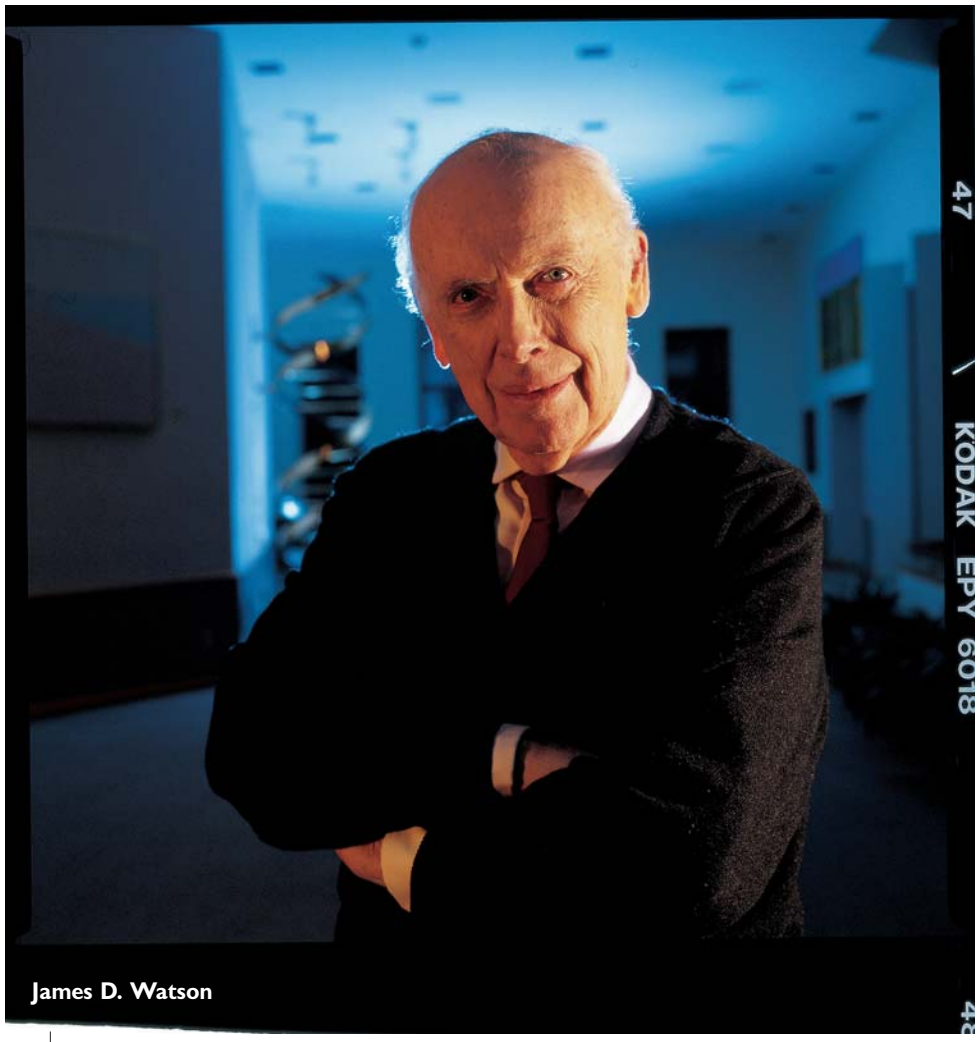


James D. Watson

Chairman of the Bored

"Lucky Jim" Watson's unlikely book of academic manners

by STEVEN SHAPIN

Improbable as it may seem, James D. Watson—the co-discoverer (with Francis Crick) of the structure of DNA—has written a Book of Manners: the most recent contribution to a genre that stretches from Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* in the sixteenth century and Francis Osborne's *Advice to a Son, or, Directions for Your Better Conduct* in the seventeenth century to Santiago Ramón y Cajal's *Advice for a Young Investigator* of 1897 and Peter Medawar's *Advice to a Young Scientist* of 1979. But Watson's most pertinent model must be F. M. Cornford's incomparable instruction manual to the aspiring academic politician, *Microcosmographia academica*: "I shall take it," the Cambridge classicist wrote in 1908, "that you are in the first flush of ambition, and just beginning to make yourself disagreeable. You think (do you not?) that you have only to state a reasonable case, and people must listen to reason and act upon it at once. It is just this conviction that makes you so unpleasant."

