

Brief Report**James Watson And His ‘The Double Helix’ Memoir: My Personal Reflections**¹**Sachi Sri Kantha**¹*Nagoya City University Graduate School of Medical Sciences, Mizuho cho, Mizuho ku, Nagoya 467-8601, Japan.***Abstract**

Since the publication of Anne Sayre’s biography on x-ray crystallographer Rosalind Franklin (1920-1958) in 1975, recently deceased James Dewey Watson (1928-2025) had generated an image of negative, unfriendly, male chauvinist type of scientist. However, in my personal interaction with him in 2011 and 2012, I found him as a person blessed with humility and helping mind to younger generation of scientists. In this appreciation, I present this side of Watson’s character.

Key words

Rosalind Franklin, humor, memoir, James Watson

Introduction

The death of James Dewey Watson on November 6, 2025, at the age of 97, was a saddening event to biomedical community at large, including me. Though Watson’s stars had dimmed during the past 15 years or so, due to politically unacceptable public statements on the intelligence of a segment of humanity, that he was a pioneer trend-setting scientist in the second half of 20th century, a great scientist writer, fund raiser for grand scientific projects and an institution builder in USA deserve recognition.

That Watson generated a negative, unfriendly, male chauvinist type of scientist, as portrayed by Anne Sayre (first biographer of chemist Rosalind Franklin in 1975) is a fact (1) Even Erwin Chargaff (1905-2002), a senior contemporary biochemist, whose empirical finding of base pairing was a vital clue to the elucidation of the double helical model of DNA, also wrote about Watson’s self-assertiveness as ‘practising biology without license’. But, in my personal experience of soliciting assistance and answering a query (during 2011 and

2012), I found Watson had humility and helping mind to a scientist who belonged to the next generation of scientists. It may well be that, Watson (and Francis Crick) treated Ms Franklin as one of their chief rivals in the race to elucidate the double helical structure of DNA during 1952-1953 and Watson treated her with nastiness, in his ‘*The Double Helix*’ memoir of 1968, he certainly showed maturity, humility and kindness to my reasonable requests. I provide specific details of these interactions below.

A Query to Watson in 2011

In 2011, I was re-reading Watson’s memoir ‘*The Double Helix*’ (1968) of his postdoctoral days in Cambridge, England. At that time, I was preparing a review on the role played by scientific paper reprints in communication among scientists. In chapter 16 of his book, Watson had described how he brought the paper of John Desmond Bernal and Issidore Fankuchen on tobacco mosaic virus (TMV), published in the *Journal of General Physiology*. I was intrigued by the sentence he had written, “Excitedly I pilfered Bernal’s and Fankuchen’s paper from the Philosophical Library and brought it up to the lab so that Francis [Crick] could inspect the TMV’s x-ray picture.” I thought, why not check it directly with Watson himself; so, I sent him an email to his secretary on April 18, 2011. Though Watson had gained an image of a brash personality, I was pleased that he responded to my query forthrightly with an email, dated June 10, 2011 (Fig. 1)

Watson had replied:

“Dear Sachi Sri Kantha,

Memories of filching the journal containing the Bernal and Fankuchen TMV paper from the Philosophical Li-

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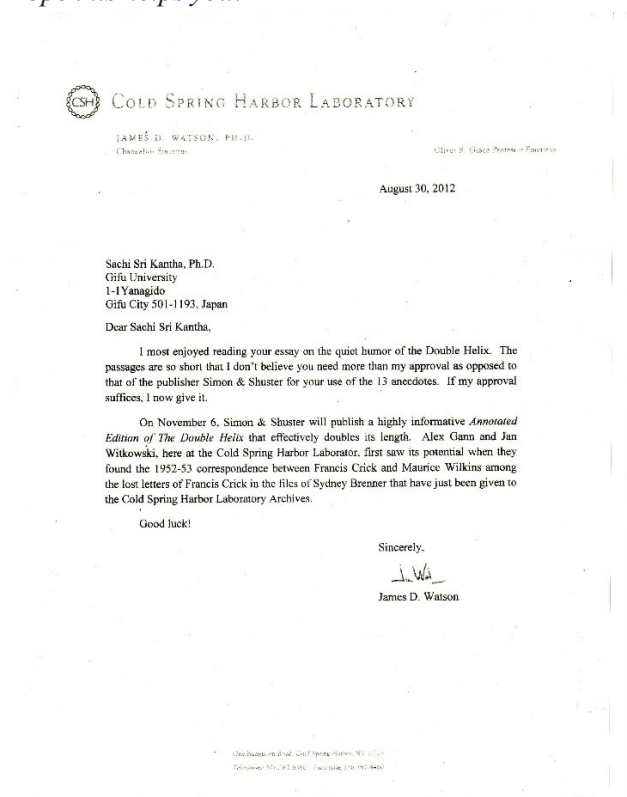
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brary no longer exist in my brain. By pilfering I suspect I meant temporarily removing it without permission. I must have later returned it again without its librarian's notice.

