

He may have unravelled DNA, but James Watson deserves to be shunned

By [Adam Rutherford](#)

The scientist is crying poverty and selling his Nobel prize medal, but why should anyone be interested in his racist, sexist views?



'James Watson said that while people may like to think that all races are born with equal intelligence, those 'who have to deal with black employees find this not true'.' Photograph: Getty Images

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The great scientist James Watson is to auction his Nobel prize medal. He told the Financial Times this week that following accusations of racism in 2007, "no one really wants to admit I exist", and as a result his income had plummeted and he has become an "unperson".

This sounds awful: an 86-year-old hero ostracised for his views, shooed from public life by the people who walk in his scientific shadow.

But it's not awful. Watson has said that he is "not a racist in a conventional way". But he told the Sunday Times in 2007 that while people may like to think that all races are born with equal intelligence, those "who have to deal with black employees find this not true". Call me old-fashioned, but that sounds like bog-standard, run-of-the-mill racism to me.

And this current whinge bemoans a new poverty born of his pariah status. Apart "from my academic income", he says, Watson is condemned to a miserly wage that prevents him from buying a David Hockney painting.

His comments reveal a pernicious character entirely unrelated to his scientific greatness, but that is longstanding and not new. Watson is rightly venerated for being half of the pair, along with Francis Crick, who discovered the structure of DNA, and for leading the Human Genome Project. The story of the unveiling of the double helix is messy and complex, just like all biology. It has been pored over and studied and embellished and mythologised. But simply, the race was won by Crick and Watson, and in April 1953 they revealed to the world the iconic double helix. The key evidence, however, Photo 51, was produced by Rosalind Franklin and Ray Gosling, at King's College London. Franklin's skill at the technique known as X-ray crystallography was profound, and was indubitably essential to the discovery. Crick and Watson acquired the photo without her knowledge.

With their unique insight and vision, Crick and Watson deserve their Nobel gongs. Contrary to some narratives, Franklin was not overlooked in this accolade. The rules are quite clear: Nobels are not awarded posthumously. Franklin had died from cancer aged just 37, in 1958, four years before the Nobel committee recognised what is undoubtedly one of the most significant scientific advances of the 20th or any century.

With Nobels, we put people on pedestals and gift them platforms to say whatever they like. Here, they represent science, but contrary to stereotype, there isn't a typical scientist. We're just people.

Some Nobel laureates say stupid ignorant things. Most say little beyond their expertise, and some, such as the president of the Royal Society, Paul Nurse, are great leaders and campaigners for science and society.

The first account of the story of DNA was by Watson himself, and reveals his character. Honest Jim is what he wanted to call the book that was published as The

Double Helix in 1968. It is a classic of nonfiction writing, and deservedly so. It is brilliant and racy and gossipy, and full of questionable truths.

He patronisingly refers to Franklin as “Rosy” throughout, despite there being no evidence that anyone else ever did. Here’s a sample of how he described her in the first few pages: “Though her features were strong, she was not unattractive, and might have been quite stunning had she taken even a mild interest in clothes. This she did not.”

Like all contemporary biologists, my career is largely based on his work. The medal? If I could afford it, I wouldn’t want it. My field, human genetics, was founded by another racist, Francis Galton, who sought to demonstrate white British dominance over the colonies using biometrics. He gave birth to eugenics, an endeavour never realised in the UK, but that was broadly supported around the beginning of the 20th century across the political spectrum, from Churchill to Marie Stopes to William Beveridge. His and my alma mater, UCL, is currently thinking hard about how to scold his racism and continue to respect his scientific legacy, which is undeniable and unrivalled. The nicest irony is that genetics – the field he founded and Watson transformed – is precisely the subject that has singularly demonstrated that race as a scientific concept holds no water.

“No one really wants to admit I exist” says Watson. That’s not it. It’s more that no one is interested in his racist, sexist views. Watson, alongside Crick, will always be the discoverer of the double helix, to my mind the scientific breakthrough of the 20th century. Here’s our challenge: celebrate science when it is great, and scientists when they deserve it. And when they turn out to be awful bigots, let’s be honest about that too. It turns out that just like DNA, people are messy, complex and sometimes full of hideous errors.