



A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life

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The triumphant true story of the man who achieved one of the greatest feats of our era—the mapping of the human genome

Growing up in California, Craig Venter didn't appear to have much of a future. An unremarkable student, he nearly flunked out of high school. After being drafted into the army, he enlisted in the navy and went to Vietnam, where the life and death struggles he encountered as a medic piqued his interest in science and medicine. After pursuing his advanced degrees, Venter quickly established himself as a brilliant and outspoken scientist. In 1984 he joined the National Institutes of Health, where he introduced novel techniques for rapid gene discovery, and left in 1991 to form his own nonprofit genomics research center, where he sequenced the first genome in history in 1995. In 1998 he announced that he would successfully sequence the human genome years earlier, and for far less money, than the government-sponsored Human Genome Project would— a prediction he kept in 2001.

A Life Decoded is the triumphant story of one of the most fascinating and controversial figures in science today. In his riveting and inspiring account Venter tells of the unparalleled drama of the quest for the human genome, a tale that involves as much politics (personal and political) as science. He also reveals how he went on to be the first to read and interpret his own genome and what it will mean for all of us to do the same. He describes his recent sailing expedition to sequence microbial life in the ocean, as well as his groundbreaking attempt to create synthetic life. Here is one of the key scientific chronicles of our lifetime, as told by the man who beat the odds to make it happen.

A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life Details

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Michelle says

Wow. Alternate titles he could have used: Vendetta: Righting All Those Wrongs. Venter used this book to get back at anyone who ever did anything wrong to him or doubted him or didn't support him or undercut him or or or. Then it becomes Toot Toot!: Blowing My Own Horn, because when he isn't getting back at anyone he's letting us know what a superior individual he is, ain't he grand! Even his genome is special. What was left of the book was dry science. Yes, this is an autobiography, he's writing about his life, but the tone is so self-serving and superior it made me roll my eyes. Yes, this is about mapping the human genome, there's going to be science, but I just listened to Bill Bryson who made science FASCINATING, so my standards were too high for Venter. But I'm such a glutton -- can't stop reading a book unless it is so bad it is making my eyes bleed -- so I listened to the whole damn thing. I came pretty close to putting this aside, but by then I'd already invested so much time in the story I decided to trudge on, rolling my eyes and snorting all the way.

Sheffy says

Craig Venter sequenced the human genome--not just any human genome--his own human genome. OK, he built a team, and they sequenced parts of ~5 genomes, but his seemed to be the dominant one--and that was supposed to be a secret... In the same way that Socrates' Apology was a defense of his actions against his accusers, Venter's autobiography explains why he thinks he's been unfairly maligned. And you know what, he just about wins me over--he is clearly a genius. And a narcissist. He describes how he struggled in his early years, got mired in Vietnam, messed up multiple marriages, and how he burned bridges with fellow scientists and industry execs alike. I'm not even sure if he can see through his own writing what is patently obvious about his own culpability in these affairs, but he provides enough details for readers to draw their own conclusions, once you pull back his interpretations. But he makes a compelling case that much of the criticism against him (people thought he was out to patent human genes for profit, he's an egomaniac) don't comport with his motives--he just wanted to be a scientist, and sail on his boats. I was a biomedical scientist in the late 90's and 2000's during the race between Venter's industry funded team and the international government consortium to sequence the genome-- I remember hearing the criticism and thinking it was a bit unfair. I've been privileged to personally interact with some of the personalities involved, Gerry Rubin (who collaborated with Venter on the fly genome as a test run before humans), James Watson, Harold Varmus, Francis Collins at NIH. Let's just say there are a lot of big egos to go around. I don't know how this book comes across to someone who is less familiar with the story as it played out--I don't think he provides enough details for the naive reader. As an added bonus, he sprinkles the book with tidbits pulled from variants in his own genome--clearly the first book in the history of the world that can do that. Autobiographies are not exactly gripping narratives, but this isn't so bad--and it will be very important in the annals of science.

Geetanjali says

Famous physicist Erwin Schrödinger once said " life is stable information written on unique molecules such

that this information can be exactly copied.” Man has been looking for ways to decode this information.

Sound reasoning and judgment, along with the ability to manipulate with abstractions, concepts, and ideas, are hallmarks of an entrepreneur. These elements are also found in the general scientific population. When intelligence and business acumen are applied to the development of new ideas, the scientific entrepreneur is born, which is inarguably could be said for Dr. Venter.

