



**In the Bookstores . . .
Pride and Pressure to Publish:
The Baltimore Affair**

by Karen Shashok

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Daniel J. Kevles. The Baltimore Case. A Trial of Politics, Science, and Character. New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1998. ISBN 0 393 04103 4

Judy Sarasohn. Science on Trial. The Whistle-blower, the Accused, and the Nobel Laureate. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. ISBN 0 312 09247 4

These books recount the epic story of an uncooperative lab director with communication problems; a disenfranchised and disillusioned whistleblower with a mission; a world-renowned but obstinate scientist; a powerful congressman with a mandate to ensure that the taxpayer's money is used responsibly; a duo of unofficial but intellectually well-armed and ethically uncompromising investigators; confused university officials torn between concerns about fairness on one hand and possible damage to their institution's reputation on the other; government officials more preoccupied with in-fighting and advancing their own careers than with their investigative duties; aggressive and unscrupulous Washington lawyers; friends, enemies, colleagues, emotions, loyalties, moral obligations and self-interest. All characters in this very human story were convinced that their motives were honorable; all were under pressure to protect their own reputations in the eyes of different peer communities and constituencies; and all made serious mistakes.

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Both books attempt to trace the full story about the Baltimore affair (also known as the Imanishi-Kari affair) and place the events into perspective for those who require a more cool-headed view than what was provided from contemporaneous reports of the controversy. And fortunately, each book concludes with a well-constructed index that makes it easy to locate specific information. One book (Kevles) has been reviewed in prominent journals [1-3], whereas the other has received much less attention.

Daniel J. Kevles, a historian of science at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), has produced a book that has been cited as the definitive study, and as conclusive evidence of the dangers of government interference in the ethical oversight of the research process [4]. His seventeen-chapter study is accompanied by a glossary of technical terms and of source abbreviations, copious endnotes, and an essay on sources. He goes into great detail on the errors made by the Office of Science Integrity (OSI) (now the Office of Research Integrity, ORI) and the Secret Service in their

The Write Stuff

analyses of the evidence against Imanishi-Kari, and attacks congressman John Dingell and his staff for being overly concerned with teaching arrogant scientists that they are

obliged to use public money with utmost responsibility. However, he also shows that the initial investigations carried out at the coauthors' and whistleblower's universities were marred by disinterest, lack of experience, and institutional rivalry between competing centers.

Kevles's book is filled with references that reflect his careful historiographic methods of investigation. However, many references are to his own notes on telephone conversations held with the persons involved in the case. This raises the possibility that some unconscious recall bias may have influenced both their account of past events and his reporting of these interviews. Moreover, as he admits in the preface (p. 12), he "eventually became persuaded that Imanishi-Kari was innocent of the charges against her", his conviction being reinforced by her much-delayed official exculpation, and by Baltimore's re-entry into public life as President of Caltech, where the author has been a member of the faculty for more than thirty years. So it appears the author had a mission in writing this book. That mission was not to discover the truth about the original publication in *Cell* [5] that caused the controversy, but to rehabilitate Baltimore and present him as a martyr to politically-motivated, incompetent government meddling in the subtleties of scientific research. The writing is consistently slanted in favour of

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Baltimore, and against whistleblower O'Toole, congressman Dingell, unofficial fraudbusters Stewart and Feder, and indeed all other players perceived by the author to be determined to bring his hero down.

Kevles thus combines his skills as a historian with a well-stocked arsenal of rhetorical devices

to lead the reader to the conclusion that Baltimore was treated unfairly by his professional adversaries, the lay press, and the US government. And he succeeded in convincing at least one book reviewer and journal editor that his view of the story is the only one worth believing: Steele's book review in *Nature Medicine* reflects the triumphant tone with which the scientific community celebrated Imanishi-Kari's official exculpation as proof that the government has no business trying to regulate the ethical conduct of research [2].

Judy Sarasohn, a Washington journalist, states in her acknowledgements (p. ix) that she set out to write "a story of human frailties and strengths for a broad audience", rather than to try to attempt to judge who was right and who was wrong. She notes that "Many scientists had not bothered to, or did not want to, look at the actual paper and allegations in dispute, and their feelings about the controversy were so raw that they did not believe other scientists could be objective". This is a key point: the controversy became so heated that legitimate questions about the data in the paper were almost forgotten in the battle to save Baltimore's reputation, and to keep the government out of the laboratories. But much of her information is based on personal interviews with the players, so again, readers need to be cautious. Perhaps the main difference in comparison with Kevles is that Sarasohn points out how Baltimore's position regarding the flawed data in the paper, Imanishi-Kari's role in producing them, and O'Toole's motives in denouncing them, changed radically as the investigation proceeded. Sarasohn divides her analysis into nineteen chapters, followed by detailed notes on sources.

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Both books do an excellent job of presenting the immunological findings initially reported (then retracted, then unretracted) in the original *Cell* article, and of providing possible interpretations of their significance. Regardless of whether readers prefer the dense documentary tone used by Kevles or Sarasohn's true-to-life scientific drama style, all will appreciate both authors' careful dissection of the facts about the original data. Neither author disguises the fact that the dispute between coauthors and the whistleblower went beyond mere differences in interpretation, and eventually turned on serious (and entirely justified) doubts as to the accuracy of some of the data. In fact, the appeals panel of the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), in its final decision, noted that "The *Cell* paper as a whole is rife with errors of all sorts... [including] some which, despite all these years and layers of review, have never been previously pointed out or corrected" [6].

One can't help but wonder why these errors were not detected by the journal's peer reviewers. The moral of this long and troublesome story for researchers is "Keep accurate lab notebooks, and discuss the data with all coauthors and colleagues whose unpublished observations are cited, before submitting the manuscript". If Imanishi-Kari had followed the first piece of advice, and if Baltimore had been more conscientious in following the second, the whole affair would probably not have happened.

What about the problem that triggered the controversy in the first place? Should those data have been published? How did a paper with misinterpretation of the data, serious errors, and internal inconsistencies get into print in a prestigious journal? On the basis of the information Kevles and Sarasohn have given us, it is wrong to conclude that the allegations O'Toole brought against her superiors were "spurious", as remarked in a Commentary published in July 1999 in the *Lancet* [4]. What role can and should EMWA members play, in their various cultural and professional settings, to guarantee that material that comes into their hands complies with current guidelines for the ethical performance of research? As government and transnational agencies throughout the world continue to struggle to reach an acceptable definition of misconduct [7], those of us who do not produce data but are nonetheless responsible for their dissemination are sometimes caught in a dilemma. Policies that guide institutional approval for the publication of information need to be developed with input not only from the creators of new knowledge, but also from those who place this knowledge in the form in which it will ultimately be consumed.

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Related websites

www.chem.vt.edu/ethics/vinny/ethxonline. On-Line Science Ethics Resources, with links to just about everything pertaining to scientific ethics in the USA up to July 1997, when the site was last updated.

http://ori.dhhs.gov. This Department of Health and Human Services site contains the text of the reformed procedures for investigating allegations of research misconduct. Note that the Office of Research Integrity will no longer be responsible for investigating allegations of misconduct, but will provide "oversight and onsite technical assistance." Investigations are now to be carried out by the Inspector-General of the DHHS [8].

www.hms.harvard.edu/dms/cos/guenin.html Commentary by Louis M. Guenin on the new definition of research misconduct proposed by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

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For More Information . . .

Readers wishing more information on the subject of ethics in science research would do well to check out:

**The Online Ethics Center for Engineering and
Science
www.onlineethics.org**

There is not too much of a purely writing nature, but there are discussions of plagiarism, authorship, and conflict of interest.