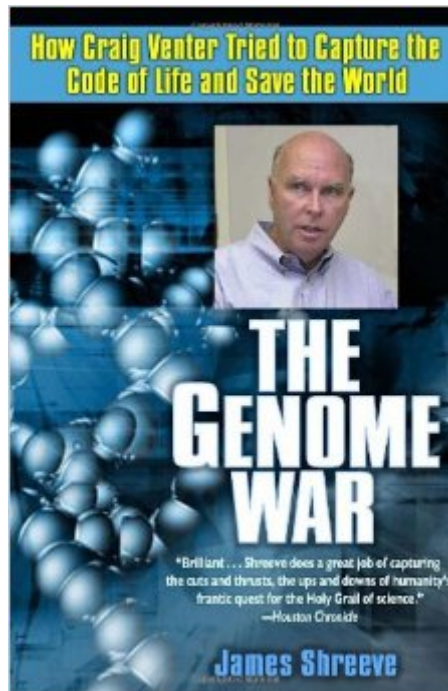


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The Genome War: How Craig Venter Tried To Capture The Code Of Life And Save The World



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

This is a ferociously well-written account of the race to map the human genome, one of the most sordid and expensive races in the history of science. Virtually alone amongst the books available out there on the genome race, this book tells the story from the point of view of Craig Venter. Not only that, but James Shreeve had a complete fly-on-the-wall view of the inner workings of Celera, allowing Shreeve to give a full-blooded account of the implosion of Venter's dream, that of becoming the Bill Gates of Biotech. Shreeve has done the impossible by pulling the threads of this immense story into a tight coherent narrative. At the end of the story, we understand how Venter ended up in the embarrassing situation of negotiating a so-called "tie" in the race for the human genome.

Shreeve has a novelistic eye for detail in painting memorable portraits of the many people involved in the story. The science is vividly introduced when needed, but the complex financial and political moves are also explicated with authority. This is very very good writing. Although Craig Venter has often been demonized amongst scientific circles, it was always an open question whether Venter was the devil incarnate, or an incredibly naive scientist who made one stupid faustian bargain after another. While there is no doubt that Venter is a brilliant man, Shreeve's account portrays Venter as a financial masochist, a victim of financial forces beyond his understanding. In the preface, Shreeve explained that he had originally wanted a balanced account of the race as he tried to get access to the head of the public Human Genome Project, Francis Collins. He was refused. Because of that, Shreeve has structured the book as a character study of Venter, where we are privy to all his inner trials and tribulations.

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