

Der Schattensammler

Scientists tend to play down their personal lives, presumably to emphasize the endurance of their discoveries. Only rarely, and usually prodded by their students, can they be persuaded to lift the veil of privacy a bit. The result is not always convincing. Emil Fischer's autobiography *Aus meinem Leben*, for instance, provides few insights into the inner life of this undoubtedly complex man apart from some interesting childhood memories. This is all the more regrettable as long shadows fell indeed onto his later years and one would like to know how he was able to cope with them. Ludwig Boltzmann's largely forgotten *Voyage of a German Professor to Eldorado* (viz. Berkeley and Stanford), published in 1905, amusingly deals with his fondness for Austrian wines and his bewilderment at American porridge and female students but provides few hints why Boltzmann, the renowned scholar and beloved teacher, committed suicide the following year.

In the opening chapter of his latest autobiography, Carl Djerassi also toys with this idea, thus setting a somber mood at the beginning of the book. Indeed, the *Schattensammler*^[1] (the English version "Treading on Shadows—the Very Last Autobiography" is underway) reads like the monolog of an old man who sits in a dimly lit room on an armchair reviewing his life with little mellowness or sentimentality. The shadowy sides of it are featured more prominently than usual in an autobiography and Djerassi spares his readers few details. His book is in part a therapy against loneliness (an "incurably disease at age 90"), in part autopsychoanalysis, a meditation on families and their secrets, and a treatise on cultural confusion and Jewish identity. A variety of accidents and maladies, the cancer death of Diane Middlebrook, his third wife, divorces, alienations and the suicide of his beloved daughter are featured at length.

At first, all of this sounds a bit depressing and like a difficult read, but the many bright spots and sunny days in Djerassi's life balance its darker sides. They are described with characteristic elegance, for Djerassi belongs to the few scientists who can write without taking recourse to phraseology. His first autobiography *Steroids Made It Possible*, published in the wonderful but now apparently dormant ACS series "Profiles Pathways and Dreams" is considerably larger than the ones of his contemporaries (e.g. Derek Barton, Rolf Huisgen), which is in itself

speaks for his mastery of language. Two others followed suit, which were geared toward an audience interested in the interplay of science and society, but not necessarily knowledgeable in chemistry. Having developed a taste for creative writing, Djerassi began to publish a number of novels, essays, poems, and plays that established him as a man of letters and made him known to an even wider audience.

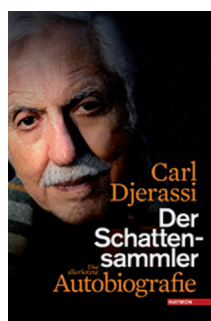
Reading the *Schattensammler* will reward those less familiar with Carl Djerassi's literary work, since he extensively cites from it. His life as philanthropist and collector, in particular of Paul Klee's work, receives ample coverage. Yet from a scientific point of view, the book has much to offer as well, since Carl Djerassi's love for organic chemistry can be felt throughout its pages. His central role in the development of orally active anticonceptives is clearly laid out without simplifying things too much and he does not eschew the many controversies associated with this topic. These concern priority claims but also the responsibilities that arise from a discovery of such consequence for society. Following some interesting observations on synthetic organic chemistry and the unique role that Syntex played in the development of the drug industry, Djerassi discusses his studies on natural product elucidation, which are less well known to non-specialists. His teaching activities, initially at Wayne State and then at Stanford University, are extensively covered as well. Those in the know will appreciate Djerassi's subtle gibes (and broad salvos) toward certain institutions and personalities that he encountered in his academic life.

Addicts are all too familiar with the meaning of "very last", which gives the subtitle of the Shadow Collector a slightly threatening connotation. Yet it is unlikely that another autobiography will ensue, although Carl Djerassi at ninety is a self-declared workaholic and still leads a more exciting life than most forty-five years olds. This may be all the better since the last one needs to be read, interpreted, and digested first. With a scientific, literary, and collector's life as rich as Carl Djerassi's it will take some time to do so!

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[1] For the German version of this book review, please see: D. Trauner, *Angew. Chem.* **2013**, *125*, 10887–10888.