



# AVOID BORING PEOPLE

LESSONS FROM A LIFE  
IN SCIENCE

JAMES D. WATSON

A KNOPF  BOOK



**AVOID BORING  
PEOPLE**

LESSONS FROM A LIFE  
IN SCIENCE

**JAMES D. WATSON**

A KNOFF  BOOK

ALSO BY JAMES D. WATSON  
*The Molecular Biology of the Gene*  
(1965, 1970, 1976, coauthor: 1987, 2003)

*The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the  
Discovery of the Structure of DNA* (1968)

*The DNA Story: A Documentary History of  
Gene Cloning* (coauthor: 1981)

*Recombinant DNA* (coauthor: 1983, 1992, 2007)

*The Molecular Biology of the Cell*  
(coauthor: 1983, 1989, 1994)

*A Passion for DNA: Genes, Genomes,  
and Society* (2000)

*Genes, Girls, and Gamow: After the  
Double Helix* (2002)

*DNA: The Secret of Life* (2003)

# AVOID BORING PEOPLE

LESSONS  
FROM A LIFE  
IN SCIENCE

---

*James D. Watson*



---

ALFRED A. KNOPF  
NEW YORK  
2007

*For Paul Doty*

# Contents

FOREWORD

PREFACE

1. MANNERS ACQUIRED AS A CHILD
2. MANNERS LEARNED WHILE AN UNDERGRADUATE
  3. MANNERS PICKED UP IN GRADUATE SCHOOL
  4. MANNERS FOLLOWED BY THE PHAGE GROUP
5. MANNERS PASSED ON TO AN ASPIRING YOUNG SCIENTIST
  6. MANNERS NEEDED FOR IMPORTANT SCIENCE
  7. MANNERS PRACTICED AS AN UNTENURED PROFESSOR
  8. MANNERS DEPLOYED FOR ACADEMIC ZING
9. MANNERS NOTICED AS A DISPENSABLE WHITE HOUSE ADVISER
  10. MANNERS APPROPRIATE FOR A NOBEL PRIZE
  11. MANNERS DEMANDED BY ACADEMIC INEPTITUDE
  12. MANNERS BEHIND READABLE BOOKS
  13. MANNERS REQUIRED FOR ACADEMIC CIVILITY
  14. MANNERS FOR HOLDING DOWN TWO JOBS
15. MANNERS MAINTAINED WHEN RELUCTANTLY LEAVING HARVARD

EPILOGUE

CAST OF CHARACTERS

REMEMBERED LESSONS

## Foreword

Robert Maynard Hutchins once famously remarked that whenever he felt the urge to exercise, he immediately lay down. Despite the hyperbole (for he, like Jim Watson, was an ardent tennis player) he had made the point that his priority resided in one relentless form of exercise, that of the mind. In this, too, Jim Watson is a true follower of Hutchins, as his book and indeed his life demonstrate so engagingly.

Under the leadership of Hutchins, the University of Chicago played a significant role not only in Jim's education, but as a permanent benchmark in his continuing thinking about education. If one of the principal goals of a liberal education is to leave students with an insistent lifelong preoccupation with the question of what education is for and what it is about, what qualities should characterize the truly educated person and what intellectual virtues should be sought and practiced—and why—then Jim is a triumphant example of its success. Hutchins was the great critic of and innovator in twentieth-century higher education. He made his university the home of perhaps the most passionate debates over curriculum and intellectual purpose to take place in recent memory. And Hutchins, like Jim, was never satisfied: his university, he said, might not be very good, but it was the best there was. For undergraduates, “the best” had to do with a vision of general education that introduced students to the most profound questions of human life and civilization, and to the great writers and thinkers who had confronted and tried to make sense of them—an education that taught students to think with rigor and integrity and to go on doing so under whatever circumstances they might encounter.