When his best-selling *The Double Helix* was published in 1968, some commentators took it as evidence that Watson, formerly Harvard's Cabot professor of the natural sciences, didn't *have* any manners. Evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin, professor of biology and Agassiz professor of zoology in the Museum of Comparative Zoology emeritus, wrote that Watson's warts-and-more "personal account" of the discovery of the structure of DNA had "debased the currency of his own life" and molecular biologist Robert Sinsheimer, chancellor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said that Watson had painted a picture of the scientific endeavor as a "clawing climb up a slippery slope, impeded by the authority of fools, to be made with cadged data...,with malice toward most and charity toward none."

In fact, Watson's reputation for poor manners long preceded *The Double Helix.* Alluding to bruising encounters in the 1950s over the proper agenda for Harvard biology, entomologist E.O. Wilson, now Pellegrino University Professor emeritus, famously called Watson "the most unpleasant human being I had ever met." But anyone who has got to the top of his disciplinary greasy pole—and Watson won his full professorship at Harvard at 30, and his Nobel Prize at 34, for work done when he was only 24—can be reckoned to know a thing or two about how to get on and up in the world of science, and so each chapter of this autobiography is identified by the "Manners" appropriate for various aspects of scientific life, and each is wrapped up by a series of "Remembered Lessons" on how to behave: "Manners Needed for Important Science," "Manners Required for Academic Civility," "Manners Deployed for Academic Zing," "Manners Maintained When Reluctantly Leaving Harvard."

The big lessons that Watson wants young scientists to learn were already clear in *The Double Helix*: be charming (when it suits), but be bloody-minded (when it's necessary); do not suffer fools, and, indeed, make sure they know that they're fools; if you are absolutely certain that you are absolutely right, then crush the opposition. All's fair in love and lab. If you're really good at science, and if you stand up for what's right, you'll inevitably make enemies, since, as Jonathan Swift said, "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." So, in dwelling on his 20 years at Harvard—from 1956 to 1976—Watson variously describes scientific colleagues and administrators as "dinosaurs," "fossilized," "vapid," "mediocre," "deadbeats," some not *even* "has-beens."

James D. Watson, *Avoid Boring People: Lessons from a Life in Science* (Alfred A. Knopf, $26.95)

Watson's campaign for Harvard backing the new molecular biology, and downgrading its investment in organismic biology, was the occasion for applying some of his most deeply felt "lessons": "multicellu-

Photograph courtesy of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory/ National Human Genome Research Institute

lar organisms were best put on the backburner" until advances were made at a molecular and single-cell level. Developmental and plant biology were just "tired games," and the sooner they went away, the better: "Never offer tenure to practitioners of dying disciplines." Watson lectured to undergraduates "Against Embryology," infuriating many of his colleagues, "But to sugar-coat science that is going nowhere ill prepares students for their futures." Watson was quite serious about this: E. O. Wilson recalls that at one department meeting, Watson announced that "Anyone who would hire an ecologist is out of his mind."

Watson became a celebrity because of the brilliant science he did as a very young man, but only about 30 pages of this book track back to those glorious few years with Francis Crick in England. Apart from a brief epilogue on Harvard's recent institutional turmoil, the book essentially breaks off with his departure from Harvard in 1976, leaving room for a sequel that might, for example, deal with Watson's role in the Human Genome Project, which goes unmentioned here. And there's no way that *Avoid Boring People* can match *The Double Helix* for taut drama. A story about a great scientific discovery ends in triumph, but a story of a life necessarily ends in some sort of pathos—at most, a contented life lived in the fading glow of early triumph, all the more so since Watson seems to believe—against an abundance of counter-examples—that molecular biologists' best years are behind them by age 40.

