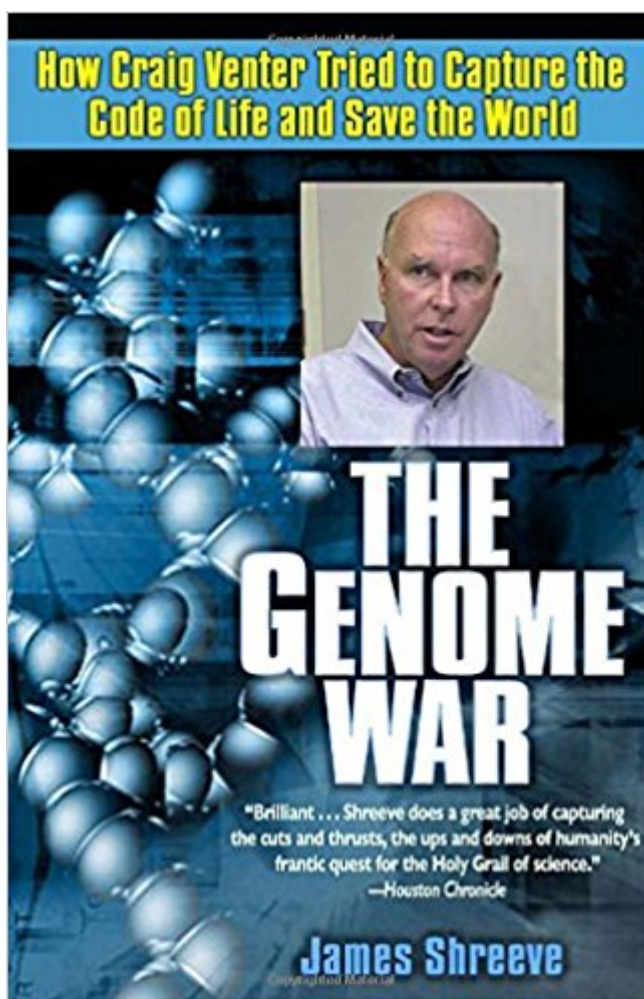


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The Genome War: How Craig Venter Tried To Capture The Code Of Life And Save The World



Synopsis

The long-awaited story of the science, the business, the politics, the intrigue behind the scenes of the most ferocious competition in the history of modern science—the race to map the human genome. On May 10, 1998, biologist Craig Venter, director of the Institute for Genomic Research, announced that he was forming a private company that within three years would unravel the complete genetic code of human life—seven years before the projected finish of the U.S. government's Human Genome Project. Venter hoped that by decoding the genome ahead of schedule, he would speed up the pace of biomedical research and save the lives of thousands of people. He also hoped to become very famous and very rich. Calling his company Celera (from the Latin for “speed”), he assembled a small group of scientists in an empty building in Rockville, Maryland, and set to work. At the same time, the leaders of the government program, under the direction of Francis Collins, head of the National Human Genome Research Institute at the National Institutes of Health, began to mobilize an unexpectedly unified effort to beat Venter to the prize—knowledge that had the potential to revolutionize medicine and society. The stage was set for one of the most thrilling and important dramas in the history of science. The Genome War is the definitive account of that drama—the race for the greatest prize biology has had to offer, told by a writer with exclusive access to Venter's operation from start to finish. It is also the story of how one man's ambition created a scientific Camelot where, for a moment, it seemed that the competing interests of pure science and commercial profit might be gloriously reconciled—and the national repercussions that resulted when that dream went awry. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

In May 1998, biologist Craig Venter announced that he was founding a company, Celera, that would sequence the genome by 2001, scooping the government's Human Genome Project by four years. This inflammatory announcement sparked a race that was as much about scientific ego and public recognition as about unlocking the so-called book of life. Shreeve (*Nature*) focuses on the tensions between academia and industry, and the rancor that ensued when Venter, who had previously headed a nonprofit research institute, changed camps. The synthesis of business and science posed new questions: can one patent the entire genome? if so, is protection of intellectual property antithetical to the advance of science? Industry is controlled by the bottom line; academia is chained to the politicians who control funding. Both models must battle a public that doesn't understand the intricacies of the research. Add to this the race to make one of the ultimate discoveries, and you get a mudslinging battle of egos. To back this up, Shreeve gives a healthy dose of the molecular biology involved in clear and vivid terms. He gives readers a fly-on-the-wall view of the scientific posturing and agonizing work behind the revelation of the genome's sequence. Shreeve is more concerned with providing a good yarn than answering the questions these events provokes, and the narrative meanders at times, but it gives a compelling look at the politics and business interests that drive science. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