The budding ornithologist who entered Chicago's college left as a man ready to embark on the study of the gene, focused on an ambitious specialization while always underlining the need to sustain the widest possible intellectual curiosity. The imperative that Jim Watson had learned to embrace was to pursue the most difficult, perhaps intractable, problems and to think scrupulously and express his views honestly, whatever might be the consequences in terms of what is now called “political correctness,” other kinds of mere conformity and self-interest, or even *politesse*.

The austerity suggested by such an outlook does not, fortunately, preclude a fine sense for the enjoyment of the world, its pleasures and its foibles. Jim portrays himself as a very young and rather monastic undergraduate and as something of a late, and utterly enthusiastic, social bloomer. The freshness and candor of his observations on people and events, accomplishments and follies (including his own) may well derive from the novelty he found in every experience that, new to him, made life ever more interesting.

This combination of qualities shone through *The Double Helix* as it does here, and indeed Jim's account of the struggle to get the manuscript published more or less intact is almost as entertaining as the book itself. And just as *The Double Helix* became a classic in showing how science may really get done, so the present volume, in describing the whole trajectory of a unique career within a larger world of science and research, will join it and add to our understanding of Jim Watson's revolutionary achievements.

The different sides of Jim Watson's persona emerge vividly also from the “remembered lessons” detailed at the end of each chapter. Some may prove more useful than others. The advice to “Expect to put on weight after Stockholm” is not, alas, relevant for most readers, but “Work on Sundays” does have larger application. So, too, the wisdom of “Don't back schemes that demand miracles.”

The maxim “Don't use autobiography to justify past actions or motivations” defines the captivating tone of this autobiography and its direct self-revelation quite wonderfully. At the same time, the exhortation “Avoid boring people” is scarcely necessary, for if Jim Watson is incapable of anything, it is of boring people.

In consequence, we must all be grateful to Jim for so exuberantly following his own lesson: “Be the first to tell a good story.”

—*Hanna H. Gray, University of Chicago*

## *Preface*

Most of my unpublished writerly output—handwritten manuscripts and letters, lectures and lab notes, university and government documents that I helped prepare—is deposited in the archives of Harvard University and of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. In time, it will all become available to the public, mostly through the Internet, for those preternaturally curious about how I have moved through life. Rather than let other commentators have the first crack at those writings, I opted to be the first to employ them extensively to prepare this look at my life before middle age became obvious—my childhood, university years, career as an active scientist and professor, and my first years as director of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory.

As this book's broad features came to cohere, I began to see *Avoid Boring People* as an object lesson, if not quite an exemplary history of the making of a scientist. It is my advice in the form of recollections of manners I deployed to navigate the worlds of science and of academia. The thought that this instructive value might be made explicit in the form of self-help led me to conclude each chapter with a set of “remembered lessons”—rules of conduct that in retrospect figured decisively in turning so many of my childhood dreams into reality. Suffice it to say, this is a book for those on their way up, as well as for those on the top who do not want their leadership years to be an assemblage of opportunities gone astray.

Skipping high school's last years led to my never learning how to type, and even today I generate left-hand-written versions of the first drafts of all my writings. Without my administrative assistant Maureen Berejka's ever-increasing skill in handling strings of seemingly indecipherable squiggles, this book could never have come into existence. In preparing successive early drafts of the manuscript, I much benefited from the able Barnard College chemistry graduate, Kiryn Haslinger, whose expert knowledge of the English language led to many improvements in my word use. New York University psychology graduate Marisa Macari ably provided help in inserting period photographs and documents. Later, Stanford biology major Agnieszka Milczarek invaluablely corrected the many errors of fact and spelling spotted by friends to whom I sent preliminary drafts. Finally, I much thank George Andreou of Knopf for masterly editing that has much improved this volume's clarity and intellectual thrust.

