

"Noble Science, Nobel Lust:" Noted scientist to share 'tribal secrets'

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Dr. Carl Djerassi, who describes himself as a "scientific tribesman for over four decades," will share his "tribal secrets" - the unspoken rules that govern scientists' behavior - during the third annual Samuel R. Scholes Jr. Lecture at Alfred University. "Noble Science, Nobel Lust: Disclosing Tribal Secrets" is the title of Djerassi's talk, scheduled for 8 p.m. April 17 in Nevins Theatre, Powell Campus Center, on the Alfred University campus. Djerassi is a Stanford University chemistry professor who led the team that synthesized the first oral contraceptive, leading him to be called the "Father of the Pill." "Scientists operate within a very tribal culture whose rules, mores and idiosyncrasies are generally not communicated through specific lectures or books, but rather are acquired through a form of intellectual osmosis in a mentor-disciple relationship," Djerassi will argue in his lecture. "Scientific 'street smarts' - in some respects the soul and baggage of contemporary scientific behavior - are absorbed by observing the mentor's self-interested concerns with publication practices and priorities, the order of the authors, the choice of the journal, the striving for academic tenure, grantsmanship, Schadenfreude - even Nobel lust. "On their own, budding scientists discover the glass ceiling for women in a male-dominated enterprise, the inherent collegiality of scientific research, and the concurrent brutal competition," Djerassi explains. "Most of these issues are related to the desire for personal recognition and even financial rewards, and each is colored by ethical nuances." Djerassi is one of the few American scientists to have been awarded both the National Medal of Science, for the synthesis of a steroid oral contraceptive, "The Pill", and the National Medal of Technology, for promoting new approaches to insect control. A member of the US National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has been awarded 18 honorary degrees and has received numerous other honors, including the first Wolf Prize in Chemistry, the first Award for the Industrial Application of Science from the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Chemical Society's highest award, the Priestly Medal. His scientific and academic successes would qualify Djerassi as a tribal chief, but for the past decade, he's been seeking the role of shaman, turning to fiction writing, mostly in the genre of what he calls "science-in-fiction," versus "science fiction." His novels illustrate, in the guise of realistic fiction, the human side of scientists and the personal conflicts faced by scientists in their quest for scientific knowledge, personal recognition, and financial rewards. In addition to five novels - Cantor's Dilemma; The Bourbaki Gambit; Marx, Deceased; Menachem's Seed and NO - he has written a number of short stories and an autobiography, The Pill, Pygmy Chimps and Degas' Horse. His most recent project is a trilogy of "science-in-theater" plays. The first, An Immaculate Conception, premiered at the 1998 Edinburgh Fringe Festival and subsequently in London, San Francisco, Vienna and Cologne. It was also broadcast by BBC Radio on its World Service in May 2000 as "Play of the Week." The second, OXYGEN, co-authored with Roald Hoffmann, will premiere April 2 at the San Diego Repertory Theatre and will be broadcast by both BBC World Service and the West German Radio in 2001. A radio play adaptation of his novel, The Bourbaki Gambit, was broadcast by West German Radio in June 2000. Each person attending Djerassi's lecture at Alfred University will receive a complimentary copy of one of his books. In addition to his own careers as a scientist, educator and writer, Djerassi is the founder of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program near Woodside, CA, which provides residencies and studio space for artists in the visual arts, literature, choreography and performing arts, and music. More than 1,000 artists have participated in the program since its inception in 1982. Djerassi is married to Diane W. Middlebrook, a writer and professor of English at Stanford University. The Samuel R. Scholes Jr. Lecture was created in 1999 by Dr. Joshua Fierer, a member of Alfred University's Class of 1959, in honor of Dr. Samuel R. Scholes Jr., an emeritus professor of chemistry at Alfred University.