



"Intuition"
by Allegra Goodman
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Novelists, playwrights and poets are increasingly attracted by scientific themes — C. P. Snow's lament about the "Two Cultures" notwithstanding — but attempts at authentic literary portrayals of scientific practice are still rare. Perhaps this is not so surprising; after all, how easy is it to construct a gripping tale out of cleaning glassware and tending to lab rats? In light of the central and pervasive role of science in contemporary society, though, it would be nice to see more authors taking on that challenge. (See the website LabLit.com, which is "dedicated to real laboratory culture and to the portrayal and perceptions of that culture – science, scientists and labs – in fiction, the media and across popular culture.")

Allegra Goodman's novel *Intuition* is a significant recent contribution to this genre. It tells the story of a research group led by two senior scientists, Sandy Glass and Marion Mendelssohn, at the fictional Philpott Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and consisting of a number of postdocs (among whom Cliff and Robin play the most important dramatic roles) and technicians. Goodman spent a good deal of time talking with and observing researchers at the Whitehead Institute, and it shows: the book does a good job of depicting the quotidian routine of a research lab, the small triumphs and frustrations its members regularly encounter, and the relationships and interactions between them.

Furthermore, Goodman does her best to portray all her characters as "real people" (as opposed to the myth of impersonal scientific researchers) with multiple motivations. I found this aspect much less successful, but that is largely a matter of personal literary taste. I do not care to be *told*, rather than *shown*,

what the characters are like, and how we are supposed to think about them. From the very beginning I repeatedly encountered passages — for example, that Marion is “fearsome, implacable, dark eyes glowering” while Sandy is “always cheerful, brimming with the irrepressible joy of his own intelligence” — that made my heart sink. But those who do not object to this style will probably find the book an enjoyable and entertaining read.

The plot is also entertaining, as well as timely and interesting. It concerns a case of possible fraud: Cliff has discovered a viral treatment which appears to make tumors disappear in mice; urged on by aggressive Sandy, the group goes public at an early stage, attracting intense worldwide interest; but Robin, who is assigned to drop her own work and follow up on Cliff’s, cannot reproduce his findings. She begins to suspect dishonesty, eventually taking her concerns outside the lab, and a major brouhaha erupts.

Goodman appropriately tries to highlight the ambiguities inherent in such conflicts, but her effort is problematic, for two main reasons. First, almost no scientific details are provided (for which the author, not a scientist, can certainly be partially excused); it is never clear just what is under dispute. The obvious question is whether or not Cliff deliberately cheated; but since Goodman writes from an omniscient point of view, and puts us inside his head throughout, it is hard to see that this *is* an open question (shades of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd?*). Unless one deliberately suspends close consideration, this narrative line does not hold together at all well.

A much more serious problem with the plot arises from the evolution of the public controversy, which proceeds roughly as follows: after getting no sympathy from coworkers and colleagues, Robin goes to a disgruntled ex-member of the Glass/Mendelsohn group, who passes her suspicions along to two self-anointed fraudbusters at the “Office for Research Integrity in Science” of the NIH, who launch a full-blown investigation that attracts the attention of a powerful, abrasive Congressman, who summons the group to a hearing....

Does this begin to sound familiar? It should: these developments (and many others) closely track those of the Imanishi-Kari/O’Toole conflict from the 1980s, well documented by former Caltech historian of science Dan Kevles in his 1998 book *The Baltimore Case*. Borrowing from real life is of course common practice, but the book contains the usual disclaimer: “....Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.” Expecting us to believe *that* is asking far too much of coincidence; nor is there any mention of any precedent or sources in the acknowledgments. It is ironic, and more than a little disappointing, that in exploring the subject of intellectual misconduct, the author might be charged with having committed a pretty good dose of it on her own part.