—Jim Watson, March 26, 2007

## 1. MANNERS ACQUIRED AS A CHILD



*With my mother in 1929*

**I** WAS BORN in 1928 in Chicago into a family that believed in books, birds, and the Democratic Party. I was the firstborn, followed two years later by my sister, Betty. My birth was at St. Luke's Hospital, not far by car from Hyde Park, where my parents lived after their marriage in 1925. Soon after Betty was born, my parents moved to South Shore, a middle-class neighborhood populated by bungalows, vacant lots, and two-story apartment houses. We lived in an apartment on Merrill Avenue before relocating in 1933 to a small, four-room bungalow that my parents bought at 7922 Luella Avenue, two blocks away. That move allowed my by then financially stretched, seventy-two-year-old grandmother to live with us in the rear bedroom next to the kitchen. In newly created tiny attic rooms, Betty and I slept on bunk-like beds.

Though I went to prekindergarten at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, the Depression quickly placed private education beyond my parents' means. I, however, was in no way disadvantaged by changing to public school. Our Luella Avenue home was only five blocks away from the academically rigorous Horace Mann Grammar School, which I attended from the ages of five through thirteen. It was then a relatively new brick building built in the early 1920s in Tudor style, possessing a large auditorium for assemblies and a gymnasium where I was seldom able to do more than two or three push-ups.

While both of my father's parents were Episcopalians, only his father, Thomas Tolman Watson (born 1876), a stockbroker, was a Republican. His wife, constantly upset at being a speculator's wife, showed her displeasure by

invariably voting for a Democrat. She was born Nellie Dewey Ford in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Her mother was a descendant of the settler Thomas Dewey, who arrived in Boston in 1633. The Watson side of my family can be traced back to the New Jersey-born William Weldon Watson (born 1794), who would become minister of the first Baptist church established west of the Appalachians, in Nashville, Tennessee. When he returned from a Baptist convention at Philadelphia in a prairie schooner (before railroads), he brought with him the first soda water fountain ever seen in Tennessee. To counteract the local whisky demon, he set up the soda fountain on a street corner near the church and single-handedly made soda water all the rage. Reputedly he made enough money selling soda water to build a new church for his growing congregation, and it still stands today in the heart of Nashville.

His eldest son, William Weldon Watson II, moved north to Springfield, Illinois, where it is said he designed a house for Abraham Lincoln across the street from his own. With his wife and brother Ben, he later accompanied Lincoln on the inaugural train to Washington. Ben's son, William Weldon Watson III (born 1847), married in 1871 Augusta Crafts Tolman, the daughter of an Episcopalian banker from St. Charles, Illinois. Afterward he became a hotelkeeper, first north of Chicago and then in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, where he raised five sons including my grandfather, Thomas Tolman Watson. After my grandfather's marriage in 1895, he initially sought his fortune at the newly discovered Mesabi Range, the great iron-ore-bearing region located near Duluth on western Lake Superior. Then he joined his older brother, William, later to be one of Mesabi's senior management. My father, James D. Watson Sr., was born in 1897, followed over the next decade by his brothers, William Weldon IV, Thomas Tolman II, and Stanley Ford.

From northern Minnesota, my father's parents moved back to the Chicago region, where, with the help of his wife's money, my grandfather bought a large Colonial Revival-style home in Chicago's affluent western suburb of La Grange. My father went to the local schools there before attending Oberlin College in Ohio for a year. Dad's freshman year ended, however, with scarlet fever rather than academic laurels. The following year he would start commuting into Chicago's commercial banking center (the Loop, with its ring of elevated tracks) to work at the Harris Trust Company. Money was short, as usual.



***My father, James D. Watson, Sr., in 1925 the year he married my mother***



***My mother, Margaret Jean Mitchell Watson, models the MacKinnon kilt from Scotland.***

But making money was never near my father's heart, and after World War I started, he enthusiastically joined the Illinois National Guard (Thirty-third Division), soon shipping off to France for more than a year. Upon coming home he began working at La Salle Extension University, a prosperous correspondence school that offered business courses. There he met, in 1920,

his future wife, Margaret Jean Mitchell (born 1899). She came to work in the personnel department after finishing two years at the University of Chicago. Mother was the only child of Lauchlin Alexander Mitchell, a Scottish-born tailor, and Elizabeth (Lizzie) Gleason, the daughter of an Irish immigrant couple (Michael Gleason and Mary Curtin) who had emigrated from Tipperary during the potato famine of the late 1840s. After farming ten years in Ohio, they moved on to land south of Michigan City, Indiana, and it was there, in 1860, that my grandmother, Nana to Betty and me, was born.

