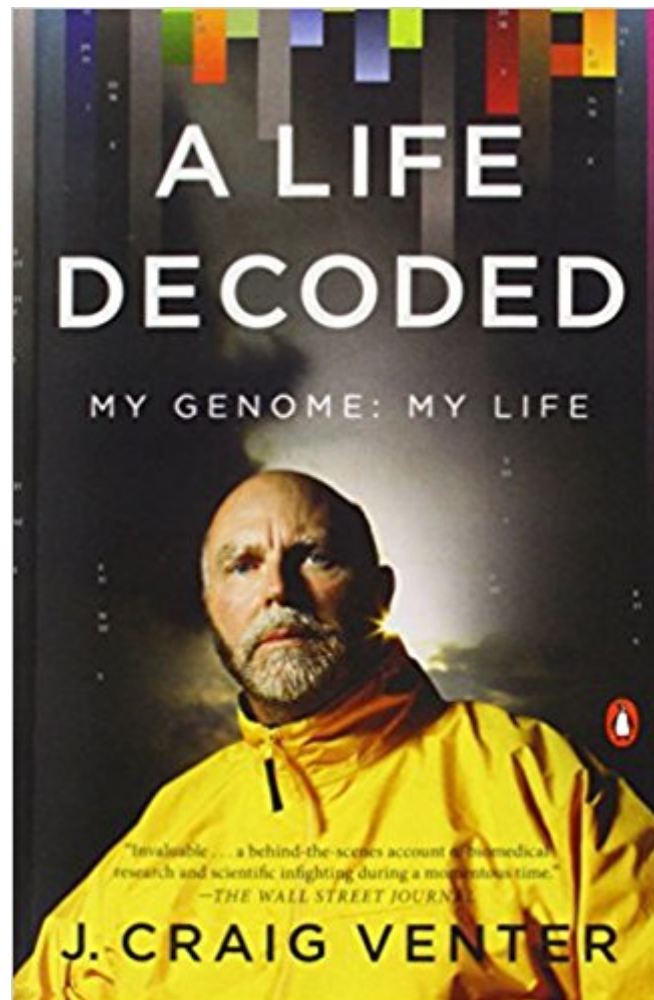


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A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life



Synopsis

The triumphant memoir of the man behind one of the greatest feats in scientific history. Of all the scientific achievements of the past century, perhaps none can match the deciphering of the human genetic code, both for its technical brilliance and for its implications for our future. In *A Life Decoded*, J. Craig Venter traces his rise from an uninspired student to one of the most fascinating and controversial figures in science today. Here, Venter relates the unparalleled drama of the quest to decode the human genome—a goal he predicted he could achieve years earlier and more cheaply than the government-sponsored Human Genome Project, and one that he fulfilled in 2001. A thrilling story of detection, *A Life Decoded* is also a revealing, and often troubling, look at how science is practiced today.

Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (September 30, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143114182

ISBN-13: 978-0143114185

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.9 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 59 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #181,221 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #34 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Genetic](#) #290 in [Books > Medical Books > Basic Sciences > Genetics](#) #413 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Scientists](#)

Customer Reviews

A great deal has been written about Venter as the head of Celera, the private research company that won a race with the National Institutes of Health's Human Genome Project to sequence the human genome. His role in this historic accomplishment has been both vilified and praised. Now, in a clumsily written autobiography, Venter offers his side of the story, portraying himself as the eternal underdog, fighting for truth and attempting to make scientific discoveries solely to help others. He is opposed in this struggle by a cadre of scientists out to advance their own careers, by a federal bureaucracy incapable of rationally using public funds to promote scientific advances and by the heads of corporations willing to do almost anything to make money. Venter accuses all of the big

players— the Human Genome Project's Frances Collins and Nobel laureate James Watson, among many others— of outright dishonesty. Ignore the hyperbole and be skeptical of the accusations, but there's still a terribly depressing story about the politics of big science. Venter also attempts to contextualize the controversy swirling around the patenting of DNA sequences. Despite the lack of unbiased insight, this is well worth reading for the fascinating perspective it offers on one of the major scientific discoveries of all time. (Oct. 22) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

With Venter, there must always be something new swelling on the horizon . . . he alone is taking the measure of life's true diversity and dreaming up new life-forms at the same time. "Wired" [Venter is] not just trying to understand how life works; he's trying to make it work for him, and us. "The Atlantic Monthly" [Venter is] not just trying to understand how life works; he's trying to make it work for him, and for us. "The Atlantic" [The] media has called Venter many things: maverick, publicity hound, risk-taker, brash, controversial, genius, manic, rebellious, visionary, audacious, arrogant, feisty, determined, provocative. His autobiography shows that they are all justified. "Nature" "A Life Decoded" offers a window into the life and mind of a scientist who . . . has indisputably become an extraordinary figure. "Science" [Venter is] not just trying to understand how life works; he's trying to make it work for him, and for us. "The Atlantic" [The] media has called Venter many things: maverick, publicity hound, risk-taker, brash, controversial, genius, manic, rebellious, visionary, audacious, arrogant, feisty, determined, provocative. His autobiography shows that they are all justified. "Nature" "A Life Decoded" offers a window into the life and mind of a scientist who . . . has indisputably become an extraordinary figure. "Science"? [Venter is] not just trying to understand how life works; he's trying to make it work for him, and for us. "The Atlantic" [The] media has called Venter many things: maverick, publicity hound, risk-taker, brash, controversial, genius, manic, rebellious, visionary, audacious, arrogant, feisty, determined, provocative. His autobiography shows that they are all justified. "Nature" "A Life Decoded" offers a window into the life and mind of a scientist who . . . has indisputably become an extraordinary figure. "Science"

