

'the design takes me back to the '80s'.

The question that puzzled me was, 'Who would buy this book?' It is not really of encyclopaedic scale or nature; it would surely not be of much use to an A-level science student. Is there a market for coffee-table books on science? I visited my local bookshop, part of a well-known national chain. *The Science Book* was selling well, I was told. Five copies purchased in the first week — good for a non-fiction book of that price. They had just ordered ten more copies for their general stock.

I hope *The Science Book* becomes a best-seller, not just because it celebrates and communicates science, but because there might then be a second edition. It should reduce the size of the images and text, with one entry per page so that 500 scientific milestones/discoveries could be described. The editor should engage as many contemporary scientists as possible in the design, writing and referencing of the book. Then this would be the best popular-science book on planet Earth, and both an inspiration and a celebration for all. ■

Fran Balkwill is at the ICRF Translational Oncology Laboratory, Barts and The London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine & Dentistry, John Vane Science Centre, Charterhouse Square, London EC1M 6BT, UK.

.....  
A clever idea  
to swallow

**This Man's Pill: Reflections on the 50th Birthday of the Pill**

by Carl Djerassi  
Oxford University Press: 2001. 320 pp.  
£12.99, \$22.50

**Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill**

by Lara V. Marks  
Yale University Press: 2001. 352 pp.  
\$29.95

**Michael Gillmer**

Fifty years ago, Carl Djerassi and his research assistant Luis Miramontes synthesized norethindrone at the laboratories of Syntex in Mexico City. Norethindrone is the synthetic hormone that has been most widely used over the past half-century in oral contraceptives, and for hormone replacement therapy and treating menstrual disorders. Djerassi's collection of essays is partly historical, partly philosophical and partly autobiographical. Beautifully written, as would be expected of one of the best-known purveyors of the literary genre of 'science in fiction', the essays include Djerassi's views on how 'the pill' has affected the attitudes of both Eastern and Western societies to sexual relationships and reproduction. And they include his

controversial thoughts on the separation of the sex act and human procreation that has occurred as a result of developments in *in vitro* fertilization techniques.

The longest chapter gives Djerassi's account of the development of the pill. Here he repeats a claim first made in *The Politics of Contraception* (1979) that norethindrone, a progestogen, is a contraceptive "pill". But there are several reasons why this does not stand up to close scrutiny. The combined oral contraceptive pill, as it is more correctly known, contains a synthetic oestrogen and a synthetic progestogen. The progestogen used in the initial trials of the pill in the 1950s in Puerto Rico was not norethindrone, but norethynodrel, a product of the Chicago-based company G. D. Searle, for whom Gregory Pincus — rightly acknowledged by Djerassi as the father of the pill — was a scientific adviser.

The inclusion of an oestrogen in the combined oral contraceptive pill was due to serendipity — the original oestrogen component, mestranol, was a contaminant of the synthesis of norethynodrel. The first trials of the pill did not begin until 1956, and it was 1960 before these synthetic hormones were licensed for use in the United States as an oral contraceptive preparation, Enovid. These facts that are fully documented by Lara Marks in *Sexual Chemistry*.

Djerassi's essays describe his views on the control of human fertility and its impact on society, particularly the way in which the development of the pill has affected human behaviour and women's sexual liberation. As he played a major — albeit indirect — role in the changes that have occurred in Western society over the past 40 years, his essays are well worth reading.

Djerassi's autobiography, the curiously titled *The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas' Horse* (Basic Books, 1992), provides insight into the mind of this enigmatic man. The autobiographical component of this latest book explains his transition from award-winning scientist to acclaimed author, poet and playwright. I can recommend it to both a specialist and a general readership, but suggest that his autobiography is read first as it provides a better insight into Djerassi's early life and influences.

A cursory glance at the main title of Lara Marks' book would suggest a treatise on pheromones and other substances involved in sexual reproduction. But the subtitle clears up that misapprehension. Marks has produced a beautifully written, definitive history of the oral contraceptive pill. Every possible aspect of its development has been considered, ranging from the global population perspective to the impact of the pill on the lives of individual women. Her research

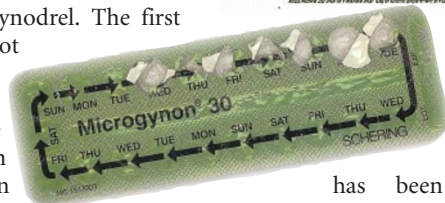
**"The Pill is not enough!"**

You need a condom to keep AIDS and STDs away.  
You think you know your boyfriend well. You think you could never get a disease from him. Think again. He may not even know he's infected. Use a latex condom every time.

**BYOC**  
BRING YOUR OWN CONDOMS

A condom is for both of you.

ADD HOME 20% OFF + FREE DELIVERY. See Us Online. Discover More At: www.bycoc.com



**Bitter pill: oral contraception has facilitated the spread of HIV.**

has been exhaustive, and includes a vast number of interviews with chemists involved in the synthesis of the pill, doctors who conducted the original field trials, and women who took part in these early studies.

Marks has also reviewed all the relevant published literature — both scientific and journalistic — and has scoured the correspondence of the lead players in this fascinating and complex story. Nearly every statement is referenced, and one-third of this 360-page masterpiece is devoted to a detailed bibliography. The book is an invaluable reference source.

Although the subject matter of these two books inevitably covers common ground, the approach taken by the authors could not be more different. Djerassi uses his personal experience and observations as the source of his views — including extracts from his poems, books and plays — to convey his feelings about how the pill has affected women's lives. Marks, on the other hand, has relied very much on the views of others, and ends each of her chapters with a conclusion reached from her extensive research. But both agree that the pill has been a major influence on the lives of women in the twentieth century. And there can be little doubt that it will continue to play an important role in the twenty-first century. These two books in their very different ways provide this insight. ■

Michael Gillmer is at the Women's Centre, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford OX3 9DU, UK.