J. Craig Venter envisioned the role of genomics in the molecular biology and converted into reality. He transformed analog version of biology into the digital world of computer.

Famously called 'the Richard Branson of biology's', he writes about his ventures and adventures throughout his life. The man who defies conventional wisdom, begins his life as a reckless, brash, feisty kid who as confessed by him in the early chapters relishes races, in particular winning ("I stank in the practice sessions but in actual races surprised everyone even myself by winning it.")

A Vietnam War veteran, Dr. Venter earned a Ph.D. in biochemistry and by the 1980s landed at the National Institutes of Health, studying adrenaline. After he adopted new technologies to hunt for adrenaline-related genes in the late 1980s, he leapt into genomic.

First few pages really demonstrate how nature and nurture together sculpt the personality. A chance entry in medicine combined with an IQ of 142 (nature) & immense will power (nurture) catapulted him in the scientific field. The book is a candid story which is predominantly about his professional life rather than personal life save some fleeting references to his wives, kid and parents. Although whether J. Craig Venter is trying to grind his own axe here or setting the account straight or sheds light on common practices in research science depends on one's own perception. Some may call him ego-maniac or some may say he is an indomitable spirit, but definitely some amount of self-assertiveness is required to take decisions such as he has taken. It's all told from Venter's personal perspective, of course, like everything else in this strongly subjective story; but after all this is one of the limitations (and strengths) of the autobiographical genre.

Although there is constant focus on the scientific and technical aspects of the work there is a lot about politics in this book. (Sometimes I would get so confused whether I am reading an autobiography of a scientist or it's hollywood movie plot on some tycoon creating his empire or may be movie script like 'the firm' or something.) But Venter goes out of his way to explain the scientific and technical problems he encountered—from his work on the adrenalin receptor in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the jigsaw-like genome assembly in the 1990s.

Despite an often heavy burden of technical details, the personalities and machinations involved in Big Science make this an engaging read. This book proves to be an eye opener in a way that it changes the way we view scientists. Anecdotes such as 'how Haemophilus influenza could speed up its evolution by exchanging DNA with its peers, as if it were installing a software update to its genome' simplify complex molecular biology to novices as well as create excitement, thrill to read ahead. However some diagrams explaining some concepts would have been helpful. Some repetitive details about the politics could have been curtailed, and the book would have been concise by at least 50 pages.

All in all an interesting book to read, you don't need have molecular biology or such background to understand & appreciate the exciting journey of a man who was under-achiever during his school days, adrenaline junkie and yet is a pioneer in the field of genomics.

Gunnar Nelson says

He was arrogant, and I was skeptical at claims he made. However, there was substance.

Marc Perry says

Spoiler Alert: " It's all about me!" (to paraphrase the author)

John says

Bio of an accomplished scientist whose initiative and persistence led to the deciphering of the human genetic code. A ,edic in Vietnam, an avid sailor, with a large ego and a combative style in dealing with competitors resulted in a stimulating career and book!

Ady ZYN says

Highly recommended!

Peter Tillman says

I enjoyed it, learned stuff. Interesting life, large ego. 3.5 stars

Eric Bittner says

A really fascinating book. Lots of insight into the politics and egos behind the sequencing of the human genome. If anyone thinks scientists do what they do just for the joy of discovery, this book will set them straight. While Venter displays no shortage of ego on his own part, the levels that his rivals stooped to is at times astonishing. In some ways the world of "big biology" is even more competitive than the business world. Being the first to achieve something is the only thing that matters. Second place really is being "first loser" and can jeopardize one's funding, and even one's career. Venter has been particularly adept at finding quicker ways to do science, and that has been very threatening to others. Naturally, as an autobiography, most everything Venter does is portrayed in a positive light, but he does give credit to others whose work was essential to his success. The book does delve into the science of genetics pretty deeply in places, which didn't bother me, but could be a bit intimidating for others. For a more balanced perspective on the entire human genome project, a book like James Shreeve's "The Genome War" would be a good choice along with "A Life Decoded." One aspect of the book that I wasn't as happy with was the frequent sidebars to discuss particular genes that have been found in Venter's own genome, and what they could mean. While interesting, they tended to disrupt the flow of the narrative. They would probably have worked better as an appendix.