Having read *The Genome War*, I had preordered Venter's own story. I was not disappointed. The *Publisher's Weekly* review sniffs that it is "clumsily written." I would attribute that opinion to one of two possibilities. Either the reviewer never got beyond the early chapters about his childhood, which

are marred by cliché and some amateurish prose, or the reviewer does not know enough biology to understand the rest. Once past the early biography, the rest of the book is riveting. I would warn those considering it that a reasonable knowledge of biology and genetics is almost a requirement to enjoy the story. I teach medical students and have studied molecular biology (unknown when I was a medical student) and it taxed my knowledge to the limit to understand his accomplishments. Still, the book reminds me a bit of "Science Fictions," the account of the discovery of the AIDS virus, which pulled no punches in naming villains and fakers. Venter is settling a few scores but, having read the other book, I am inclined to accept his version of the story. Biology research is not beanbag, to paraphrase an old aphorism, especially when the stakes are high. There are titanic egos in this story, not just that of the author. If you like biology and genetics and want to read about the biggest big game hunt in biological science history, this is a good place to start. The best part of the story begins as he returns from Vietnam, a near failure in high school, now stimulated by his experiences as a corpsman to study and go to medical school. He has married a New Zealand girl he met on R&R in Australia. They both go to UCSD once they have mastered junior college. Here he becomes interested in biochemistry, then cell biology. He is the beneficiary of the interest of a noted cell biologist who likes his story and encourages him to do research. Eventually, this leads to a PhD only seven years after his return from the war. He goes on to a medical school faculty position, gradually building his research credentials until he is invited to join the NIH. He tells the story of his research into the nature of the adrenaline receptor, the link that allows the hormone to stimulate the heart to beat faster and more powerfully. From there, he begins to study the genetics of the receptor. From there, he climbs the path to world fame and meets some nasty surprises in fellow scientists whose personal ambition cancels their devotion to science. I highly recommend this book to those with some background in biology and genetics. He tries to simplify for a broader audience but the subject is still complex. I read the book in two days, actually taking longer than I might with another non-fiction book because it requires concentration and some rereading to understand the details. The science, not the author, is the hero here and it takes some time to understand it all.

This is a great man. He is also crazy; he almost drowned his friends rather than turn his yacht around in the face of a violent storm/hurricane. The government was set to decode the genome in 20 years giving out billions to university professors using manual techniques. Venter raised \$200 million, bought a bunch of machines, and worked them 24/7 for 2 years and got the job done. They still made him share the glory with the National Institute of Health and its 20 year project. He sailed

around the world collecting water samples and discovered more new life forms than had been found previously. His story about serving in the Army in Vietnam is priceless. He got his start in biology working as a medic in Vietnam. After that he went to school. Great insights into genetics. He and his new lab are working to develop synthetic life. He can already build DNA starting with bases A, T, U, G.

I started reading this autobiography alongside *The Genome War* and found it to be a great complement. Venter had a whole career before starting on the human genome- his book is more than half over before he relates an incident brought up 15% of the way through Shreeve's. Most of this book is about his work, the seemingly unavoidable politics of navigating schemes that opposed his work, and then a little about sailing. Venter had the vision and confidence to lead teams of people towards large goals that took years to achieve. Due to his biochemist training, he was attentive to detail and got unprecedented results partly due to painstakingly verifying manufacturer's claims. While his ability to execute on a long term plan and attend to detail seemed surprising for someone who was a bad high school student, throughout his life he consistently displayed a highly competitive, risk seeking nature, which allowed him to be the game changer in his field. A top performer, he seems to fixate on and draw motivation from opposition and criticisms. Aside from Venter's boldness and drive, the only personality that comes out is that of a cartoonishly devious and somewhat stupid Watson. The concepts are easy to understand but Venter emphasizes that biological ideas are cheap- the devil's in the details, a perhaps obvious statement that helped to drive me away from biology ages ago because it's so complex, just one thing after another. Despite innovating towards using sophisticated computing and robotic technology, something like 10-90% of the machines would be broken on any given day, and Venter describes endless other implementational headaches to get the necessary data. This inspirational account of doggedly pursuing one's vision also reveals a depressing aspect of the current scientific world where mediocrity is incentivized and innovation difficult without significant ego. Modern scientists seem to have to choose between acclaim (ultimately in the form of the Nobel prize) and money (by disappearing into industry and branded as opposed to sharing work, regardless of whether they actually share data or not). This obsession with the Nobel prize makes me consider the motivations of the great scientists of yore like Newton, who obviously never received these prizes, and reveals that humans are naturally competitive- if we can't compete over money then we compete over recognition. The myth of the tenured genius like Mendel bumbling about with experiments so far ahead of their time as to have no immediate use is not a beneficial model when generally applied.

Balancing the slow, beurocratic, often ineffective, resource draining motions of modern academia with the perhaps shortsighted, globally suboptimal greed of industry illustrates a question encountered in many spheres.

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