

PEOPLE

Guest Editorial: Celebrating Carl Djerassi

by Roald Hoffmann, Jeffrey I. Seeman, Bassam Z. Shkhashiri, and Richard N. Zare

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Credit: Karen Ostertag

Carl Djerassi at age 90

This is a guest editorial by **Roald Hoffmann** of Cornell University, **Jeffrey I. Seeman** of the University of Richmond, **Bassam Z. Shkhashiri** of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and **Richard N. Zare** of Stanford University.

Carl Djerassi was born 100 years ago next Sunday. We **remember him**, and in that memory celebrate what it means for a human being to be fully alive. His willfully engaged life illuminates the many dimensions of freedom and the choices we make in a complicated world.

One such freedom is that of life and the remarkable opportunities America offered an immigrant. Oh, may it continue to do so! Carl was a refugee from Nazi Europe who was welcomed in the US. He took every advantage of what the country had to offer to a bright, hard-working youth—Carl completed his PhD at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2 ½ years. He remained a citizen of the world as well.

Carl worked productively in Mexico City in the 1950s and often returned to Europe and his birthplace, Vienna.

We celebrate the freedom and joy to be a chemist, and to do so both in industry and academia. At Ciba, during his industrial career, Carl invented the first commercially viable antihistamine. At Syntex, he led the development of the first birth control pill, among other steroid pharmaceuticals. During his academic career, at Wayne State University and ultimately at Stanford University, he was the author of hundreds of scientific publications; mass spectrometry and circular dichroism became part of the organic chemist's tool kit thanks to Carl's work.

In his mid-60s, at the height of his scientific productivity, he closed his laboratory and began his third intellectual career, that of an author of, in his words, “science in fiction.” This too is a freedom we all have—to reach out, to do something different, to transform ourselves.

Carl totally immersed himself in writing poetry, fiction, and plays. He wrote extensively about his life journey, about his struggles with identity, and his search for belonging. Not many people publish three memoirs; Carl did. As well as several novels, numerous plays, collections of poetry and essays, and one art book. There are 271 entries on his literary list. That’s more than many scientists publish in the scientific literature in a lifetime!

Carl was ambitious and competitive, leaving many of us ennobled, inspired... and sometimes bruised. He even wrote a book of short stories on “one-upmanship.” This man was driven by what he called “productive insecurity.” He held the rare honor of being awarded the National Medal of Science and the National Medal of Technology—and being on President Richard Nixon’s “enemies list”.

He appreciated being widely recognized for his scientific and technological work, but it never was enough. He was a master of self-promotion, and in this he was relentless, even into his last days (he died in 2015). Carl was interested in what literary critics had to say, too, although he didn’t give them the last word. Indeed, he never gave anyone the last word.

The world has benefited much from Carl’s scientific research, in natural products, in instrumental analysis, in the earliest stages of artificial intelligence. There is much to learn from his writings—about ourselves and about one another. And he shared his creativity with others—in a remarkable artists’ colony he founded in the Santa Cruz, California, mountains in memory of his daughter and in gifts to institutions in the places he loved: Gambier, Ohio; Madison, Wisconsin; San Francisco; London; Vienna; Bulgaria. We thank John H. Dawson of the University of South Carolina, who on behalf of Carl’s graduate students urged us to celebrate Carl on his hundredth birthday. We lead you to a citizen of the world who benefited from the freedom of America and from its opportunities. The breadth of his contributions impresses; it is what the imagination and work ethic of a scientist can create.

Ultimately, the freedom we celebrate, one that all of us can reach, is uniqueness within society. Those of us who were blessed to have known him or crossed swords with him understood this: Carl Djerassi was a force of nature.

Views expressed on this page are those of the author and not necessarily those of ACS.