

BOOKS

“The ability to deal with people is as purchasable a commodity. . . I will pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun.” —JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER

FIVE BEST ON CHIEF EXECUTIVES



Tevi Troy

The author, most recently, of ‘The Power and the Money: The Epic Clashes Between Commanders in Chief and Titans of Industry’

Titan
By Ron Chernow (1998)

John D. Rockefeller built an oil empire by having a singular and relentless focus: “his business.” So observes Ron Chernow in “Titan.” Although Rockefeller’s drive brought him immense wealth, he made the mistake of neglecting his growing unpopularity with the public, becoming a figure who “stood high on the list of bogeymen regularly berated by Populists.” That became a problem when trust-busting President Theodore Roosevelt targeted Rockefeller’s Standard Oil early in the 20th century. As government threats to his business multiplied, Rockefeller changed tack and began presenting a friendlier face to the world. In retirement, he tried to reinvent himself as a golfer and philanthropist. During the Panic of 1907, Rockefeller helped the U.S. stave off financial disaster while playing his daily round at his Hudson Valley estate in Pocantico Hills, N.Y. “Reporters spilled onto the golf course at Pocantico. When asked if he would *really* give half his securities to stop the panic, Rockefeller replied, ‘Yes, and I have cords of them, gentlemen, cords of them.’ ”

Henry Ford
By Vincent Curcio (2013)

Henry Ford came up with a car so popular that he himself became a celebrity. According to Vincent Curcio’s biography, “no other figure of the 1920s, aside from Calvin Coolidge, who was president for six years, received as much newspaper coverage as Henry Ford in the United States.” Ford was a ravenous acquirer of Americana and displayed much of his collection at a Dearborn, Mich., compound that included a museum he initially named after the inventor—and his friend—Thomas Edison. In 1929, President Herbert Hoover attended a dedication ceremony for the Edison Institute of Technology among guests such as Marie Curie, Orville Wright, Will Rogers and Walter Chrysler. Ford ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 1918 and later contemplated a White House bid. But elected office proved elusive, in part because he was a poor public speaker. Edison at one point chided his friend for his political aspirations: “What do you want to do that for? You can’t speak. You wouldn’t say a damn word. You’d be mum.”



DRIVER’S SEAT Lee A. Iacocca in his office at Ford Motor Co., 1974.

Mr. and Mrs. Hollywood
By Kathleen Sharp (2003)

Hollywood über-agent and studio chief Lew Wasserman went out of his way to avoid publicity and urged his subordinates to do the same. “No interviews. No panels. No speeches,” he exhorted. “Stay out of the spotlight. It fades your suit.” In her double biography of Wasserman and his wife, Edie, Kathleen Sharp charts how Wasserman, with Edie’s help, ascended from his modest upbringing in Cleveland to MCA agent to agency head and then leader of Universal Studios. Wasserman wasn’t dazzled by actors but assiduously courted politicians. For Edie’s 50th birthday in 1965, he hosted scads of movie stars—and raised eyebrows for inviting Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, brother of the slain president, to the party. Wasserman’s fame enhanced his power. As the writer Dominick Dunne observed after

Wasserman cozied up to Bill Clinton, then an unknown Arkansas governor, “Edie and Lew could smell power, whether it was in Hollywood, Washington, or Arkansas.”

Iacocca
By Lee Iacocca and William Novak (1984)

In the 1980s, Chrysler chief executive Lee Iacocca was a familiar face across America, appearing in car commercials and even making a cameo on the television series “Miami Vice.” In the memoir he co-authored with William Novak, Iacocca lamented his fame’s attendant loss of privacy. Initially reluctant to hawk cars on TV, he had to be talked into it by Chrysler’s advertising agency. “There was only one aspect of all this that appealed to me,” Iacocca writes of the spots. “Unlike some of the spokesmen we had used in the past, I work cheap.

Once I did 108 takes in about 10 hours, and all I got for it was a corned beef sandwich and a cup of coffee!” Iacocca became so famous that there was even a plan for new commercials with a Lee Iacocca Muppet, which the crew tested in front of sample audiences before airing. “The audiences thought the commercials were fun but too cute. Thank God for that,” Iacocca writes. His TV appearances stoked misguided speculation that the Chrysler CEO harbored presidential ambitions. “Many people now think I’m an actor. But that’s ridiculous,” he writes. “Everybody knows that being an actor doesn’t qualify you to be president!”

Atlas Shrugged
By Ayn Rand (1957)

“Who is John Galt?” After this first line of “Atlas Shrugged,” novelist Ayn Rand has her characters ask

the question more than two dozen times. The query indicates how well-known Galt’s name is in Rand’s fictional universe. At some point, the reader learns that there actually is a character named John Galt. He is not only the biggest chief executive of all time but the CEO of all CEOs. He is the one who “would stop the motor of the world” by getting the world’s great industrialists to quit in protest of a collectivist government that is taking away their work product and destroying people’s innovative spirit. Galt assembles his “men of the mind” in Galt’s Gulch, an isolated valley where they can live in a place where their talents are rewarded as they deserve to be. Then he delivers an epic address—“This is John Galt speaking”—that goes on for more than 30,000 words. Everyone has to listen because he has taken over the airwaves. Galt may be fictional, but in this Randian world, he is the most universally known CEO of all time.

