Book Review for 3/07/04 by Steve Henson

Title: “DNA: The Secret of Life”
Author: James D. Watson with Andrew Berry
Publisher: Alfred A. Knopf
Length: 445 pages
Price: $39.95
Reading time: 12-16 hours
Reading rating: 9
Overall rating: 4

If important books require important subjects, “DNA: The Secret of Life” qualifies. Written by the Nobel Prize winner for Physiology of Medicine in 1962, James D. Watson, “DNA” is a fascinating exploration of genetics as we know it today.

The book is wide ranging, covering topics from the history of genetics to a debate on whether nature or nurture is the primary influencer of human behavior. Material is presented in a very straightforward way and scientific jargon is limited. Adult readers of any background will be able to follow complex scientific developments.

Watson is at his best when he shares his anger and he has plenty to be angry about. His targets include short-sighted politicians, predatory business people, and fear-mongering journalists. He raises important issues and addresses them directly, even when he is forced to be politically incorrect. This confrontational style is best expressed in Chapter 5, “DNA, Dollars, and Drugs.”

Biotechnology is the application of biological knowledge and techniques to create products. The growth in importance of the category is exemplified by Genentech, formed in 1976 as the world’s first biotech company. Genentech now has a market cap of over $55 billion, making it one of the most valuable companies in the world. Much of Genentech’s value is associated with patents.

One of Watson’s principal targets is the United States legal system and its handling of patent issues. Using Genentech as an example he draws a contrast between England’s court system and the United States’ system. In England, complex scientific issues are heard by technically qualified judges supported by independent experts. The same issues are heard in the United States by juries. Genentech won important broad-based patent protections from an American jury that Genentech’s lawyers ensured had no member with a college education.

Watson criticizes the breadth of patents being awarded in biotechnology and reserves his harshest criticism for companies that hold entire areas of research for ransom. He suggests that product patents should be narrow and that patents based on methods clearly vital to scientific progress should not be allowed to prevent general availability at reasonable prices. He does not suggest how such a system could be implemented.

The relationship between science and money and how science will be changed concerns Watson. As he points out, most of the scientific breakthroughs that led to the revolution in biotechnology originated with academics who were salaried employees at universities and colleges around the world. These same academics today are being encouraged to develop entrepreneurial skills and proprietary technology. Basic science is no longer shared, it's owned, controlled, and sold to the highest bidder.

Steve Henson is a Marketing Professor at Western Carolina University. He has over two decades of work experience in the biotech category, including large and small companies. He teaches Marketing Strategy to undergraduates and masters students. For previous book reviews, visit our Web site at www.wcu.edu/cob/bookreviews.