Lucky Jim

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Genes, Girls and Gamow

by James D. Watson

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There are those days when we dream of making a major discovery and the magnificent life that must ensue. Unfortunately, major scientific discoveries are rare and only a select few are chosen to taste this great success and experience the glorious 'afterlife'. Luckily for those of us who have not yet succeeded, James D. Watson has apparently been willing to share many of his feelings and the sensations that followed the most enviable discovery in 20th Century biology, first in 1968 with *The Double Helix*, and now in his new book, *Genes, Girls and Gamow*. In his famous, controversial and even scandalous first book, Watson described in detail his personal experiences when he and Francis Crick approached the solution of the structure of DNA and how they outmanoeuvred their competitors in claiming this ultimate prize. *The Double Helix* was initially entitled *Honest Jim*, inspired by the novel *Lucky Jim* coincidentally published by Kingsley Amis in the *annus mirabilis* 1953.

In his new book, Watson describes in detail his life following the 3 years after the memorable discovery of March 1953 and, as an epilogue, he gives us a short overview of

the major events of his life, including the Nobel Prize ceremony of 1962 and ending with his marriage in March 1968. To enrich the virtual-reality experience of being famous, *Genes, Girls and Gamow* is well illustrated with personal photographs of the time and contains many original letters. The book is based around three leading themes: science (genes); personal life (girls); and Watson's interaction with contemporary scientists and personalities (as exemplified by the interesting personage of George Gamow). It is rather light on science, as Watson did not do that much in the 3 years after the DNA discovery. But it is heavy on personal recollections, and the reader really starts to feel like an unmarried, but otherwise successful, young scientist in the 1950s, dining with interesting characters and attending international meetings. And one's attention is frequently turned to girls. Watson's memory is excellent, and even after so many years he still remembers conversations and such minute details as the vintage of wine he ordered on a given occasion. The passages about the well-known contemporary scientists were, for me, the most interesting. I was pleased to have virtual encounters with such personalities as Linus Pauling, Richard Feynman and George Gamow, and also with some respected scientists whom I have, in fact, met in their later real lives. However, Watson the Lucky Jim in science was not so lucky in love, despite reading such instructive materials as Kinsey's 1953 report, *Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female*. Maybe this is for the good of the book, since, when Watson finally writes about three nights he spent with his fiancée, this passage imparts a rather embarrassing sense of voyeurism.

Why is Gamow so central to the book to be mentioned in the title? Gamow was a Russian-born theoretical physicist living and working in the USA, who, like many physicists of the time, became deeply interested in biology with the hope of cracking the genetic code. This hope he shared with Watson as well as the later disappointment caused by the fact that their own ideas about the genetic code turned out to be wrong. Gamow was the initiator of the RNA Tie Club—see the cover of the book for the tie designed by Gamow—which was supposed to be a

closed scientific club for physicists and biologists united by their desire to solve the genetic code. Despite considerable time and effort devoted by Gamow and Watson, the club never materialised as intended and periodic meetings of its members never took place. However, they all exchanged letters and from time to time circulated scientific notes. In one such note, written in early 1955, Francis Crick put forward the adaptor hypothesis, proposing that, before incorporation into a growing polypeptide chain, each amino acid is attached to a specific adaptor (possibly RNA-like) through which it can be bound to the RNA template—at this time, tRNA was not yet known. Interestingly, Crick's prophetic proposal was found to be unrealistic by Gamow and Watson.

All those aware of the history of molecular biology know that Watson and Crick were greatly aided in their discovery of the DNA structure by unauthorised use of unpublished crystallographic data obtained by Rosalind Franklin (see *EMBO reports*, **2**, 181, 2001). I was interested, therefore, to see how honestly Watson reports the state of his conscience in light of this fact, and there are indeed several reflections scattered throughout the text. For example, in 1953 Francis Crick tried to popularise the discovery of the DNA structure by giving interviews for the *Sunday Telegraph* and for the BBC. Watson strongly opposed this publicity and only agreed to the BBC interview on the condition that its transmission would be limited to overseas services. In *Genes, Girls and Gamow* he writes 'I was afraid that we might be thought grabby and did not want to stir up more discussion as to whether we had improperly used King's College data,' obviously obtained mainly by Rosalind Franklin but also by Maurice Wilkins. From this passage we can see that Watson was not able to really enjoy his discovery because of the ethical line he knew he had crossed at the time.

The main lesson from the book for me is that life after a major scientific discovery is not always a happy one, especially when the conscience is not completely clear.

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