On Charles Darwin's birthday -- February 12 -- in 2001, two groups of scientists announced simultaneously that the human genome sequence had been completed. The public consortium, involving teams from six countries, published its results in *Nature* and made them immediately available on the Internet. Craig Venter's company, Celera Genomics, published its paper in *Science*. Those announcements, although premature (only two rough drafts were available, accompanied by some preliminary analyses), marked one of the few uncontroversial moments in the quest for the human genome sequence. Almost everything else, from the ownership of the results to the molecular and statistical methods used, was the subject of sharp conflict. The title of this book, *The Genome War*, is only partly exaggerated. No casualties were reported, but all the psychological ingredients of a war were present and are documented in the book. The subtitle is a joke, I hope. *The Genome War* has something in common with *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. In Laclos's novel, the

apparent goal of the characters -- to seduce a human being -- is little more than a pretext for a cruel game of power. Two centuries later the pretext has become grander -- the goal no longer centers on a single person, but on the DNA of the species -- but the game is no less cruel. Through 26 dense chapters, Shreeve displays for us the intricate game of personalities and ambitions that ultimately led to the completion of the Human Genome Project. Great stories need great characters. Shreeve chose Craig Venter, and in this choice lies the appeal of the book as well as its main limitation. Venter, or at least the Venter whom Shreeve describes, is the herald of glamour, efficiency, and free enterprise. He enters the book onboard his yacht, and from that moment on, any scientist with "home-cut hair" who wears "whatever old sweater and slacks first presented themselves to him on waking up" has a hard time. Big projects, big money, big rewards for the investors; everything related to Venter is formidable, never mind that certain pages of the book are too much reminiscent, for my taste, of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. On the other hand, to offer a suitable stage for such a character, Shreeve continuously has to create dramatic situations. Often he does so by reporting private conversations and very personal thoughts, which in many cases he cannot have learned from the horse's mouth. As a result, the readers simply do not understand what cocktail of fiction and nonfiction they actually have in their hands. More important, crucial aspects of the story and other key figures -- notably John Sulston, the head of genome sequencing at Britain's Sanger Institute -- are left in the shadows. I doubt that the average reader will realize how important it has been to ensure that the human DNA sequence remains freely available to all (despite and against Venter's wishes). Far too few words are spent to explain that Celera could put together its results only by using the data produced and made available to all by the public consortium. In brief, this is not the most balanced or rigorous book on the Human Genome Project. However, some of its pages are worth reading. I liked this image of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory: "In the hallways and stairwells hang photographs of the original apostles of the new science: Delbruck himself, Salvador Luria, Crick and Watson, Barbara McClintock, Jacques Monod, Alfred Hershey . . . forever young and cocksure, their eyes bright from the birth of ideas that will take their older, grayer selves to Stockholm." Guido Barbujani Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Firstly, I haven't even finished this book at the time of my writing this review, but I could no longer wait to comment on it. The distinguished feature of this book is its style of writing. It is incredibly simple and straight forward, without any unnecessary twist of language or logic. Although this is a

depiction of the whole story behind the Human Genome Project, it reads like an epic tale of a breathtaking journey. James Shreeve gives a close account of all the events that led up to sequencing of human genome, including politics, science, business, legal matters and personal relations. What's more, is that a lay reader who understands nothing about gene or molecular biology can learn a whole lot of things he didn't know before. While the book is not technical in biological and other scientific explanations, it is sufficient to explain to the lay reader about genes, their importance as well as their pharmaceutical value. This book, like other reviewers have mentioned, is truly hard to put down. Highly recommended to everyone!!

Good for 3/4 of the book then it just droned on with nothing really new. Fascinating insight into one narcissistic scientist and his quest for me me me couched in terms of for everybody.

This book was a fascinating mix of science and drama. It's great to see scientists portrayed as merely human, with all their moments of genius, weakness, and egomania. I wish more scientific achievements could be documented in this way... I think it would bring a greater appreciation and understanding to the process of discovery.

James Shreeve is to be congratulated on making a complex subject understandable. I learned a lot from reading this book about the science, personalities, politics, etc. of big science projects, and the attitudes of commercial enterprises and academia. I'd strongly recommend this for anyone interested in the life sciences.

Amazing book!

Good book! Came quick with no fuss.

If you read only one science book this year, it has to be James Shreeve's inside view of the race to sequence the human genome. The story of this tumultuous competition between the prestigious Human Genome Project and the brash visionary Craig Venter is a joy ride. Shreeve's irreverent, charming and ultimately thrilling tale is a masterpiece of science writing. The white coats (and white hats) drop away in this book as Shreeve reveals the majesty of science for what it has always been, a very human story. Bravo!

This is an extremely well written book. It provides the layperson with an understanding of the importance of the Genome science, and understanding of the political battles and corporate battles necessary to advance our understanding of science

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