Books Ring Mah Bell says

This man is possibly the most self absorbed, arrogant SOB EVER. Then again, if I were half as brilliant, maybe I'd be a jerk too. Only 50 pages in - hope to get into science stuff soon. One thing I do like so far that "Dr. I massaged their heart in my hands! I swim like a Mutha! I get laid a ton!" does is offer little boxes of genome info - why, for example he can swim so well as his gene for endurance does not have a common mutation that makes the rest of us cramp up and want to die.

Okay... I finished. Absolutley fascinating. That cocky personality helped him get funding for research, propose ideas and experiments, and fight like hell if someone told him no. That attitude (as unattractive as I find it) certainly led to one of the most interesting scientific finds of my lifetime.

Thanks, Venter! You are a genius and a jerk.

Alex says

Format: Hard-cover

This book shows that it pays to be bold and take risks in academia, just as in business.

A life decoded was a great story about an adventurous life, was educational in terms of what the science actually did, and provided key insights on how politics in academia operate.

Fantastic book.

I also really enjoyed the quotes at the start of each chapter, usually from Darwin.

Some memorable quotes all throughout the book:

p125: "In science the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to the man to whom the idea first occurs. Not the man who finds a grain of new and precious quality but to him who sows it, reaps it, grinds it and feeds the world on it" - Sir Francis Darwin, First Galton Lecture before the Eugenics Society (1914)

p148: "Son, you are obviously doing extremely well." He did not strike me as being au fait with the science, so I asked him why my success was so obvious: "This is Washington, and we judge people by the quality of their enemies, and son, you have some of the best." - Narration

p159: "Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies solely in my tenacity" - Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)

p189: If you cannot - in the long run - tell everyone what you have been doing, your doing has been worthless. - Erwin Shrodinger, 1933 Nobel Prize winner in Physics

p251: The public genome people assumed the fort to sequence an genome was too sizeable for a single

laboratory. As mentioned earlier, the yeast genome, which was only about three times the size of Haemophilus influenza, had required some one thousand "monks" working for almost ten years in laboratories spread all over the world. The problem with that approach was that while a few centres did high-quality work, many others were of only average quality or even worse. The first yeast chromosome sequence to be published had to be redone, under-scoring the management issues in having each diverse lab trying to read code in its own way, with varying degrees of success. In this system, quantity of sequence, not quality, was what mattered most. - Narration

p254: A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.

- Oscar Wilde: A Picture of Dorian Grey

p260: The battles went all the way to the Applera board, where I had to argue my case for filing patents only when there was clear value. I was fighting for my integrity and that of my team because we had promised to make the human genome publicly available. The stress was more than I could handle at times. By then I had gotten to know Bill Clinton a little and was inspired by the way he dealt with the endless pressures from the job, the media, and his political opponents. Not letting your opponents see you cringe and sweat can be more damaging to your attackers than a good counterpunch (though the later can be very satisfying).

- Narration

p309: Then I received a copy of Tony Blair's speech, and my blood began to boil. Drafted by his chief scientist, Sir Bob May, it was so partisan that I suspected the Wellcome Trust had had a major influence on its drafting.

I was so upset that I called Ari and told him that if Blair went ahead with those remarks, I would boycott the White House ceremony and hold my own press conference. Ari tried to calm me and promised to call Neal Lane immediately. He told me not to do anything rash -- in fact, not to do anything or call anybody until I heard back from him or Neal. Neal finally called and wanted to go through Blair's speech with me, line by line, to clarify what had offended me. When I finished, he clearly understood my position and was sympathetic, but he said there was little he could do. "I can change anything you want in Collins's speech and even the president's, but you're asking me to change a major international address by a foreign head of state. I just can't do that."

The lack of reassurance reminded me of Collins's prevarication in our basement discussions when he told me, as Lander had done before him, that he could not speak for his colleagues. Collins had also said he had nothing to do with the release of the ultimatum letter to the L.A. Times and had blamed the Wellcome Trust. If someone deceives me once, then shame on him; if it happens twice, then shame on me. I was not going to let it happen a second time on live television from the White House. I was firm: If the speech went out as it was, I would not show up. Neal pleaded with me to wait until he had at least tried to get it changed.