Early in her adolescence, Nana had left the Gleason farm to become a servant in the Barker mansion, the home of Michigan City's most prosperous family, owners of a large boxcar factory. Soon Nana rose to be Mrs. Barker's personal maid, accompanying her around the spas of the Midwest. Later, Mr. Barker took closer note and installed her in a Chicago flat together with funds that allowed her an independent life. Only more than a decade later, in her mid-thirties, did she marry Lauchlin Alexander Mitchell, born in Glasgow (1855) to Robert Mitchell and Flora MacKinnon.

As a youth, Lauchlin Mitchell immigrated to Toronto and from there to Chicago, where his custom-made-suit business thrived by the time of the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Sadly, he died in an accident when my mother was just fourteen, struck by a runaway horse carriage while coming out of the Palmer House Hotel on New Year's Eve. My mother's only mementos of him were a tiny MacKinnon kilt sent to her from Scotland and the splendid pastel of him that was exhibited at the 1893 World's Fair, reportedly commissioned in exchange for a custom-made suit. Nana began to take in paying guests, in effect running an Irish boardinghouse on Chicago's South Side.

Marring my mother's adolescence was a lengthy bout of rheumatic fever that damaged her heart and made her short of breath if she exercised seriously. The illness ultimately cut her life short and she died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. Like her mother, she followed the Catholic religion but was never a serious churchgoer. I remember her going to mass only on Christmas Eve and Easter, always saying that her heart needed to rest on weekends. On many days, particularly Sunday, Nana helped prepare our family's meals, having a skill at cooking not commonly found among the Chicago Irish. Her presence in our home early on gave Mother the freedom to work part time at the Housing Office of the University of Chicago, helping to supplement my father's barely adequate salary, which had been cut by half to \$3,000 when the Depression took hold.



*Elizabeth Mitchell in Michigan City in 1925 before she was my nana*

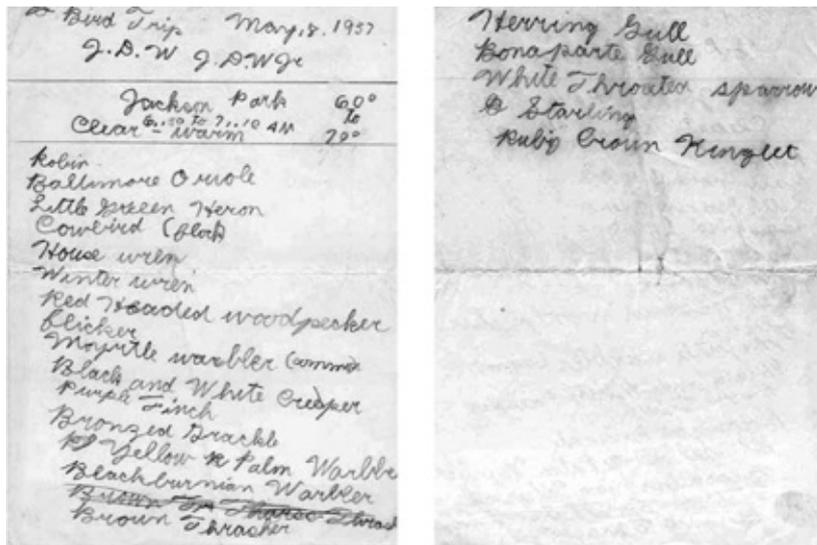
Behind our house was an alley that separated the homes on the west side of Luella Avenue from those on the east side of Paxton Avenue. The general absence of cars made it a safe place for games of kick-the-can or setting off firecrackers that could still be bought freely around the Fourth of July. When I finally began to grow past five feet, a backboard with a basketball hoop was put up above our garage doors, allowing me to practice my free throws after school. Scarce family funds also purchased a ping-pong table to liven up winter days.