This Tale Starts With DNA

The Genetic Book of the Dead
By Richard Dawkins
Yale, 360 pages, \$35

By ADRIAN WOOLFSON

ON THE EVENING of Jan. 27, 1922, Franz Kafka arrived by horse-drawn sleigh at the mountain resort of Spindlermühle, in present-day Czech Republic, and immediately began working on what would be his final novel, “Das Schloss” (“The Castle”). Almost two-and-a-half years later, on June 3, 1924, Kafka would die of complications related to tuberculosis before his book could be completed; it ends midsentence on page 275. In his intellectually sparkling and beautifully crafted “The Genetic Book of the Dead: A Darwinian Reverie,” Richard Dawkins argues that, unlike the unfinished works of human literature—specific, deliberate—the genetic manuscript encoding the informational details of human beings was not crafted by a conscious being or Creator, but by a Darwinian process of evolution by natural selection. Like “The Castle,” the human genome is an unfinished work, its current state representing a snapshot, a moment of transience and transition that lacks

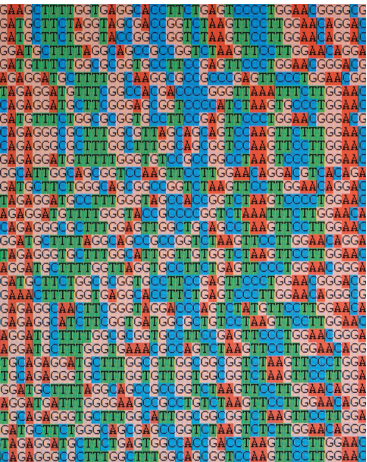
the completeness of a destination. Unlike a novel, however, the genome is a project of continuous revision, locked in a Nietzschean state of perpetual becoming. It is a process that may often be whimsical and capricious. As such we have lyre birds that can mimic car alarms, chainsaws and supposedly even the distinct sounds of “Nikon versus Canon camera shutters,” and octopuses that have “perfected the art of dynamic cross-dressing.” It is also possible, Mr. Dawkins intriguingly speculates, that bats may “hear in color.” The author reminds us that Darwinian authorship has no purpose, directionality or preconception of its end products. A very different type of evolutionary narrative could just as well have substituted for the existing one. Evolution is guided, instead, by a pragmatic mandate to opportunistically utilize the best available options. This lack of foresight, we are told, is nowhere more evident than in cancer cells, whose growth advantage over healthy cells results in a pyrrhic victory that paradoxically accelerates their demise. In an earlier work, Mr. Dawkins likened the mindless and causally distinct efforts of the natural selection process to the handiwork of a “blind watchmaker,” an analogy for evolution’s best-guess forecasting of the kind of adaptations a species may require to survive. The success of these strategies, of course, depends on the notion that what happened yesterday is a good predictor of what is likely to happen tomorrow. But while human authors may effortlessly delete and rewrite text, evolution, Mr. Dawkins reminds us, does not have

such luxuries. Instead of wiping the slate clean and restarting, it is compelled to overwrite pre-existing genetic text, tinkering with its letters, sentences and paragraphs, and reshuffling them rather than reimagining their configuration. A consequence of this is that bad design may become awkwardly cemented alongside optimal features. Mr. Dawkins cites the back-to-front configuration of the human retina as an example and recalls Hermann von

The history of life can be seen as an unfinished novel. Revisions can be surprising and dramatic.

Helmholtz, the 19th-century German scientist who stated that if the human eye had been made by an engineer, he “would have sent it back.” Genetically encoded information is supplemented by information acquired through development, learning and culture. Mr. Dawkins describes the various levels of informational overwriting within and beyond genomes as “evolutionary palimpsests,” and considers cultural artifacts to be examples of the “extended phenotype” of our being. He also reminds us that, at the genetic level, evolution remains deeply historical and referential. While Kafka’s arrival in Spindlermühle was captured in a black-and-white photograph that anticipates the dark mood of his unfinished novel, organisms lack such direct records of the environ-

ments in which they originated. Mr. Dawkins suggests that we may one day be able to “read” the complex information lurking beyond the primary sequences of genomes, much like a QR code. This might allow for the reconstruction of the ancient environments in which a species was forged,



UNALIGNED A computer image of DNA base sequences.

the “scanner” in this case being a mathematical process—such as the deep learning of artificial intelligence—that may unleash the muted voices of our ancestors. Genomes and the organisms they compute are in this sense a photographic negative from which prints of ancient worlds may be inferred. With regard to our own ignominious origins, Mr. Dawkins reminds us that a substantial proportion of our genetic material is made from bugs and viruses. Much of our genome is constructed from remnant sequences reflecting ancient viral infections. Fur-

thermore, the number of bacterial cells associated with the human body outnumbered our own by a factor of at least two. Even the genomes of our energy-producing mitochondria originated from bacteria. Our bodies are a vehicle for their survival. The fabric through which Mr. Dawkins weaves his ideas is predicated on his unwavering gene’s-eye view of evolution that challenges a species-centric perspective. He views the genetic “cartels” of cooperating, protein-encoding genes as the irreducible, causal agents of natural selection. This idea was first popularized in his 1976 book, “The Selfish Gene,” which built on the ideas of the biologist W.D. Hamilton as articulated in Hamilton’s 1971 paper, “Geometry for the Selfish Herd.” Given that we now know that most of the human genome is transcribed into RNA, the protein-encoding definition of genes may need revisiting. And why restrict the unit of selection to genes at the expense of the non-coding regulatory sequences controlling their expression? Alterations to even single genetic letters may impact gene function. The final irony of Darwinian evolution may be that the same cooperating set of genes that helped build the human imagination is currently inventing technologies capable of seamlessly designing and synthesizing genomes *de novo*. Like cancer cells, our selfish DNA replicator fragments may unwittingly have created the basis for writing themselves out of history.

Mr. Woolfson is the author of “An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Genetics.”