

Of Flies, Mice, and Men

By François Jacob

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Who could have guessed that the lowly fruit fly might hold the key for decoding heredity? Or that the mouse might one day disclose astonishing evolutionary secrets? In a book infused with wisdom, wonder, and a healthy dose of wry skepticism, Nobel Prize-winning geneticist François Jacob walks us through the surprising ways of science, particularly the science of biology, in this century. *Of Flies, Mice, and Men* is at once a work of history, a social study of the role of scientists in the modern world, and a cautionary tale of the bumbling and brilliance, imagination and luck, that attend scientific discovery. A book about molecules, reproduction, and evolutionary tinkering, it is also about the way biologists work, and how they contemplate beauty and truth, good and evil.

Animated with anecdotes from Greek mythology, literature, episodes from the history of science, and personal experience, *Of Flies, Mice, and Men* tells the story of how the marvelous discoveries of molecular and developmental biology are transforming our understanding of who we are and where we came from. In particular, Jacob scrutinizes the place of the scientist in society. Alternately cast as the soothsayer Tiresias, the conscienceless inventor Daedalus, or Prometheus, conveyer of dangerous knowledge, the scientist in our day must instead adopt the role of truthteller, Jacob suggests. And the crucial truth that molecular biology teaches is the one he elaborates with great clarity and grace in this book: that all animals are made of the same building blocks, by a combinatorial system that always rearranges the same elements according to new forms.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Molecular biology seems to crystallize our feelings about science. The promises and threats of knowledge are made plain as we peek around the corner and see genetic counseling, genome mapping, and cloning staring back at us. Pioneering researcher François Jacob--who shared the 1965 Nobel Prize for medicine--offers his thoughts on the past, present, and future of science in *Of Flies, Mice & Men*. As informal as a memoir, yet sharp and clever in its discussions of philosophy and politics, Jacob's book breaks new ground in popular-science publishing.

Not many scientists are comfortable quoting poets from Sophocles to Apollinaire, but Jacob weaves their words with his own beautiful prose to inspire the reader with new ways of thinking about science as a part of human life. His aim is not simply to retell the brief history of molecular biology but to put it in context and, more importantly, to show that this context is as important as the research itself. Jacob is one of the few scientists who recognize that science is easily abused, but that its course can't be stopped, or even slowed much. Rather than caving in to fatalism, he offers the hope that it can be guided, and he knows that a well-informed public is his best ally in this effort. The project is inspiring, if a little daunting; as he says, opening Pandora's box "condemned human beings to never-ending research." *--Rob Lightner*

From Publishers Weekly
Part autobiography, part biology primer and part discourse on the role of scientific research, this slim volume by the winner of the 1965 Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology fuses an elegant history of molecular biology with a recounting of the development of Jacob's (The Possible and the Actual; The Statue Within; etc.) own landmark research into the mechanisms of gene regulation in microorganisms. "The history of molecular biology," Jacob writes in his introduction, "provides a model for understanding how original research takes shape." Using references to Greek mythology and literature, personal experience and historical anecdote, Jacob spices up his narratives with ruminations on the changing roles and responsibilities of scientists. In addition, because of its often controversial nature, molecular biology?genetics in particular?offers a model for understanding the relationship between politics and science. Jacob clearly believes that scientists should not work in isolation and that both the political and the investigative processes should shape the ways in which we use the discoveries made in the laboratory. To those who would limit the topics open to scientific investigation, he states simply and forcefully: "The biggest danger for humankind is not the development of knowledge, but of ignorance." Well written and accessible to nonscientists, his book provides valuable insight into the workings of a powerful thinker and the field to which he has chosen to apply himself.
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From Library Journal
Jacob (The Statue Within, LJ 3/15/88), the 1965 Nobel laureate in medicine, has written a book of interest to scientists and nonscientists alike. He discusses the nature of scientific research and discovery and the need for both scientists and the public to exercise objectivity and precision when discussing the limits, applications, and consequences of biological (and particularly genetic) research. This is not a book for readers who prefer straightforward and sequential narratives. Jacob's text coils and unwinds much like a replicating molecule of DNA, intertwining musings on such disparate topics as childhood friendships, film, and classical mythology with reflections on the history, politics, and practice of science. The result is smoothly flowing, elegant, and intriguing. Recommended for academic and public libraries.?Nancy Curtis, Univ. of Maine Lib., Orono

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Connie Sims:

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Jennifer Mitchell:

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Lisa Thomason:

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Herbert Oakley:

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