BOOK REVIEW

A Dictionary of Genetics

6th Edition by Robert King and William D. Stansfield. 530 pp. Oxford University Press, 2002

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Nobody will contest the usefulness of dictionaries. You may need them for translations, to find the right explanation or definition of a particular word, a synonym, they can increase your general knowledge and understanding of various subjects. My late uncle, an artist painter, used to say when he finished reading another volume of the Larousse dictionary: 'that was interesting, I never learned that much when I was in school'. I know for a fact that there were other reasons why he never learned much in school, but in some way he was right. Dictionaries can be extremely useful when well conceived and organised and of course when the information is correct, clearly formulated and understandable for those who want to use it. The authors of this dictionary of genetics are emeriti, but experienced geneticists. They produced the first edition of this dictionary in 1968. Since then they must have had a hard time keeping up with the explosive developments in genetics. Indeed, the dictionary is not limited to Human Genetics, but covers the genetics of a whole series of organisms. In addition, one can find information on chemicals, chemical reactions, biochemistry, physics, statistics, cytogenetics, some genetic diseases, even methods used in genetic research and diagnosis. All in all 500 terms more than in the previous edition of 1997 with its 6500 definitions. All this is further illustrated with some 350 simple tables and black and white drawings, including chemical formulas and reactions. It is difficult to think of a term that is not found in the dictionary; PCR, RNAi, proteome are all there and explained clearly. I could not find Yeast Two Hybrid and metabolome, but there are significantly more terms

that I saw for the first time than that there were missing. Some definitions seem at first a bit odd e.g. trimester: one-third of the human nine-month gestation period, but of course the authors had to limit the scope of the dictionary to the explanation of terms used in the context of genetics in the broad sense.

Remarkable and interesting are the six appendices with the most surprising information. These include the hierarchical classification of organisms, a list of economically important domesticated organisms from alfalfa to zinnia, the chronological citation of important discoveries in genetics from 1590 to 2001, with all relevant Nobel prizes as well as relevant publications in the field. A list of periodicals and websites conclude the appendices. It is to be expected that some scientists will find quarrel with the fact that their contribution or name is not listed, but overall the authors did a remarkable job in bringing all this information together. One should forgive the authors that they list our journal as being published by Karger and not by Nature Publishing (which is out of date by 4 years), and just take note of the fact that our journal is listed. For students, professionals, and non-geneticists, including science writers, this will be a useful addition to the libraries, which will help in promoting a better understanding of the so rapidly evolving field of genetics.

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