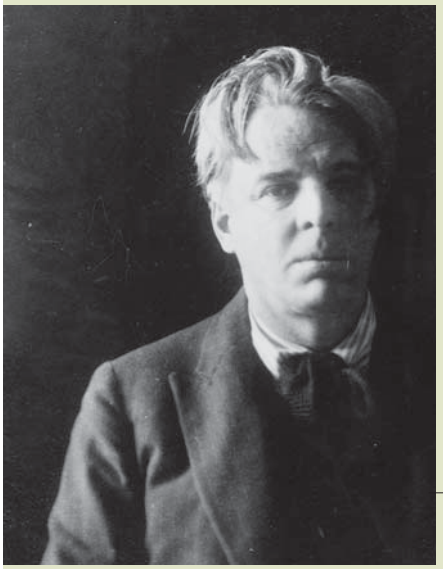
Some of the rest of *Boring* deals with the outstanding problems in gene regulation that became so clearly framed once the double-helical model of DNA was embraced, and with the links forged between molecular biology and cancer research. These were no mere mopping-up operations, and enormous ingenuity was needed to flesh out what Crick called the "Central Dogma" of molecular biology: DNA codes for RNA which in turn codes for proteins, and the process does not work in the reverse direction. But most of *Boring* is either personal—and other reviewers can have their say about the "full-bodied blond bombshells," "wisps of pale, fragile flesh," and "petite, well-shaped" socialites, princesses, and Radcliffe students who troop through its pages—or it is about the ever-increasing amounts of time and energy that Watson devoted to scientific ad-

OPEN BOOK

"Poems Are Not Position Papers"

Porter University Professor Helen Vendler grew up with her mother's poetry books, which "stopped with the Victorians." It was not until she was 22 that she read Yeats's work and "was astonished by it." She felt too young to write her dissertation on the poems; now, in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Harvard, $35), she feels "it is not absurd" to do so.

I knew that someone who was 22 could not write convincingly on the emotions and motives of someone who wrote until he was 73. Perhaps, I thought, once I had lived through the stages of life that had, in Yeats, produced the great late poems, I might aim to write about them.…



William Butler Yeats, 1923

[T]o my eyes, Yeats's style was the most important of his qualities, since it was what would make the poems last. Yeats himself said, after all, "Books live almost entirely because of their style." To undertake a book that was taxonomically focused on Yeats's lyric styles was not entirely what I wanted to do…but it was what needed to be done.….

I have put myself here in the position of the writer of the poems, attempting to track his hand and mind as he writes. I do not, therefore, argue with Yeats's ideological or aesthetic positions (which in any case changed over time, and were never anything but complex; as my teacher John Kelleher once said, "Yeats is a poet who moved, like General Sherman, on a wide and constantly shifting front"). I take as my defense for this position Yeats's remarks in a 1927 letter…: "Schopenhauer can do no wrong in my eyes—I no more quarrel with his errors than I do with a mountain cattaract *[sic]*. Error is but the abyss into which he precipitates his truth." Here, as I comment on a poem, I aim to follow the poet's creative thinking as it motivates the evolution of the poem. Nor do I want to argue with the poems; poems are hypothetical sites of speculation, not position papers. They do not exist on the same plane as actual life; they are not votes, they are not uttered from a podium or pulpit, they are not essays. They are products of reverie.…Each poem is a new personal venture made functional by technical expertise; the poet's moral urgency in writing is as real, needless to say, as his technical skill, but moral urgency alone never made a poem. On the other hand, technical expertise alone does not suffice, either. Form is the necessary and skilled embodiment of the poet's moral urgency, the poet's method of self-revelation.…

Yeats asserted (in his elegy for the painter Robert Gregory) that the gazing heart "doubled its might" by having recourse to the artist's "secret discipline" of form. He singled out…"that stern colour and that delicate line"—an emotional palette and structural draftsmanship—as the ingredients of that "secret discipline." In poetry, as in all the arts, "the gazing heart" remains the center, but it doubles its might by its own proper means: diction, prosody, structural evolution, a sense of perfected shape.

Photograph by Spicer-Simson/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

ministration, university politics, and facilitating others' research. And, surprisingly, it's in these connections that some of Watson's "lessons" are most perceptive.

So, for example, Watson notes that many intellectual conflicts in science play themselves out as contests over the control of physical space. Salaries are important, but space is even more important, since it's a publicly visible sign of your standing and power: "Always buy adjacent property that comes up for sale"; "Be prepared to resign over inadequate space"; "In the Darwinian world of an academic department, if you don't create such crises, limited resources will surely go to gutsier colleagues." And, indeed, much of the gritty detail of Watson's accounts of life at both Harvard and the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, to which he went full time after leaving the University, is taken up with stories about academic Space Wars. Watson persuades readers—and not just scientific readers—that he's got a fine eye for the weapons, the tactics, and the terrain of academic battle. At the Long Island laboratory, Watson turned into an effective fundraiser and administrator.

