A life in science and literature

Alison Abbott reviews the latest autobiography of Carl Djerassi, father of the Pill.

Chemist Carl Djerassi published his first full-length autobiography just before his 70th birthday. Now, just weeks after his 91st, he delivers his second. Remarkably, *In Retrospect* does have new things to say.

At an age when most scientists retire, Djerassi launched a second career as a novelist and playwright. And in the preface, he announces that *In Retrospect* is largely an “autopsychanalysis”, searching within his fiction for an understanding of his true self and motivations. The book is, however, much more wide-ranging and outward-looking than that implies, although Djerassi’s powerful ego is ever-present — sometimes irritatingly, but often endearingly.

Djerassi was born in Vienna to secular Jewish doctors who divorced, then remarried after Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany, so that Carl and his mother could escape to his father’s native Bulgaria. From there, mother and son emigrated to the United States, where Djerassi learnt English and studied ferociously. In 1949, he joined the labs of the pharmaceutical company Syntex in Mexico City, where he led the research team that synthesized the first orally active steroid contraceptive compound, norethindrone. In 1959, he became a member of the chemistry faculty at Stanford University in California; he consolidated his reputation as a front-line chemist over three decades. Then he shifted his academic attention to outreach, before becoming a professor emeritus in 2002.

Djerassi became enormously wealthy thanks to the soaring value of the Syntex stock acquired when he worked at the company, and he took up art (and house) collecting. Emotionally, his life was turbulent: he married three times, and had to face the tragedy of his daughter’s suicide in 1978. His marvellous first autobiography, *The Pill, Pygmy Chimps and Degas’ Horse* (Basic, 1992), covers this era in his life. *In Retrospect* goes over some of the same ground, using the prism of his other writings — rediscovering his Jewish identity through fictional characters in his books and plays, for example.

Carl Djerassi moved from chemistry to fiction-writing.

It also airs a few grievances, particularly that the Stanford University chemistry faculty did not give him a leaving party when he retired — an omission that raised eyebrows in academic circles even at the time.

Furthermore, the book attempts to settle who did what, and when, regarding the development of the Pill. Scientific priority is an important issue for Djerassi. He details the frequently overlooked work of Austrian physiologist Ludwig Haberlandt, whom he credits with being the first to understand that progesterone-related steroids could act as contraceptives. In the 1920s, Haberlandt

showed that the corpus luteum, a progesterone-rich structure that develops around the egg during the menstrual cycle, had contraceptive properties, and he tried to persuade the pharmaceutical industry to develop a contraceptive for humans. Haberlandt committed suicide at 47 in 1932, apparently in despair at the hostility that greeted his ideas.

Syntex filed its patent on norethindrone in 1951. More than a year later, another company, Searle, filed a patent on the similar compound norethynodrel — a steroid that is converted to norethindrone in the body. Neither company at first thought of marketing the compounds as contraceptives, fearing that public acceptance would be too low for profitability. Both got marketing approval from the US Food and Drug Administration for their use in menstrual disorders and other indications in 1957. Soon after, both decided to forge ahead with contraception. But Syntex lost two years in that race because its clinical-trials partner Parke-Davis, fearing a possible religious backlash, suddenly pulled out — so Searle’s product was first on the market.

Djerassi quotes his own literary works at length. Four of his five novels form his “science in fiction” series, the most well-known being

Cantor’s Dilemma (Penguin, 1989), a saucy tale about a scientific race marred by misconduct. It is used in some university scientific-ethics courses. His nine plays include *Immaculate Misconception*, which addresses the dilemmas and possibilities of a method of *in vitro* fertilization called ICSI. Another, *Oxygen*, co-authored with Nobel laureate and fellow chemist Roald Hoffmann, creates a retrospective Nobel committee to deliberate on who should win a prize for the discovery of oxygen. In *In Retrospect*, Djerassi defends the much-criticized didacticism that characterizes these works.

Djerassi’s multifaceted life has been intense, high-octane and successful. The vigour of his prose suggests how much he has enjoyed it. ■

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