Being an optimist I kept working on my text and sitting at the computer in my home office after midnight when my phone rang. It was a relieved-sounding Neal Lane, who assured me that everyone had gotten my message and that Tony Blair's speech would be rewritten. Could I see a copy first? I had his assurances that the speech would be changed and that I would be pleased. Now would I agree to participate? I had never known Neal to be anything less than honourable and straightforward, so I accepted his word. The conversation quickly turned to my speech. I promised him a copy by 6:00 A.M. but walked him through what I wanted to say. Neal seemed pleased. The next time we would see each other would be at the White House in the morning. We were going to unveil the book of humankind to the world.

p311: The next day Collins phoned to plead with me, saying it would end the wrong message to have only

one of us appear on the cover, and I reluctantly agreed. When I told Dick Thompson, he asked if I was really sure. I said I was feeling magnanimous and it was the right thing to do.

p320: A scientific man ought to have no wishes, no affectations - a mere heart of stone -- Charles Darwin

Sueper says

I found this book to be a very interesting read while much of the world is questioning the value of cooperation vs competition, with books like *Atlas Shrugged* and my personal favorite, *Where Good Ideas Come From*. Venter's story helps me to come to terms with my own struggle to find a balance between the necessity of cooperation and competition in order to catalyze innovation in today's world. I also enjoyed the personal connections I had to his life, whether it was the references to Bethesda, Potomac, Rockville and Annapolis where I grew up, or his process of choosing the right academic institution for his scientific studies. I really enjoyed listening to the audio version of this book between running and doing image processing of rat brain tissue. It was fun to listen to the details of mapping the human genome, as I provided my minuscule contribution to mapping the human brain. It helped me put the tediousness of my work into perspective, through basic inspiration. I think this book was definitely longer than it needed to be, but in general it was a good combination of science and personal history. A great read for anyone considering a life in science and/or creative innovation.

Michelle says

(3.5 stars) This is an autobiography of J. Craig Venter and his quest to decode the human genome. While it provides a fascinating perspective into some of the politics and undercurrents that affected the process, Venter's own ego and biases clearly shine through. He clearly is a driven and determined man, but one who will take what he wants without letting anyone stand in his way. He reminds me of another titan of industry, Larry Ellison, not only for the attitude but also for their shared passion for sailing. It would be interesting to read others' perspectives on these events, and I would be particularly intrigued by the thoughts of his second wife, Claire Fraser, a respected scientist and businesswoman in her own right.

Charlene says

What can I say about this book? It was a little bit like reading Holly Madison's book *Down the Rabbit Hole*. Instead of the Playboy mansion it was the world of science. Instead of vicious attacks on Hugh Hefner's character, Venter attacked the characters of just about anyone who pissed him off, stood in his way, or insulted him in any way during his long and fruitful career. Like Holly Madison, Venter engaged in very little self reflection of his own behavior while, at the same time, being keenly aware of every fault in those around him. Mistakes were certainly made, but not by him! The end result was a science tell all that was addictive to read, which also possibly included many inaccuracies.

So why 5 stars? I could not put this book down! I am now motivated to read *Genome Wars* to try to understand the real story, from a more objective source. I had to give this book 5 stars because it was the longest tantrum thrown by a scientist, possibly in the history of science biographies.

At first, it appears as if Venter is able to look at his own flaws. He spent a lot of time writing about his bad grades in high school, his forced placement into community college, etc. However, does he really see this as a flaw? Hell no! He sees himself as a struggling Darwin who had a bit of trouble with maths but overcame it to be one of the world's most important figures. Venter, without question, sees himself as one of the world's most important people. Does he have the success to back it up? In some ways yes. In other ways-- not to the degree to which he admires himself.

However, this book had it all: glorious science, amazing new discoveries, novel ideas, dirty science politics, personal relationship problems, and so on. Say what you will about his attitude, I haven't enjoyed reading a book this much in a long time.

James Mize says

Brash, opinionated, and breathtaking in its scope and pace, as many have described the man himself. Well-written for the lay reader. Only once did I feel that the science got too dense for me to appreciate the drama of the story as it was unfolding. Pages 95-100 or so hurt my head, but after surviving that I was able to delude myself into thinking I was smart enough about genomics to be able to hang on for the rest of the ride.
