Carl Djerassi, Chemist, “Mother of the Pill” and Writer, Coming to Iowa

Lecture “The Rise and Demise of the Pill.”
Sat., March 8, 5 – 6:30, in the Old Capitol Senate Chamber.
Free and open to the Public

By: Waltraud Maierhofer and Walter Gruenzweig

Carl Djerassi, world-famous chemist and writer who has been called one of the few universal minds of our era, will give a keynote address at the Symposium „Pill and Pen: Contraception and Unwanted Pregnancy in Literature and Popular Culture” organized by The University of Iowa’s Division of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures. For his part in the development of an oral contraceptive by synthesizing norethisterone, he likes to refer to himself as the “mother” of the birth-control pill.

The Austrian-born scientist, who had to flee his country after the invasion of Hitler-Germany and eventually found a new home in the United States, was one of the most prolific natural scientists of the 20th century. He has authored more than a thousand scientific papers. After completing his PhD at the University of Wisconsin, he became associate director of research at Syntex in Mexico City where he and his team developed the first highly active progestin analogue that was effective when taken by mouth. In 1960, he became professor of Chemistry at Stanford where he has been teaching ever since, also as professor emeritus.

Early on, Carl Djerassi became interested in areas he likes to refer to as the “soft” dimensions of the hard sciences he contributed to so successfully. In The Politics of Contraception, published in 1979, he dealt with the social, political and cultural
implications of his best-known scientific achievement. In the 1980s, encouraged by his wife, the late Diane Middlebrook, a well-known professor of English at Stanford and a biographer, he started to write fiction. His often repeated motivation for exchanging his lab coat for the pen and PC was that the natural sciences were too “monological” for him. He preferred the dialogical modes of novels, the short story and, of course, the theatre.

Although there are many well-known authors dealing with the natural sciences and their implications, it is Carl Djerassi who coined a definitive generic term for such works, namely “science-in-fiction” and “science-in-theatre.” In contradistinction to the widely popular genre of science fiction, science-in-fiction, while introducing fictional characters, a fictional world and a fictional plot, must remain correct and plausible in “its science.” In fictional terms, it insists on scientific verisimilitude.

Another major focus is the representation of scientists and science as a kind of tribal culture which has its own rules and oddities. This includes the competitive character most scientists have, the (for an outside observer) idiosyncratic desire to be the first to make a discovery, or to be obsessed with their research at the expense of other parts of their lives (especially personal relationships).

Djerassi has written five novels, eight plays, a book of poetry and a volume of short stories as well as a docudrama. The latter deals with the afterlife of four great Jewish thinkers and artists, Adorno, Benjamin, Scholem and Schönberg, probably his most important work. His recent plays, An Immaculate Misconception, Taboos, and ICSI bring the issues of birth control, artificial insemination, and family planning into the highly complex and interrelated contexts of reproduction, gender, and politics. Video excerpts will be shown as part of the presentation. His major autobiography, This Man’s Pill: Reflections on the 50th Birthday of the Pill narrates not only the history of the pill but ponders also questions such as sex and immortality, the future of contraception (Why is there no male pill?), and his work in fiction, theatre, and as an art collector. Most recently, he completed his third (!) autobiography (Der Schattensammler) which was instantly translated and published in German while still awaiting publication in the original English. 10 copies of it will be available for free at the lecture to readers of German.

At the impressive age of 90, Carl Djerassi, who has received more than 30 honorary doctorates from universities around the world, is a highly entertaining and provocative
speaker. His combined expertise as a scientist and writer promise an entertaining, informative, and highly sophisticated lecture.


Djerassi’s lecture and all presentations of the symposium are free and open to students and the public. Individuals with disabilities are encouraged to attend all UI-sponsored events. If you are a person with a disability who requires a reasonable accommodation, contact Waltraud Maierhofer in advance at 866 46a5 1607 or at Waltraud-maierhofer@uiowa.edu.

The lecture and symposium are sponsored by the Division of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures; the departments of German, Chemistry, Cinematic Arts, Pharmacology as well as Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies; Global Health Studies Programs, the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, the Center for Human Rights, the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Honors Program, and International Programs.

(Walter Gruenzweig, University of Dortmund; editor of The SciArtist: Carl Djerassi’s Science-in-Literature in Transatlantic and Interdisciplinary Contexts.)

More on Djerassi, his books, newspaper articles and interviews: http://www.djerassi.com/