Hope this helps you!"



A Request to Watson in 2012

In 2012, as I was teaching 'Scientific English' to undergrad and graduate students at the Gifu University, I became interested in writing an essay on the self-deprecating humor sprinkled in Watson's memoir. I chose 13 such episodes included in the book and prepared a 'Historical Notes' submission to the *Current Science* (Bangalore) fortnightly journal. Before submission of this manuscript, I sent a pre-publication copy for Watson's reading by air mail, with a cover letter requesting permission for direct quotes from his book. I reproduce below, my May 24, 2012 letter to him.

"Dear Dr. Watson:

Greetings from Gifu University, Japan. To felicitate the golden jubilee anniversary of the 1962 Nobel award for medicine/physiology, jointly awarded to you, Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins, I have prepared a manuscript entitled, 'Self-deprecating humor in James Watson's 'The Double Helix' (1968) memoir.' A copy of the same, I'm attaching herewith.

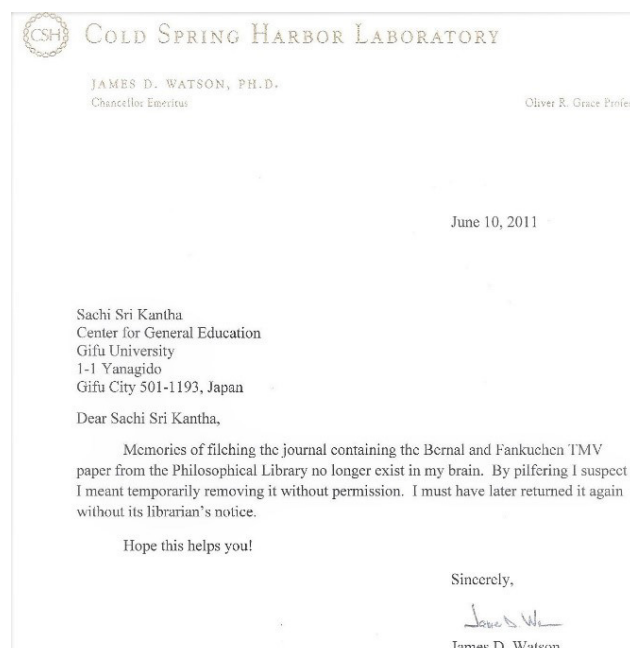
I have included 13 anecdotes from your memoir in the text, The total word count comes to 921. I plan to submit this manuscript for publication in the *Current Science* (Bangalore) journal in its 'Historical Notes' section. I would appreciate if you can kindly give me permission to quote these 13 anecdotes from your book. Considering the total number of words (2,884) in the prepared text, I believe that the total word count (921) of the 13 anecdotes may exceed the 'fair use' limit. Hence, this polite request. The 'Historical Notes' section of this journal is of educational value to younger generation of students whose native language is not English. I would appreciate hearing from you at the earliest. You can feel free to contact me via email provided at the top. Thanks in advance for the courtesy."

Watson didn't disappoint me. He did reply with an email on August 30, 2012 (Fig. 2). Excerpts of his response were:

"Dear Sachi Sri Kantha,

I most enjoyed reading your essay on the quiet humor of the Double Helix. The passages are so short that I don't believe you need more than my approval as opposed to that of the publisher Simon & Shuster for your use of the 13 anecdotes. If my approval suffices, I now give it... Good luck!"

Subsequently, I forwarded this email to Dr P. Balaram, the editor of *Current Science*. As Watson himself had given consent, my manuscript was promptly accepted for publication (2).



Conclusion

In the following years, I was able to pluck few more 'gems' from this Watson memoir and his co-authored seminal papers with Francis Crick and present his thoughts to younger generation of scientists via (3-6). I was able to infer that like many great scientists, Watson had his share of talents as well as faults. But, being a misogynist is not one of these faults (5).

Acknowledgments

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