

Chemistry on stage

Carl Djerassi talks to Ben Valsler about his move from distinguished chemist to 'intellectual smuggler'

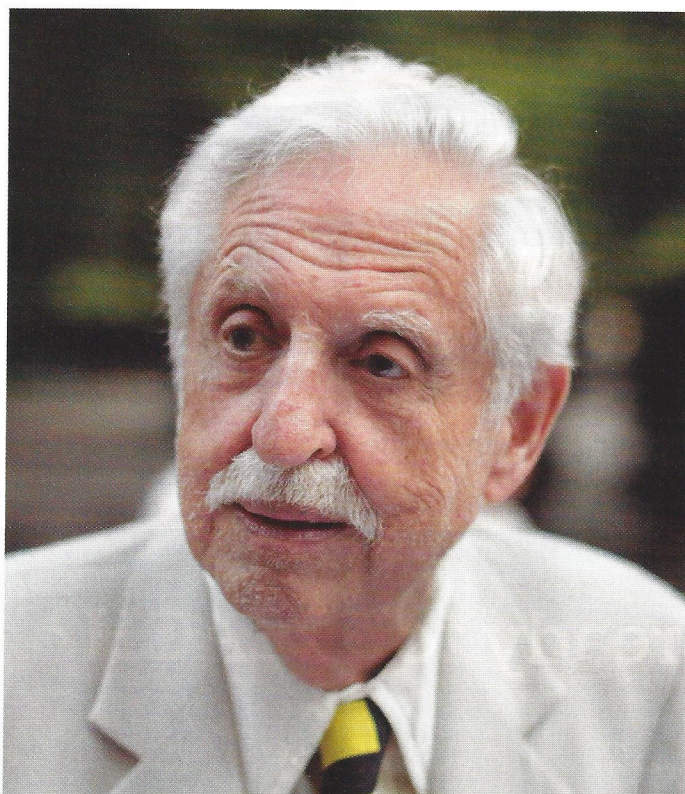
You had a distinguished career as a chemist – what caused you to move over to writing fiction?

I changed my career, really my intellectual life, at an unexpectedly late stage: in my middle or late 60s. I really decided it would be interesting to lead a totally different life – that of an intellectual smuggler.

It was my work dealing with the pill and oral contraceptives which made me realise that one has to communicate scientific discovery, if one talks about the social consequences of it, with a very broad public. Many people are either not interested in what you have to say or they are afraid of it, or they claim that they won't understand it and they don't listen even if you try to explain.

So therefore, I thought I would smuggle it. I will hide it in what I initially called 'science-in-fiction' to differentiate it completely from science fiction. In other words, everything I describe in a pseudo- or quasi-fictional context is, in fact, either true or plausible. I don't violate the second law of thermodynamics, I don't have things like perpetual motion machines, which could be very amusing and interesting in science fiction, but really don't work for my purposes.

I focused my fiction and my plays on the behavioural and cultural aspects of scientists; how we behave, rather than what we do. There are plenty of very good science journalists who describe how we do science. But to describe how we behave, you need to be an insider. And you have to be an insider who is willing to wash dirty lab coats in public. It's my own lab coat, too, so I'm not a muckraking journalist who talks about 'them chemists'. No, I write about ourselves. It's a collective *mea culpa* in part, but not entirely,



Carl Djerassi is associated with development of the contraceptive pill

because many of the idiosyncratic aspects are positive ones.

We are a discipline that is probably the most collegial of them all. At the same time, science is brutally competitive. Scientists are ambitious; we want to be first. We have an Olympic games, you might say, in which there's only a gold medal, there are no silvers or bronzes.

Do you think a career as a scientist has affected the way that you've approached writing fiction?

I don't think so, except in one context. We are scientists because we are curious. That is invariably the first motivation for someone to go into science. My curiosity reflects itself in the type of plays that I write.

But when it comes to style, the

answer is categorically no. Because as scientists, we write purely for information transmission and we are supposed to be precise. What absolutely counts is content, and style comes second. You can write an extremely good scientific paper in very poor style and it will still be considered a great paper if the science is great. If the style is great but the science is mediocre, that's a mediocre paper.

That is not the case in literary writing where style in the broadest context is very different. You have to hide information transmission. Otherwise, people will call it didactic; the most insulting term in any book review. I'm fully aware of the danger, of even admitting to having didactic motives. But I'm old enough to be able to do this and say, 'Well, what the hell!'

Do you judge the success of your 'science-in-fiction' books on different parameters from other authors?

Entirely. I don't write bestsellers by definition, but I write long sellers. A good example is that the first volume in my science-in-fiction tetralogy, *Cantor's dilemma*, is still being reprinted every year.

It's used partly in colleges and universities as recommended reading. But it particularly tells young scientists what it's really like to go into science. [It deals with] universities, graduate students, post docs, professors; misbehaviour as well as attractive behaviour. I wrote it in 1990, it's still completely up to date and very relevant.

Dialogue in fiction allows us to explore ethical 'grey' areas. Would you like to see populist drama, such as soap operas, approach some of these ethical situations?

I will disappoint you and say no because I'm not a soap opera fan. I do not like to have this reduced to a lower level. I do not like to see them oversimplified.

But there's another problem. Everything I have told you sounds rosy, but in fact, theatres are very suspicious of plays [with scientific content]. Theatres feel that we scientists are taking over the world, and now, we want to move into the theatre and take over there too.

One of my lectures is called *What can science do for the theatre versus what can the theatre do for science*. I'm interested of course in the second, and not so much for science, but for scientists. I really like to show that we are, perhaps not 'normal', but interesting people. We are not all Strangeloves or Frankensteins, idiot savants or nerds, but we also cover a Gaussian distribution curve of behaviour, where the middle is one that most people are unfamiliar with and could find quite interesting.

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