Still other "lessons" make one wonder whether they're ironically intended, whether Watson isn't blessed with a full measure of self-awareness, or whether he's just forgotten the cutthroat competitiveness commended in *The Double Helix*: "Science works better when the winners don't take all"; "Share valuable research tools"; "Never be the brightest person in the room." And most fascinating of all: "Science is highly social." Watson is quite right here: science *is* social—you schmooze or you lose. And, although both *The Double Helix* and *Boring* are superficially about the survival of the scientific fittest, both offer overwhelming evidence that scientific discovery, conventionally assigned to one or a few individuals, has its authentic origins in the dense, unplanned, even irretrievable interactions among many individuals. The "weak ties" represented by an overheard passing remark—perhaps even from a member of a "dying discipline"—may turn out to be as important in the creative process as the "strong ties" connecting an individual with teachers and like-minded colleagues.

...a strong argument for why combative individualism may not always be constructive.

In just this sense, "James Dewey Watson" is both a unique individual, endowed by nature with huge scientific talents, and a fortuitous historical trajectory among many institutions and the scientists who lived in them, notably including fine scientists less ambitious, abrasive, and competitive than he is. Lucky Jim, indeed. But if it's true that science is such a social activity, then Watson has inadvertently made a strong argument for why combative individualism may not always be such a constructive pose. Watson is large; he contains contradictions.

Lucky Jim is also unexpectedly traditionalist, and even Romantic, Jim. *Boring* is a voiding of long-stored rheum at Harvard and its obstructionist ways: "F__ Harvard and f__ Pusey," Watson puritanically recalls himself thinking when President Pusey called him back from an unapproved trip to California, and the wound of then-Faculty of Arts and Sciences dean Franklin L. Ford's denial of a $1,000 raise after winning the Nobel Prize still festers more than 40 years on. Commenting on one of Harvard's present-day scientific fault-lines, Watson rakes Larry Summers over the coals for what he sees as misguided infatuation with "translational" research and the commercializing impulses embodied in the "almost Soviet-style fantasy" of the plan for Allston science. For Watson, it's the pure science of Divinity Avenue on which Harvard should concentrate its resources and which is the guardian of Harvard's soul.

But as much as *Boring* is payback time for Harvard, it's a love-song to the University of Chicago, where Watson was a bird-watching undergraduate, where he reveled in courses on literature, history, philosophy, and sociology, and where President Robert M. Hutchins presided over an institution and a curriculum designed to produce graduates capable of critical thought and morally compelled to use those critical capacities—damn the consequences. Chicago, unlike Harvard, was "virtually an officers' training school for intellectuals," and it was at Chicago, Watson recalls, that he "learned the need to be forthright and call crap crap." It is not, however, a skill entirely unknown at Harvard.

Steven Shapin is Ford professor of the history of science. He has written several books on the history of early modern science and his Science As a Vocation: Personal Virtue and Scientific Authority *will be published by the University of Chicago Press next year.*

Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Marcia Chellis requests a source for "Everything is high school."

Barbara Murray would like to verify an anecdote involving Tennessee Williams's alleged reply when asked why he had stopped seeing a psychiatrist: "Well, that man kept nosing into my personal business…."

"pot…wall" (September-October). Eliot Kieval recognized the query as a variant of "Strive not as doth a crocke with a wall," from Geoffrey Chaucer's short poem "Good Counsel."

"Age is a thief" (November-December). John T. Collins supplied, as an earlier example of this formulation, "Time, the subtle thief of youth," from John Milton's poem "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-three."

"logical fallacies" (November-December). Elizabeth Bernstein was the first of many readers to recognize this reference to Max Shulman's short story "Love Is a Fallacy," from his 1951 collection *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. George Sicherman added that the story was subsequently turned into an episode of the eponymous television show (season 1, episode 22, airing on March 1, 1960, according to www.tv.com).

Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.