My irreligious father only reluctantly had agreed to a Catholic baptism for my sister and me. It kept peace between him and my grandmother. He may have regretted the accommodation when my sister and I began going to church on Sundays with Nana. At first I didn't mind memorizing the catechism or going to the priest to confess my venial sins. But by the age of ten, I was aware of the Spanish Civil War and my father let me know that the Catholic Church was on the side of the fascism he despised. Though one priest at Our Lady of Peace gave sermons supporting the New Deal, many in the congregation bought Father Coughlin's vitriolic magazine opposing Roosevelt, England, and the Jews, which was on sale outside Our Lady of Peace following each Sunday mass.



***Horace Mann Grammar School kindergarten class photo, October 1933. I am seated on the floor, second from the left, proudly wearing a bow tie***

Just after my confirmation at age eleven, I completely stopped going to Sunday masses in order to accompany my father on his Sunday morning bird walks. Even as a small boy I was fascinated by birds, and when I was only seven my uncle Tom and aunt Etta gave me a children's book on bird migration, *Traveling with Birds*, by Rudyerd Boulton, curator of birds at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. My father's devotion to bird-watching went back to his high school days in La Grange. It continued equally strong after World War I when his family moved to an apartment in Hyde Park on Chicago's South Side, so his brother Bill could conveniently attend the University of Chicago. Dad would be up before sunrise most spring and fall days to go birding in nearby Jackson Park. Our first bird walks were also in Jackson Park. There I first learned to spot the common winterresident ducks, including the goldeneye, the old squaw, the bufflehead, and the American merganser. In the spring I quickly learned to differentiate the most common of warblers, vireos, and flycatchers that in springtime migrated north from their tropical winter homes. By the age of eleven, I already had enough book knowledge of birds to anticipate the many new species we would encounter during a 1939 drive in a borrowed car to see the San Francisco International Exposition. On that trip I added more than fifty new species to my acquaintance.



**Early on I learned from my father to keep careful notes on birds.**

My mother, by then a captain of our Seventh Ward precinct, enjoyed working for the Democratic Party. Our basement became the local polling station, earning us ten dollars per election, and my mother made another ten manning the polls. At the 1940 Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago, we rooted, to no avail, for Paul McNutt, Indiana's handsome governor then bidding to be chosen as Roosevelt's running mate.

In the evenings, Dad often was consumed with work brought home from the office. His principal task as collection manager of the LaSalle correspondence school was to write letters dunning students for delinquent payments. He never believed in threatening them, instead cajoling them with reminders of how their studies of the law or accounting would help them advance to high-paying jobs. I now realize how difficult it must have been to keep the job, he being a socialist-leaning Democrat sympathetic to the students who couldn't pay. No one, however, could accuse him of not working hard or of undermining free enterprise or, for that matter, of frowning upon the plutocratic game of golf, which he first came to enjoy in youth but later could play only on company outings after the Depression had forced the sale of the family Hudson.



***Ten years old and soon to abandon Sunday mass for Sunday morning bird-watching***

Our family always rooted for Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal's promise to rescue the downtrodden from the heartless grasp of unregulated capitalism. We were naturally on the side of the strikers in their violent confrontations with U.S. Steel at the massive South Side mill two miles east of our home along the shore of Lake Michigan. Matters of economics, however, began to concern our family less as the German menace grew. My father was a strong supporter of the English and French, the Allies on whose side he had fought in the First World War. He would have found the Germans a natural enemy even without Hitler.

I remember his anguish when Madrid fell to Franco. The local radio stations played up the defeat of the communist-backed republicans, but Father then saw fascism and Nazism as the real evils. By the time of Munich, the news from Europe was as much cause to be glued to the radio as was the Lone Ranger or the Chicago Cubs. Particularly crucial to us was the outcome of the 1940 presidential election, wherein Roosevelt sought his third term and was opposed by Wendell Willkie. Seemingly almost as awful as the Nazis themselves were America's isolationists, who wanted to stay out of the problems of Europe. My father was among those who saw in Charles Lindbergh's visit to Germany a manifestation of anti-Semitism.

