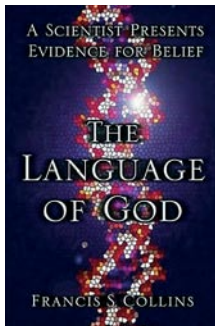


Books written by prominent life scientists

About God, Genes, and Cancer

Three accounted life science experts become writers: Human Genome Project supervisor Francis Collins dabbles in philosophy, zoologist Ryan Gregory issues a huge tome on genomic study – and the prior DKFZ director Harald zur Hausen provides a comprehensive overview on cancer-inducing infective agents.



Sometimes a superstar in one field gets into his head to succeed in a completely different field. The result can be a disaster. Take rock band singer Sting, who dabbles with John Dowland's renaissance music, or his

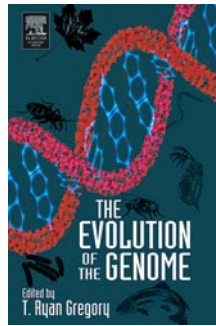
colleague Jon Bon Jovi, who acted in third-class horror films. Francis Collins, former head of the Human Genome Project, recently also discovered a novel field to work on. In *The Language of God*, the notable scientist philosophises on religion. The book caused a sensation in the USA and climbed to the top of the ranking lists whilst in Europe few noticed its existence. Did we miss anything?

Definitely not. Collins – the man who was praised as “genome cracker” (*Sunday Times*) and “superstar” (*Tagesspiegel*), takes a chance – and fails miserably. Pleading for a peaceful coexistence of belief in God on the one hand with practising modern science on the other, Collins speaks about a “third way”, in which “science is not threatened by God” but “enhanced”. He daydreams of combining science and (Christian) religion in harmony. That's a sensitive issue, demanding a sharp-sighted analyst who is also able to write in a lively and clear manner.

Collins cannot meet these demands at all. Shy to provoke disputes, he argues in a tedious, politically correct tone, that makes the reader either bored or angry, and what he writes is dubious. Sam Harris, a US expert on religious subjects, wrote in a review: *If one wonders how beguiled, self-deceived and carefree in the service of fallacy a scientist can be in the United States in the 21st century, [Collins' book] provides the answer. This is an American book, attesting to American ignorance, written for Americans who believe that ignorance is stronger than death. – There is nothing to add to these words.*

WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief. By Francis S. Collins. Free Press, 2006. 304 pages, €26.-.



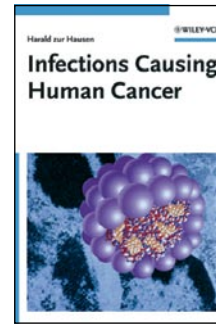
The public funded Human Genome Project (HGP) took 13 years and resulted in a solemn handshake with US president Bill Clinton. HGP director Francis Collins and his worldwide co-workers had spent

\$3.8 billion between 1990 and 2003 to unravel three billion nucleotides. But was it worth it? Ryan Gregory provides as an editor of *The Evolution of the Genome* dozens of arguments to affirm this question. The Canadian evolutionary biologist, winner of the prestigious Howard Alper Postdoctoral Prize in 2003, recently returned home after research intermezzos at the American Museum of Natural History (New York) and the Natural History Museum (London). Now Gregory acts as an Assistant Professor at the Biodiversity Institute of Ontario, University of Guelph.

In this arty hardcover with its glossy paper, Gregory provides an impressive overview of the key areas in genome biology, such as the evolution of genome size in animals and plants, polyploidy, the evolution of genomic parasites, and comparative genomics in eukaryotes and prokaryotes as well. Despite its highly academic value (and countless references), the reading “flows” in a very enjoyable way. Gregory and his sixteen co-authors ask endless questions on large-scale evolutionary phenomena – and they answer them all: How common is polyploidy in plants, and how is it linked with animals, i.e. with attacking herbivores? What are “B Chromosomes”, how widely are they distributed and where are they derived from? How did genomes originate? What is a prokaryotic species? And so forth. In a word: Wherever one opens this well written book, he will read it with great pleasure.

WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

The Evolution of the Genome. By T. Ryan Gregory. Elsevier Academic Press, 2005. 740 pages, €65.50.



Are you close to desperation while working boring long years on a never-ending research project? Bear up! In the 1980s the young German researcher Harald zur Hausen faced similar problems. The fact that prostitutes

have higher rates of cervical cancer than nuns didn't leave him alone. Zur Hausen got it into his head to unveil a causal link between HPV (human papillomavirus) infection and cervical cancer. In the beginning, he was pretty alone with this attempt. He persisted and worked on oncogenic pathogens and the role of viruses in human tumors. Now, nearly 30 years later, zur Hausen has proved his hypotheses and published a total of 280 papers. Recently, a vaccine which protects women from developing cervical cancers has been approved for sale. It is the first vaccine to protect people from cancer at all, and it is based upon zur Hausen's long lasting research. Discouraged scientists should keep this little story in mind.

Besides his successful career as a research scientist, Harald zur Hausen was Scientific Director of the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) in Heidelberg (Germany). Now, after his retirement, he has published a comprehensive book on his field. Zur Hausen compressed his complete expertise into *Infections Causing Human Cancer* – and this is quite a number. Approximately 20% of the global cancer incidence is initiated or promoted by infectious agents like certain viruses and parasites like *Schistosoma*, *Helicobacter* and liver flukes. Each of these vermin has its own chapter. The book contains tons of information for skilled experts, it has an extensive bibliography, but it doesn't mention every bagatelle in detail. You should consider purchasing it.

WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

Infections Causing Human Cancer. By Harald zur Hausen. Wiley-VCH, 2006. 517 pages, €149.-.