the lives of the destitute in poor countries. The problems of development are complex. Their solutions are complex too. If you are interested in understanding them, then you should read Partha Dasgupta's *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* (Oxford University Press, 1993). I would certainly recommend *Faith and Credit* to anyone thinking of joining the World Bank — one should acquire a critical attitude toward any institution. But I would much rather that they read Dasgupta's book. In it they will not find a litany of complaints about the World Bank. They will find instead something precious: a deep understanding of the problems of the destitute in poor countries and the means for improving their lot. □

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## Science in fiction

Bernard Knight

**The Bourbaki Gambit.** By Carl Djerassi. University of Georgia Press: 1994. Pp. 230. \$19.95.

THE cover of *The Bourbaki Gambit* carries laudatory remarks by such literary giants as Iris Murdoch, David Lodge and Arthur C. Clarke, yet after carefully reading every word of the several hundred pages, I failed to find reasons to be similarly effusive. The scientific pedigree of the author is impeccable: Djerassi is a professor of chemistry at Stanford University with an impressive list of medals and awards for chemical prowess, including the first synthesis of a steroid oral contraceptive, which earned him the title, quoted in the blurb, as 'Father of the Pill'. He has published prose and poetry, including a previous novel *Cantor's Dilemma*, which he describes in his three-page foreword as being the first in a tetralogy, of which *The Bourbaki Gambit* continues "to shine the unforgivingly bright light of contemporary life on today's scientists".

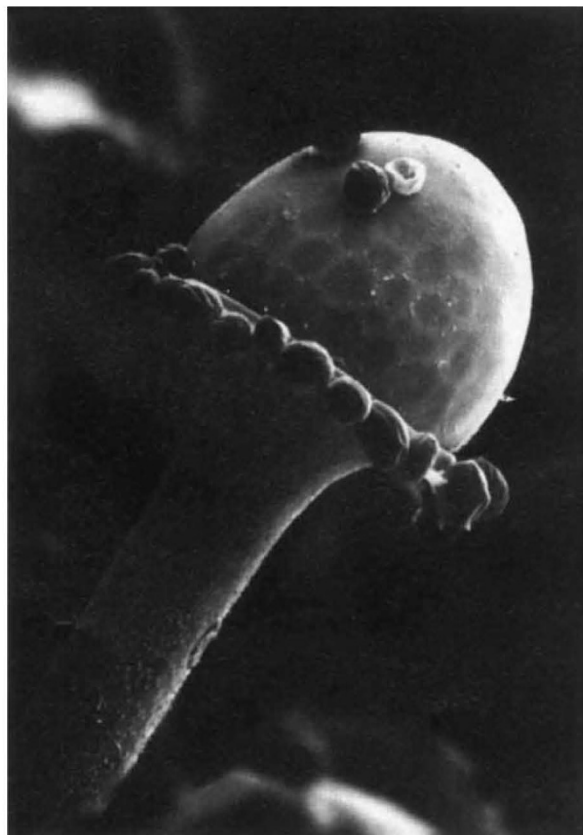
The thrust of this pretty straightforward yarn is that four geriatric scientists from various parts of the world become increasingly disgruntled with the downgrading of their research funds or their enforced retirement, especially when their name-

plates are unscrewed from their office doors on the day they leave. As a collective act of revenge, to show the world of academia that superannuation is not synonymous with creative paralysis or cognitive atrophy, they decide to construct a communal research publication of Nobel proportions, concealed under a pseudonym. It is not made sufficiently clear — at least not to me — why this ploy should have been expected to rock the foundations of the scientific establishment, apart from generating some surprise that any egotistical researchers would be willing to hide the light of their creativity under a bushel of anonymity. The idea, which provides the title of the book, came from a real-life series of publications where a group of mathematicians used the fictional name of Nicholas Bourbaki.

To my mind, the story parts company with credibility because of the apparent ease with which a world-shaking piece of research is gestated with virtually no personal access to laboratory facilities by the main members of the geriatric team. Following a series of dinner parties, a week in Capri and lots of faxes, they come up with the polymerase chain reaction (PCR), which of course actually did gain the Nobel prize in 1993. Not surprisingly, the publication they choose for their jolly jape is *Nature*, but their young lady worker jumps the gun by mailing off a couple of copies prematurely. For devotees of *Nature*, there is an amusing account of how the journal expedited publication with remarkable speed: "There were no comments by the referees" she continued. "Nothing; just a note from London that the manuscripts were accepted."

Most of the laboratory work necessary to discover and develop PCR seems to have been performed *en passant* by this young postgraduate as a preliminary to her PhD. Most of Chapter 19 is devoted, by way of dialogue, to an explanation of DNA, base sequences and the principles of recombinant and amplification techniques including six diagrams — a strange sight on the pages of a novel. The writing is competent and flows easily, and the characterization is excellent, avoiding the cardboard figures that too often abound in "science in fiction", as the author himself categorizes his genre.

The problem is the storyline, which is longwinded and lacks any surprises. The plot is virtually stated at the beginning and then travels along sedately to the end of the book, where the reader is left feeling "so what?". The several feeble attempts to inject some mild and irrelevant sexual content overshadow some much more interesting side-paths, such as a rather bitter exposé of the scientific hierarchy in Japan. I am genuinely not trying to be gratuitously unkind, but I feel that what could have made an interesting short story has made a rather tedious novel.



THE fungus *Rhizopus oligosporus* has been used for centuries as a fermentation agent in the production of tempe, an oriental soybean cake. This picture is taken from *Microfungi* by S. Gravesen, J. C. Frisvad and R. A. Samson, which concentrates on the filamentous fungi (the moulds) and their role in biodeterioration and biotechnology. Sections also cover mycotoxins, allergies and fungal infections. The book concludes with a description of 34 common mould species. Published by Munksgaard, Nørre Søgade 35, Postboks 2148, 1016 Copenhagen, Denmark. Price is DK320.