Occasionally my parents had nasty disagreements about mispending what little money they had. But these frustrations were never passed on to my sister and me, and we each regularly received five cents for the Saturday afternoon double features at the nearby Avalon Theatre. Our parents would join us for some movies, one such occasion being John Ford's adaptation of Steinbeck's epic chronicle *The Grapes of Wrath*. The message that great decency by itself

does not generate a happy ending never left me. A long drought that turned fertile farmlands into dust clouds should not cause a family to lose everything. How any responsible citizen could see this film and not see the good brought about by the New Deal boggled my imagination.

I always liked going to grammar school and twice skipped a half grade, graduating when I was just thirteen. Somewhat downcasting were the results of my two IQ tests, discovered by stealthy looks at teachers' desktops. In neither test did I rise much above 120.1 got more encouragement from my reading comprehension scores, which placed me at the top of my class. I graduated from grammar school in June 1941, just after Germany invaded Russia. By then Churchill had joined Roosevelt as a hero of mine, and on most evenings we listened to Edward R. Murrow reporting from London on the CBS news. That summer was broken by my first time away from my family, going by train for two weeks in August to Owasippe Scout Reservation in Michigan above Muskegon on the White River. There I enjoyed working for nature-oriented merit badges that made me a Life Scout. Less fun were the overnight camping trips, in which I would invariably lag behind the other hikers, catching up only when they stopped to rest. Nonetheless, I came home content to have spotted thirty-seven different bird species.



*Russell Hart (center) and I on the way to Boy Scout camp in 1941*

I could not help realizing, however, that as a boy expert on birds I was far behind the much younger Gerard Darrow, who thanks to a prodigious memory became a Chicago celebrity when as a four-year-old ornithologist his story and talent were written up in the *Chicago Daily News*. I would resent him even more when he became the first famous “Quiz Kid” of a Sunday afternoon radio program that first aired in June 1940. Groups of five children, each of whom received a \$100 defense bond, were asked questions by the host, the third-grade-educated Jolly Joe Kelley. Previously he had been emcee of the *National Barn Dance*, having first come to radio fame by reading the funnies

on WLS. Almost instantaneously, *Quiz Kids* became a national sensation, with its weekly listenership between ten million and twenty million—almost half the giant audiences that listened to Jack Benny, Bob Hope, and Red Skelton.

Virtually every Sunday afternoon for over two years, I listened to *Quiz Kids* hoping that somehow I might get on the program and win a war bond. Stoking this hope was the fact that one of the show's producers, Ed Simmons, lived in the apartment house next to our bungalow. Finally, because of a successful audition or because of Ed Simmons's influence, I became a fourteen-year-old Quiz Kid in the fall of 1942. My first two appearances went well, with lots of questions suited to my expertise. But my third time on, I was up against an eight-year-old called Ruth Duskin and a battery of questions on the Bible and Shakespeare dominating the thirty-minute horror. I had never been encouraged to know the plots of Shakespeare, and my early Catholic upbringing had furthermore shielded me from any knowledge of the Old Testament. So it was virtually preordained that I would not be one of the three contestants to come back for the next program. When we went home I bitterly felt the want of encyclopedic knowledge and quick wits needed for semipermanence as a Quiz Kid. But I was nevertheless three defense bonds richer. Later these were used to purchase a pair of 7 × 50 Bausch and Lomb binoculars to replace the ancient pair my father had used as a birder in his youth.



*As a Quiz Kid in 1942, second from the left, doomed by my lack of familiarity with the Bible and Shakespeare*

By then I was a sophomore at the newly built South Shore High School. I continued as a largely S (superior) student, though I encountered much more competition than I had at Horace Mann. There was a great Latin teacher, Miss Kinney, who sent me off to the state Latin exams with the more stellar student Marilyn Weintraub, on whom I had a slight crush that no one ever knew

