

Work brings out again crucial conversation and collaboration were is most talkative scientists

Unveiling of the molecule
density. The union of structure
function then revealed has
an astonishing rightness.
Anyone with an interest in
it, it requires a real effort to
see a time when DNA was
a thing of beauty at the heart
of the cell, its intertwined strands
and it immediately clear how
information is preserved and
passed through the self-
replication of a single,
molecule. Yet it is less
a lifetime ago that this
is a fact about life on Earth
is known.

It is not able to tell us much
new about what motivated
his relentless achievement, and
his later work on the code,
his consciousness. Watson
had his eye on the Nobel;
and other concerns. Watson
in his memoir how his
burst into the Eagle pub
at Cambridge telling lunchtime
stories they had discovered the
secret of life. Crick had no such
ambition, but if he did say this
would have been with a touch of
humour. Crick believed there *was*
a secret, and abhorred vitalism,
the doctrine that there is some
divine principle responsible
for all things living matter can do
with sticks and stones cannot. And
with death it all was his impa-
tience with religion. Materialism
can explain life, and then the
idea of God was an unneces-
sary superstition. This conviction

arose when Crick was still a
schoolboy, and stayed with him
until the end. Olby ponders its
origins, but does not get much
further than others before him.
It seems the God hypothesis just
made no sense.

Other more personal aspects
get less generous treatment. His
subject's liking for extramarital
adventures is mentioned in
passing; his occasional use of
marijuana and LSD is treated
even more incidentally. Ridley
has more to say about the latter
in his slimmer volume – not out
of prurience but because it seems
an interesting thing to know
about such a creative thinker. But
Olby relates the scientific life
with great skill, and has more
space for key experiments and
arguments. His book is an
essential complement to other
historians' recent studies of the
great days of molecular biology.

It also, though, brings out
again how crucial conversation
and collaboration were for this
most talkative of scientists. His
closest work was with Watson,
then Sydney Brenner, Leslie Orgel
and – in neuroscience – Christof
Koch. That conversational
quality, for me, still comes
across best in *The Eighth Day
of Creation: Makers of the
Revolution in Biology*, Horace
Judson's 1979 oral history of
molecular biology, in which all
the key contributors speak at
length. But that book, easier to
admire than emulate, is another
reason to question the value of
the individual scientific biography,
even for an exceptional person
like Crick.

**Jon Turney is senior visiting
fellow in the department of
science and technology studies,
University College London.**

THE AUTHOR



at the University of Leeds.
He is well known as
a historian of 19th- and
20th-century biology,
his special fields being
genetics and molecular
biology.

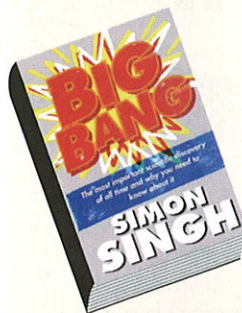
While putting together
this biography, he worked
closely with its subject.
Francis Crick would
send in comments on the
text under the headings:
"Very General Remarks",
"Less General Remarks"

and "Detailed Remarks".
Although the work
was finished before
Crick's death in 2004,
Crick would allow
publication only
posthumously.

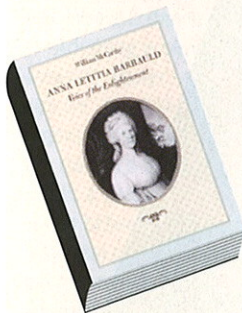
Olby has also
interviewed other
eminent scientists
including Crick's scientific
partner, James D. Watson,
crystallographer John
Desmond Bernal and
chemist Sir Aaron Klug.

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

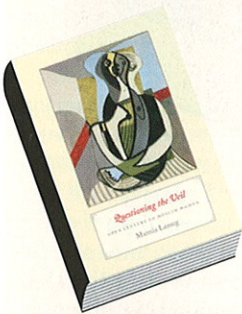
A weekly look over the shoulders of our scholar-reviewers



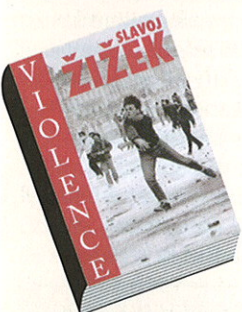
Alan Gilmore is superintendent, Mt John Observatory, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. "I have just finished Simon Singh's **Big Bang** (HarperCollins, 2005), having enjoyed *The Code Book* (HarperCollins, 2000) and *Trick or Treatment?* (TransWorld, 2009), a demolition of the alternative medicine racket written with Edzard Ernst. *Big Bang* covers cosmology, from the Greek philosophers to the Wilkinson-MAP satellite, all in the chatty style of Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Singh provides many fascinating biographical details of the scientists involved."



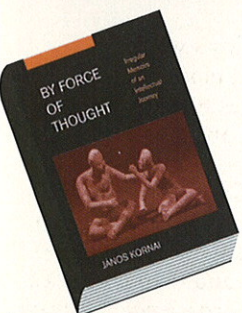
Isobel Grundy is professor emeritus, department of English, University of Alberta, and project co-investigator of the online Cambridge University Press journal *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*. "Needing to read William McCarthy's **Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) so as to update *Orlando's* Barbauld entry, I was instantly hooked. She campaigned for so much we take for granted: abolition of slavery, civil rights for minority religions, teaching English in schools. Reformers worshipped her, reactionaries hated her. A biography to relish and remember."



June Purvis is professor of women's and gender history, University of Portsmouth. "I am reading **Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women** by Marnia Lazreg (Princeton University Press, 2009). A highly readable, moving book, based on the experiences of Muslim women, it is the most lucid argument I know for doing away with the veil."



Nigel Rodenhurst, an Arts and Humanities Research Council studentship-funded doctoral candidate at Aberystwyth University, is reading **Violence** by Slavoj Žižek (Profile, 2009). "Looking at different types of violence in society, Žižek is as engaging, digressional and confrontational as ever. He manages to pack in a reference to a different philosopher or event on almost every page, from Homer to Badiou, from the Holocaust to a masturbathon, while continuing to be illuminating and serious."



Richard Rose, director of the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Aberdeen, is reading **By Force of Thought** (MIT Press, 2007), by János Kornai. "After escaping the Holocaust, although he was a German Jew in wartime Budapest, and spending ten years as a party warrior for Marxism, Kornai concluded that he would never write anything unless he thought it out from first principles that could be applied to real-world situations, like the pathologies of the planned economy. The book explains why he became a Harvard professor of economics *because* he had never taken a degree in economics."

Olby is research
or in the
ment of history
philosophy of
at the University
burgh. Before
was based at