

## Preface

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In the years 2000 and 2002, I had several conversations with James (Jim) D. Watson, the Nobel laureate co-discoverer of the double helical structure of DNA. Two of these conversations were recorded on tape and excerpts from one have appeared in print.<sup>1</sup> There was also a third recorded conversation, conducted by my wife, Magdi. The three conversations covered a wide range of topics, including progress in science, the role of scientist in modern life, women in science, scientific ethics, terrorism, religion, and his relationship to fellow scientists. They revealed important aspects of the thinking of this major contributor to the science of our time. These conversations form the basis for this book.

Watson and Crick's "suggestion"<sup>2</sup> for the structure of DNA has been labeled the most important discovery in biology since Darwin and the most important discovery in science in the second half of the 20th century. Its consequences reverberate in the 21st century. Watson was also the architect of the molecular biological laboratories at Harvard University, and he built Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory into a world-class center of biomedical research. He was a principal player in the Human Genome Project, which promises to reform medicine in the decades to come. He has also been influential with his books. Watson has become a legend in his lifetime, and not only among scientists. In the neighborhood of Cold Spring Harbor, on the north shore of Long Island, he is popularly referred to as "the DNA Doctor."

Because Watson is so well known, what he thinks and says is important, and this is why I found it worthwhile to share our conversations with a broad readership. Naturally, these conversations cannot provide

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<sup>1</sup> Hargittai, I. *Candid Science II: Conversations with Famous Biomedical Scientists*. Imperial College Press, London, 2002, pp. 2–15. (James D. Watson)

<sup>2</sup> Watson, J. D., Crick, F. H. C., "A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid." *Nature* 1953, April 25, pp. 737–738, p. 737.

a comprehensive portrait of a scientist, especially as complex as Watson. Therefore, I augment them with comments and with excerpts from conversations with other contributors to the biological revolution, such as Erwin Chargaff, Francis Crick, Sydney Brenner, and others. These encounters have opened up for me an exciting world of modern biology. I must admit that biology bored me when I was in school although it was at the time when the double helix discovery happened and when the genetic code was being broken, but we had no idea about those advances. I became a physical chemist and have investigated the structure of small molecules. In my research, I tried to push the limits of possibilities to study small molecular structures and determine them as accurately as possible. I used to think — mistakenly, as it turned out — that the fine details of structure would not be of interest for large, biologically important molecules. In 2000, I spent three months at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, England, and wanted to validate this premonition, but came away with the opposite conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Today, I find biomedical research to be the most exciting area of science. This change in my attitude towards the biological sciences is the strongest motivation behind creating this book. My encounters with Jim Watson, and in particular the three months my wife and I spent as his and his wife's, Elizabeth's (Liz), guests at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in 2002, brought me closer to him than to any other player of the biological revolution.

Much has been written about Watson, yet our conversations with him offered something in addition to the existing literature; that something is beyond chemistry and biology, even beyond science. It is about what Watson's path has demonstrated best and what he put in this way: "go somewhere beyond your ability and come out on top."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hargittai, M., Hargittai, I., in *Strength from Weakness: Structural Consequences of Weak Interactions in Molecules, Supermolecules, and Crystals*, eds. Domenicano, A., Hargittai, I., Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht, 2002, pp. 91–119.

<sup>4</sup> Watson, J. D., "Succeeding in Science: Some Rules of Thumb." *Science* 1993, 261, September 24, pp. 1812–1813, p. 1812.