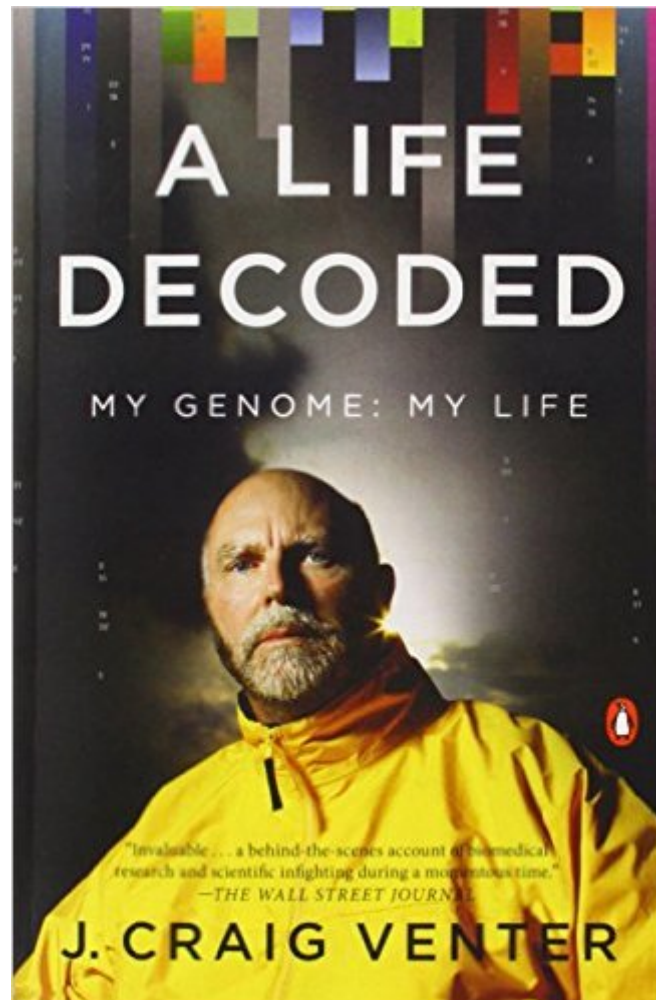


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A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life



Synopsis

The triumphant memoir of the man behind one of the greatest feats in scientific history. Of all the scientific achievements of the past century, perhaps none can match the deciphering of the human genetic code, both for its technical brilliance and for its implications for our future. In *A Life Decoded*, J. Craig Venter traces his rise from an uninspired student to one of the most fascinating and controversial figures in science today. Here, Venter relates the unparalleled drama of the quest to decode the human genome—a goal he predicted he could achieve years earlier and more cheaply than the government-sponsored Human Genome Project, and one that he fulfilled in 2001. A thrilling story of detection, *A Life Decoded* is also a revealing, and often troubling, look at how science is practiced today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Having read *The Genome War*, I had preordered Venter's own story. I was not disappointed. The *Publisher's Weekly* review sniffs that it is "clumsily written." I would attribute that opinion to one of two possibilities. Either the reviewer never got beyond the early chapters about his childhood, which are marred by cliché and some amateurish prose, or the reviewer does not know enough biology to understand the rest. Once past the early biography, the rest of the book is riveting. I would warn those considering it that a reasonable knowledge of biology and genetics is almost a requirement to enjoy the story. I teach medical students and have studied molecular biology (unknown when I was a medical student) and it taxed my knowledge to the limit to understand his accomplishments. Still,

the book reminds me a bit of "Science Fictions," the account of the discovery of the AIDS virus, which pulled no punches in naming villains and fakers. Venter is settling a few scores but, having read the other book, I am inclined to accept his version of the story. Biology research is not beanbag, to paraphrase an old aphorism, especially when the stakes are high. There are titanic egos in this story, not just that of the author. If you like biology and genetics and want to read about the biggest big game hunt in biological science history, this is a good place to start. The best part of the story begins as he returns from Vietnam, a near failure in high school, now stimulated by his experiences as a corpsman to study and go to medical school. He has married a New Zealand girl he met on R&R in Australia. They both go to UCSD once they have mastered junior college. Here he becomes interested in biochemistry, then cell biology.

This is a memoir by the scientist whose team was the first to map the human genome - and handily beat the federal government at the task with less funding and time. Unfortunately, the latter half of the book is less about science than the politics and business around it. Not only do scientists at Venter's level have to cozy up to venture capitalists, Congresspersons, and Presidents (and get courted and used by them in turn), but there's a lot of self-promotion and jockeying for position between and among colleagues. Venter doesn't sound particularly bitter about petty, two-faced, and undermining peers (there are plenty) and their apparently dishonorable behavior, but he clearly gets back his own with this book. Thus, the greatest scientific achievement of Venter's life reads less compellingly than the more quotidian aspects of his earlier life and career: playing chicken with trains as a kid, racing jets with a bicycle as they lifted off from San Francisco Airport, and the lessons of the "University of Death" that was Vietnam, where Venter served as a medic at Da Nang navy hospital. Venter's descriptions of the science he pursues assume a fair amount of knowledge on the part of the reader, and may be tough for the lay reader to follow, but are always thankfully short. Sailors may enjoy the accounts of his escapes to the ocean, handily winning a trans-Atlantic race and fighting a storm in the Bermuda Triangle. One of the stronger features of the book are boxes set off from the narrative that describe various details of Venter's own genetic code in relation to the latest findings about inheritance, disease, and how genes express themselves in our bodies and lives.

Knowing Craig and having had worked at Celera, I was eager to learn more of the details of Craig's early career which I knew only in general strokes. However, also knowing Craig, I was also inclined to take his portrayal with a grain of salt. In this spirit, I would strongly recommend this book as a

gripping tale of remarkable success, intrigue, and adventure, as told through the eyes of one of the greatest egomaniacs ever. The book does wander a bit through Craig's earliest years and the strongest material coincides with the formation of TIGR, Celera, and the JCVI. I can vouch for many of the stories and perspectives from the Celera years, having heard, directly or indirectly, of the events at the time. The interludes about Craig's genome are fascinating, and the science is presented with enough explanation and metaphor that it should be easy to grasp for the non-expert. However, as much as Craig "sets the record straight", or grinds axes depending on your perspective, his ego tinges the entire book and regrettably diminishes its credibility. It's simply hard to believe a man, who in his own account, was always right, never showed a shred of self-doubt, and never made a mistake beyond trusting the incompetents and villains surrounding him. Craig also spends his time railing against commercial science and business people, claiming that he never had any aspirations to make money---although he made plenty---and feuded constantly with those that did. Although this seems superficially noble, it does make we wonder at his motives to request tens and hundreds of millions of dollars from venture capitalists if he truly never intended to repay those investments.

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