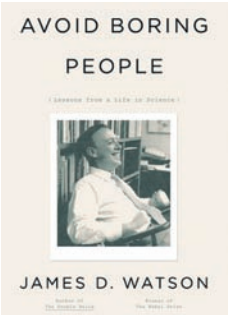
Sharp tactics



AVOID BORING PEOPLE: LESSONS FROM A LIFE IN SCIENCE BY JAMES D. WATSON

Alfred A. Knopf: 2007. 349 pp. $26.95

Twentieth-century science produced two ubiquitous models: the Rutherford–Bohr model of the atom and Watson and Crick's double-helix structure of DNA. Rutherford and Bohr did not collaborate directly on their model, which took a few years to emerge. The double helix, by contrast, was the instantaneous product of two intellects as complementary as the base pairs that so thrillingly lock together to form the rungs of its twisted ladder. When Nevill Mott arrived as the new head of the Cavendish Laboratory one year later, he believed it was all the work of one man called Francis Watson–Crick.

Watson is the scientific grandson of both Bohr and Rutherford. Max Delbrück, who was mesmerized by Bohr as a young physicist, became an inspirational mentor for Watson during his postgraduate research on phages, the stripped-down genetic vehicles. He learned from Delbrück to 'go to the heart of the gene', that 'young hotshots' working on fundamentally important questions acquire reputations for arrogance from less committed scientists; he would deliberately sit next to Delbrück at meals, hungry for great thoughts but often rewarded with crumbs about women or tennis. There are parallels with Rutherford's single-minded pursuit of the nucleus and his dismissal of lesser problems as 'stamp collecting'. Watson says in this memoir studded with advice that 'two obsessions are one too many' and 'a big objective…makes you feel special'. Just as Rutherford, when teased that he was a lucky man always on the crest of a wave, could answer 'Well, I made the wave didn't I?' so too 'Lucky' Jim.

Like Bohr and Rutherford, Watson built up an institute that attracts some of the world's best. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratories, when he became its director in 1968, was every biologist's favourite summer camp — dilapidated, underfunded and friendly. Displaying unsuspected talents for fund-raising and management, Watson transformed CSHL into an architecturally stylish academic powerhouse, where science is still a social activity and gossip is expected. It is sad that this productive association has ended in unpleasant circumstances. Watson recalls an anthropology lecture at CSHL in the summer of 1948 as 'obvious crap' — a description I think he would readily apply to his own recent remarks about race and intelligence.

Watson grew up in Chicago during the Depression. His adored mother was a precinct captain for the Democrats. From his father he learned about accurate observation and scepticism through bird watching. His first taste of celebrity was at the age of 14 on the radio show *Quiz Kids* before being dethroned by an 8-year-old girl, who knew more about the Bible and Shakespeare. Any holes in his general education were largely covered by a liberal undergraduate curriculum at the University of Chicago based on great works rather than textbooks (*College is for learning how to think* — one of the lessons collected at the end of the book). After a PhD from Indiana, he set sail for Europe and a life rooted in the mid-West blossomed into a rarefied career — rubbing elbows with presidents (US, corporation and university), prominent scientists and intellectuals. He was more attuned to self-interest and competition than his European counterparts, but retained a deep moral concern about the societal benefits from science. François Jacob, who Watson regarded as a major competitor in 1960s gene-regulation research, summed him up as "A surprising mixture of awkwardness and shrewdness. Of childishness in the things of life and of maturity in those of science."

Max Perutz, whose chronic heartburn was not eased by the presence of Watson and Crick in his lab, admired Watson for never confusing hard work with hard thinking. Although reading this book is not hard work, young scientists and lab directors (its intended beneficiaries) will have to decide whether to bother. In his prime, Watson would have first turned to the end, scanning the list of 'Remembered Lessons' for any surprises.

Andrew Brown
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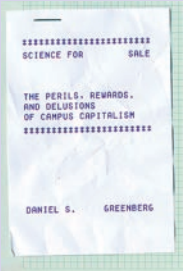
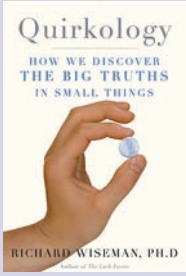


Science for Sale: The Perils, Rewards, and Delusions of Campus Capitalism
by Daniel S. Greenberg
Univ. Chicago Press: 2007. 324 pp. $25/£14.

Ties between universities and industry could lead to research compromises. And just how profitable is 'campus capitalism'? Greenberg reveals the figures and actual risks.



Quirkology: How We Discover the Big Truths in Small Things
by Richard Wiseman
Basic Books: 2007. 323 pp. $26.

Using experimental psychology, the author studies quirky aspects of human behaviour, providing insights into what we find funny — including the funniest joke in the world — or scary.

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