**NEW BOOKS BRIEFLY NOTE
AVOID BORING PEOPLE: LESSONS FROM A LIFE IN SCIENCE**

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**AVOID BORING PEOPLE: LESSONS FROM A LIFE IN SCIENCE by James D. Watson. Published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2007.**

James D. Watson, author of *The Double Helix* in 1968, begins that book with the arresting sentence: “I never saw Francis Crick in a modest mood.” I think it is fair to say that Watson’s autobiography Avoid Boring People could begin “I never experienced a modest mood myself.”

The book starts with Watson’s birth in 1928, in Chicago, into a family that “believed in books, birds, and the Democratic Party.” Watson traces his upbringing in depression-era Chicago, his attendance at public elementary and high school, and his undergraduate experience at the University of Chicago. Watson went on to graduate school at Indiana University and a post graduate fellowship at Cambridge where he encountered Francis Crick and participated in the discovery of structure of DNA.

Subsequently, Watson worked on what is now called the Central Dogma of DNA Replication, DNA translation to RNA, and the transcription of proteins. In addition to *The Double Helix* he is the author/co-author of multiple editions of *The Molecular Biology of the Gene* and *The Molecular Biology of the Cell*. Watson was director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York from 1968 to 1993, first director of the National Center for Human Genome Research of the National Institutes of Health, and is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, The Royal Society, recipient of The Presidential Medal of Freedom, The National Medal of Science, and with Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins the 1962 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Watson’s autobiography is unique insofar as each chapter of his life is concluded with a series of lessons. For example, the lessons he takes away from his post doctoral years at Cambridge University are: “(1) Choose an objective apparently ahead of its time; (2) Work on problems only when you feel tangible success may come in several years; (3) Never be the brightest person in a room; (4) Stay in close contact with your intellectual competitors; (5) Work with a teammate who is your intellectual equal; (6) Always have someone to save you.” Watson’s book, therefore, may be taken as a guidebook to a successful scientific and academic career. There is much he has to teach about the scientific process and academic life.

There are, on the other hand, several unpleasant aspects to this book. Watson seems completely incapable of ever describing a woman he encountered in his laboratory without offering some sort of modifier: “attractive”, “nice figure”, “blue eyed”. There are repeated comments to how he would like a laboratory location which allowed him to admire the female undergraduates coming and going to classes. Women are described as a constant subject of pursuit. Even after he describes his marriage, shortly before his 40th birthday, to a 19 year old college undergraduate, repeated references to women as sexual objects occur.

There are also several aspects of this book which can only be described as mean spirited or narcissistic. Inspite of his multiple accolades, Watson still seems to have lots of old scores to settle. He is annoyed that in the mid 1970’s the President of Harvard did not make a bigger fuss over him when he left to go to work at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory full time. Scientific meetings where the majority of those present voted against a position that he adopted call for a rehashing of the issues to demonstrate how, 30 years later, he was sure he was right and they were wrong. Endless amounts of ink are spilled over the minutia of political infighting in the Harvard Department of Biology as if everyone should be fascinated by what went on in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is a bit surprising that the editors at Alfred Knopf Publishing Company didn’t choose to delete these sections. They do not reflect well upon the author.

Nonetheless, Watson writes well and the book is a relatively quick and interesting read.