



TITLE INFORMATION

THE MYSTERIOUS COMMONPLACE

A Life in Science

Charles DeLisi

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BOOK REVIEW

An acclaimed scientist reflects on his life in research, public policy, and higher education.

"Hollywood movies often present a highly romanticized view of scientists," writes DeLisi in his book's opening lines. Asserting that most scientists do not adhere to the stereotypes of people so dedicated to their research that they never leave the lab or who constantly fight accusations that their cutting-edge theories are quackery, the author observes that most popular accounts of the lives of scientists ignore "the deep satisfaction that comes from being part of a diverse global community" and the lifetime bonds forged among mentors, students, and colleagues. Reflecting on his half-century of working in science, in this memoir DeLisi blends his impressive biography with a deeply personal exploration of the interconnectivity that drives scientific innovation. The narrative begins with his upbringing in the Bronx, where he was raised in a tightknit Italian community by an extended family who took care of him and his mother after his father died. It was during his childhood, shaped both by traumatic loss as well as the support of his relatives, that the author became drawn to scientific curiosities, from the chemistry of wine-making taught to him by his grandfather to the mysteries of the solar system described in a life-changing book that was a part of his third-grade teacher's classroom library. Even after graduating from the City College of New York with a history degree, DeLisi continued to feel the "pull of science," which led to him earning a doctorate degree in physics from New York University and a postdoctoral research fellowship at Yale University. While the book doesn't downplay his achievements or research—including his groundbreaking work in mathematical immunology as a staff scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory and his three decades with Boston University as the Metcalf Professor of Science and Engineering—this is a remarkably humble work that always emphasizes the collaborative nature of the scientific community. Perhaps best known for his central role in initiating the Human Genome Project as director of the U.S. Department of Energy's Health and Environmental Research Programs (DeLisi is a true polymath; public policy is another of his areas of expertise), the author provides an intimate behind-the-scenes story of one of the most groundbreaking scientific endeavors of the last 50 years.

The memoir was originally published in 2021; this updated and expanded edition includes commentary on new advances in genomics and explanatory endnotes detailing scientific concepts for a more general audience. (This emphasis on accessibility is a hallmark of the book and indicative of the patience of an experienced educator who's mentored generations of budding scientists.) Most notably, this second edition features a new chapter on climate change. DeLisi outlines the evidence behind the scientific consensus that the dramatic changes in weather and temperature we're experiencing are largely driven by human activity and offers potential solutions in the form of agricultural genomics and other scientific advancements. The author's engaging text, which features frequent cameos from luminaries in modern science, is supplemented with an assortment of full-color photographs. While science lies at the heart of the work, DeLisi also thoughtfully explores the intersection of science and social change from his time as a college student in the 1960s through his retirement from higher education in the 21st century. A well-crafted memoir recounting the life of a scientific pioneer.

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