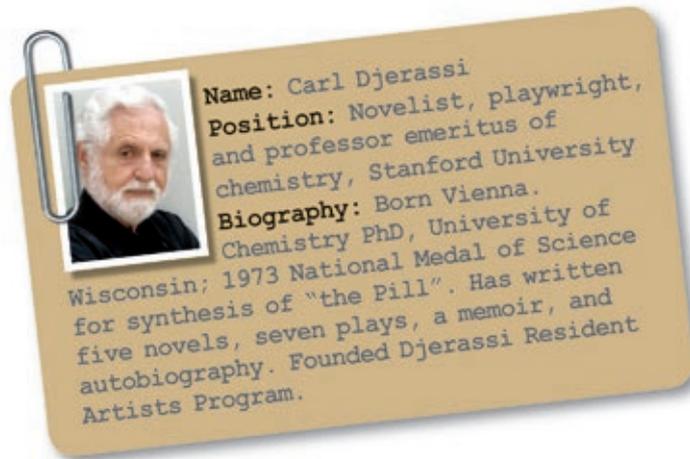




# The pater of pills and plays



Carl Djerassi is credited with developing the contraceptive pill which was recently named as one of the *BMJ's* top 15 medical breakthroughs

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## When did you start writing?

I wrote my first short stories in 1986, when I still had a large research group. I now work seven days a week, writing and giving more lectures than in my professorial career. I always have very different audiences—next week, I'll be addressing philosophers and writers at a Walter Benjamin festival in Berlin, followed by a talk on male contraception at an Austrian congress.

## Was this a career change or another branching of your career as a scientist?

Complete career change. First of all, the mode of working is different; a lab offers real infrastructure and support, whereas writing is totally solitary. Also, the idea of accomplishment is more ambiguous in the arts than in the sciences. I now read and go to the theatre in a different way than I used to, focusing on the mechanics of how plays are structured. I used to read quite a bit of science, but nothing compared to the enormous amount of reading that I have to do now. Looking at the bookshelf, I shudder to think what I have left to read.

## Who was your intended audience when you began to write?

My original purpose was to write for the general public, but

I discovered that I wrote more for young scientists about to embark on their careers. By writing about the behaviour of scientists or the role of women in a male dominated discipline, I'm washing out dirty lab coats in public, which people are uncomfortable with. There's a major autobiographical, or auto-psychoanalytical, component, in that the behaviour that I describe is also my behaviour. So it's not about "them jerks"; I am writing about a collective mea culpa. It's my way of being self reflective, something I never was as a scientist.

## Do you feel that writing or engaging with the public compromises your legitimacy as a scientist?

My entire decision to write fiction and plays was a great risk, because certainly my scientific colleagues didn't consider it serious work. If I were a younger person still climbing the professional ladder, such work would not get me any brownie points. I was a total autodidact and learnt about the side effects only after practising it. The process of communicating with the public invariably means that you become a sort of showman, for whom publicity becomes important. Even if you have somewhat moderate success, more people know you than otherwise would through

your scientific work. You could say it's either the price or the pleasure you pay. Since I worked in the field of chemistry for 50 years before starting to write, my research had already been judged. In that sense, I don't think my work and image as a scientist have been affected retrospectively.

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## Whose support did you have along the way?

My own. I didn't receive any support from my colleagues. That's the advantage to having started at a later age—you can afford to go for it because you have the arrogance, independence, and self assurance. If I didn't have a lot of that, I would have given this up long ago.

## Are you inspired by any particular writers?

There was a book of Iris Murdoch's, *The Sea, The Sea*, which inspired me when writing my third novel, *Menachem's Seed*. I was impressed how a woman could describe so masterfully the rediscovery of an ageing man's sexuality, and

I wanted to see whether I could insightfully write about the sexuality of an ageing woman. Another writer I admire is David Lodge. Some of his novels do for literature what I try to do for science; while I write about science in fiction, he writes about fiction in fiction.

## Why did you make the shift from writing books to writing plays?

Primarily because I became more interested in the use of dialogue. It presents a more humanising view. In my former incarnation as a scientist, I never used dialogue in written discourse. My current endeavour is by far the most ambitious I have ever tried—I'm writing a book all in dialogue form, a prose docudrama, and ending with a rap that I had

professionally commissioned. I decided just about everything has been done on my subject, Walter Benjamin, except for a rap.

## Do you feel comfortable taking risks?

Oh absolutely. That's what it's all about.

## What advice have you for anyone interested in more than one discipline?

To do exactly that. The first thing you have to do is discover there are 26 hours in a day. You just have to learn how to manage your available time efficiently.

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