JCI The Journal of Clinical Investigation

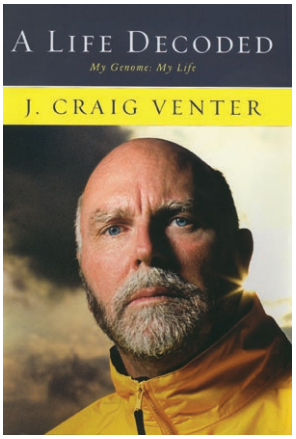
A life decoded: *My genome — my life*

Arthur L. Caplan

J Clin Invest. 2008;118(3):828-828. https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI34979.

Book Review

One look at the cover of A life decoded by J. Craig Venter and you know you are not looking at a run-of-the-mill scientist's biography. Venter's visage, framed not by a white lab coat but by a yellow sailing slicker, stares out at the prospective reader with the sun bursting forth behind his earlobe from a stormy sky. On the back cover are blurbs in praise, not of the book, but of J. Craig Venter. Inside, 400 pages of egocentric prose await. Having warned you that this book might have made former North Korean leader and personality cult exemplar Kim Il-sung nervous about its immodesty, I need to disclose that I have known Craig Venter for about ten years, served on the advisory board of Celera (founded by Venter), and have gotten into a number of fights with him over policy decisions about the samples used to map the human genome, the creation of synthetic life, and the wisdom of publishing the genomes of various nasty microbes in full. So it may be that some of my critical assessment of the book's egomania is motivated by our rocky relationship. But I should also disclose that I consider Venter a friend, a brilliant scientist, an extraordinary entrepreneur, and a true visionary when it comes to genomics. The book starts with a […]



A life decoded

My genome — my life

J. Craig Venter
The Viking Press. New York, New York, USA. 2007.
400 pp. $25.95. ISBN: 978-0-670-06358-1 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Arthur L. Caplan
Department of Medical Ethics and Center for Bioethics, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.
E-mail: caplan@mail.med.upenn.edu

One look at the cover of *A life decoded* by J. Craig Venter and you know you are not looking at a run-of-the-mill scientist's biography. Venter's visage, framed not by a white lab coat but by a yellow sailing slicker, stares out at the prospective reader with the sun bursting forth behind his earlobe from a stormy sky. On the back cover are blurbs in praise, not of the book, but of J. Craig Venter. Inside, 400 pages of egocentric prose await.

Having warned you that this book might have made former North Korean leader and personality cult exemplar Kim Il-sung nervous about its immodesty, I need to disclose that I have known Craig Venter for about ten years, served on the advisory board of Celera (founded by Venter), and have gotten into a number of fights with him over policy decisions about the samples used to map the human genome, the creation of synthetic life, and the wisdom of publishing the genomes of various nasty microbes in full. So it may be that some of my critical assessment of the book's egomania is motivated by our rocky relationship. But I should also disclose that I consider Venter a friend, a brilliant scientist, an extraordinary entrepreneur, and a true visionary when it comes to genomics.

The book starts with a narrative of Venter's boyhood in the early 1950s in Millbrae, California. He loved to race his bike next to and sometimes in front of the jets taking off at the San Francisco airport, showing early on that taking risks would be a key feature of his life. The story continues right up through the formation of a private company, Celera, built out of the old PerkinElmer, which produced a passable map of the human genome in 2000 and then, just as quickly, cut Venter loose in a power struggle over Celera's future.

In between these bookend events comes a parade of life-shaping stories, including time spent as a corpsman in Vietnam (a crucial period in the young Venter's life in terms of his finding an interest in medicine and biology), research on the biochemistry of adrenaline receptors at the University of Buffalo, entry into the emerging world of genomics at the NIH, mastering shotgun sequencing of various microbes at the privately funded The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR), a couple of marriages, a huge number of grant proposals, and dozens of hair-raising adventures at sea as Venter's increasing success in genomics afforded him the money to indulge his love of sailing with better boats and ever-riskier journeys. As the story moves forward, old mentors are acknowledged, enemies identified and chastised, and more recent rivalries settled nearly always in Venter's favor.

So why would anyone other than a close Venter relative or a mental health worker interested in narcissism want to read this book? The answer, quite simply, is that *A life decoded*, while raw, sometimes petty, frequently one-sided, and often immature, gives the best account of which I am aware of the emergence of a young scientist into the world of "big" biomedicine. It also gives a useful overview of the evolution of corporatized science in the United States. How we got into a situation where universities and their faculties have to struggle to figure out how to coexist with the demands of the NIH and private for-profit companies without huge conflicts of interest is laid out in Venter's tale of how he tried to work the interface of government, private money, and corporate funding to gain sufficient independence to pursue genomic science as he saw fit.

Anyone who thinks that either big federal funding or private funding does not come with huge strings attached needs to read this book. And anyone who thinks they are smart enough to retain a semblance of freedom and independence despite these strings needs to read this book. Throughout his career, Venter has done about as well as anyone could have done, and he has always been just one step ahead of the credit-hungry NIH Institute Directors, the dreamy private philanthropists seeking fame or immortality, or the profit-hungry corporate CEOs and their lawyers.

There have been a few books written that offer first-hand accounts of lives of achievement in the biomedical sciences in the twentieth century. Venter's book is the first to give such an account in the context of twenty-first century science. The world of government and private funding that provides the scaffolding for most clinical and some basic biomedical research lurched into existence in response to genomics. That world is not a pretty one in terms of ethics, and as Venter's book shows, it is not for the faint of heart in terms of leadership. *A life decoded* tells one renowned scientist's self-absorbed but nonetheless instructive story of how he sailed on this turbulent new scientific sea and not only survived, but flourished.