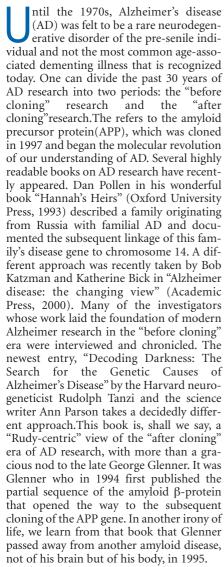
The Boston Alzheimer connection

Decoding Darkness: the Search for the Genetic Cause of Alzheimer's disease

by Rudolph E. Tanzi and Ann B. Parson Persueus Publishing · November 2000 Hardback £17/\$26

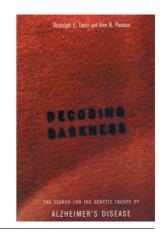
Edward Koo



This book is not meant to be comprehensive, nor does it represent an impartial view of AD research. Rather, it is the story of one of the key neurogeneticists involved in the hunt for the familial AD genes. The book begins with the young student, fresh from college, long hair and all, stumbling

into the laboratory of another young investigator, James Gusella, at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, USA. It was in this lab shortly thereafter that the first breakthrough of modern molecular genetics and neurodegenerative disease research occurred: the linkage of Huntington's disease locus to chromosome 4. This fortuitous encounter between budding student and junior scientist, however, led to and defined Tanzi's subsequent key roles in AD research and, in particular, the familial AD genes. Those who entered the field in the past decade may not know that Tanzi's trajectory to success in AD research occurred during his graduate school days. To make the young reader more envious, Tanzi even bypassed the now standard postdoctoral training period to establish his own laboratory. This book chronicles the period roughly from 1984 to 1999, and includes the cloning of the APP gene, linkage of the first families to chromosome 21, identification of the rare APP mutations, discovery of the presenilin-1 and -2 genes and ends with the recent efforts by pharmaceutical and biotech companies to treat this devastating disorder

The book contains the bare basics of molecular genetics and Alzheimer biology, but I suspect that the casual reader will have difficulties following that aspect of the work. The book is fast-paced, exciting, a bit gossipy, fragmentary and contains a few errors of fact. Names of so many different investigators are mentioned along the way that I suspect an uninitiated reader will be lost at times. The book also leaves some interesting stories hanging. For example, how was it that Peter Hyslop initially found linkage in one of his families to chromosome 21, only to discover four years later that the mutation resided within the newly discovered presenilin-1 gene? As in any highly competitive area, the Alzheimer field has it's share of paranoia and "tight-lipped" investigators. The authors relate an amusing story of Jerry Schellenberg from Seattle, who flew all the way to Italy with his data



tucked in his shirt pocket, ready to announce to the world his finding about chromsome 14 linkage in case someone else did. However, as soon as he realized that no one else had similar data, he turned around and left the conference early.

This is an intensely personal book. It shares the successes but also the false starts and blind alleys that all researchers go through. In this book, as in many before, one witnesses the competitive world of academic research, the fiercely competitive scientists and what drives one particular investigator to this field. This odd assortment of interests is well summarized by a quote in the book: "[it's] a mixture of idealism, selfishness, generosity, greed, fun, anger, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll".

Who should read this book? Alzheimer investigators will no doubt at times be amused and at times annoyed. It is a fun science detective story as long as the reader has some interest in AD. However, for this reviewer, it is a good read.

Edward Koo is at the University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA email: edkoo@ucsd.edu

Other Alzheimer's disease books

Alzheimer's Disease—Current Treatments and Future Prospects by William Brown FT Pharmaceuticals, £475/\$700

Biological Markers in Dementia of Alzheimer's Type edited by E. J. Fowler

Smith-Gordon and Company Ltd, £28/\$37

Pathology of Alzheimer's Disease edited by Alison Goate and F. Ashall *Academic Press*, £59.95/\$92

Alzheimer's Disease Reference by T. Reisberg *The Free Press,* £53.95/\$75