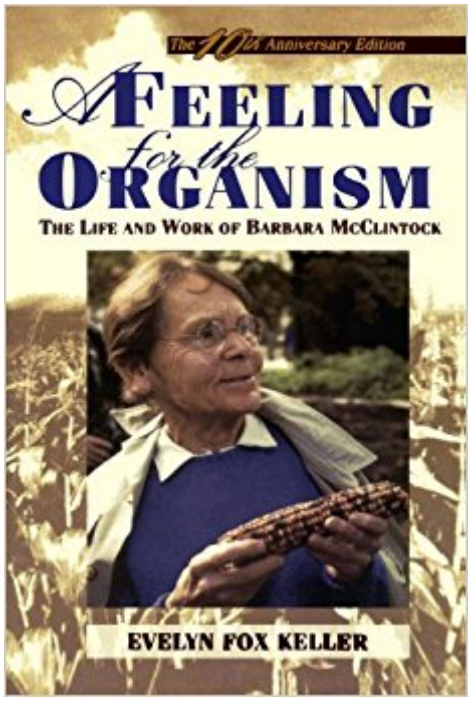
A Feeling For The Organism, 10th Aniversary Edition: The Life And Work Of Barbara McClintock



Synopsis

For much of her life she worked alone, brilliant but eccentric, with ideas that made little sense to her colleagues. Yet before DNA and the molecular revolution, Barbara McClintock’s tireless analysis of corn led her to uncover some of the deepest, most intricate secrets of genetic organization. Nearly forty years later, her insights would bring her a MacArthur Foundation grant, the Nobel Prize, and long overdue recognition. At her recent death at age 90, she was widely acknowledged as one of the most significant figures in 20th-century science.Evelyn Fox Keller’s acclaimed biography, A Feeling for the Organism, gives us the full story of McClintock’s pioneeringâ •although sometimes professionally difficultâ •career in cytology and genetics. The book now appears in a special edition marking the 10th anniversary of its original publication.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I discovered this book as I was looking for a text for my university seminar, "Women in Science". The search has been frustrating because there are so few readable but substantive books on women who have contributed to our knowledge of the world. There’s a lot of fluff; but what I wanted to show my students was the struggles as well as the triumphs--the frustrations, as well as the acolades. I wanted them to see the scientific landscape through the eyes of a woman, and to hear her voice. This book offered that and so much more. Unlike Sy Montgomery’s "Walking with the Great Apes" (Houghton Mifflin, 1991), which follows the careers of Goodall, Fossey and Galdikas, Keller resists the temptation to go kitsch. Instead, she showed what made Barbara McClintock a Nobel Prize winner and a scientific outsider.--Nan Crystal Arens, Assistant Professor, Integrative

Biology, University of California, Berkeley

Imagine being devalued simply because you are a woman in a man's career at a time when that made you an oddity. Then imagine having a mind brilliant enough to identify and understand transposable elements at a time when your science is so far ahead of everyone else's work that they cannot understand you or take you seriously. Put those two factors together and imagine how much confidence and courage it took for her to stick with her studies of maize genetics until everyone else caught up with her. Even if you're not interested in her science, you can't read this book and not be inspired by the woman. Dr. McClintock is my hero on many levels.

Barbara McClintock was a maverick from the very beginning. Her parents did not consider education as the best option for a woman. Her relationship with her mother was particularly frictitious. She made the decision to study botany at Cornell, and her love of the genetics grew. She worked on maize at a time when most cytogeneticists were working on Drosophila. It can easily be argued that nobody understood the maize plant and its genetics as well as she did at the time.The book can get quite technical midway, and will be appreciated best by those with a background in genetics. McClintock was a woman way ahead of her time, in fact, decades ahead. She could not be promoted to certain positions at several institutions simply because she is female (despite a superior knowledge in cytogenetics).It took approximately 5 years for McClintock to finish and publish her results on transposable elements in chromosomes (transposons). She gave numerous presentations on her discoveries and nobody understood - at a time when molecular biology was taking over the field of cytogenetics. This book shows that science is not always objective. It also brings up legitimate points as to whether the prevailing Western view of Science (i.e. the scientific method) is efficient enough in scientific research and discovery.I highly recommend this book!

"A Feeling for the Organism" is much closer to memoir than biography. When McClintock denied Keller access to her letters and notebooks, Keller chose to rely on McClintock's recollections. Consequently, we learn how McClintock wanted others to see her, and perhaps how she wanted to see herself, but not the truth. McClintock is portrayed as a genius struggling against a world too stupid to appreciate her brilliance, but the existence of transposition was never in serious doubt; it was McClintock's theory of genetic control that was controversial, and later discarded as incorrect. For a better understanding of McClintock's work and its reception, read The Tangled Field by Nathaniel Comfort, which manages to tell the real story without diminishing the scientific importance

or originality of McClintock.

Keller does an excellent job of elucidating McClintock's work and her original way of thinking and seeing, ways that made her ahead of her time, but ultimately led to her Noble. Keller's descriptions of the science are pretty technical but still accessible to the non-scientist (such as myself). Keller also does a great job of handling the difficult aspects of McClintock's personality -- of her difficulties with communicating and with feeling like -- and being -- an outsider. One can see how the family of origin contributed to McClintock's struggles with personal isolation. Keller shows this without any armchair psychologizing -- she lets her readers make the conclusions if they want to. I finished this book with immense respect for McClinock and also for Keller. Highly recommended and thoroughly enjoyable.

This is a wonderful book. It is the story of a science as well as the story of a scientist. It is a story of synergy, that elusive concept that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The book reminds us that a person is more than the collection of individual cells; that the cell is more than the collection of cytoplasm, nucleus, and chromosomes; that the chromosomes are more than the collection of individual genes; and that the science of biology is more than the collection of individual scientists. It reminds me that in the process of taking something apart to discover how it 'ticks', we frequently miss all the different ways it was originally connected. This book is not, however, limited to science and scientists -- its messages and lessons have a broader appeal and application. It can apply to any group of people, any collection of individuals, for this is also the story of a maverick. Mavericks are only considered different and unusual in relation to a group. Mavericks als

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