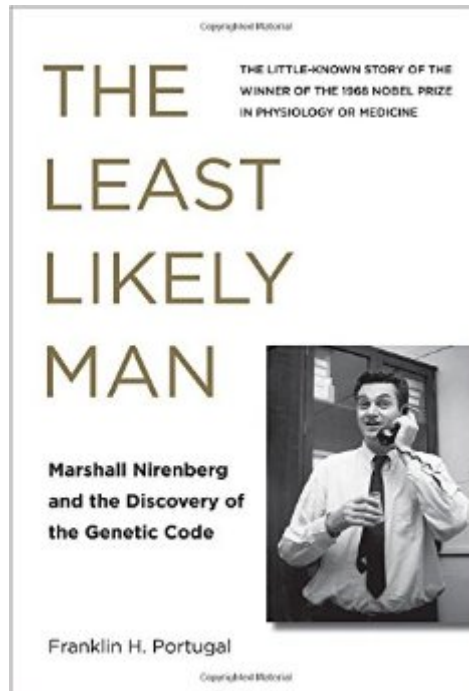


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# The Least Likely Man: Marshall Nirenberg And The Discovery Of The Genetic Code (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

The genetic code is the Rosetta Stone by which we interpret the 3.3 billion letters of human DNA, the alphabet of life, and the discovery of the code has had an immeasurable impact on science and society. In 1968, Marshall Nirenberg, an unassuming government scientist working at the National Institutes of Health, shared the Nobel Prize for cracking the genetic code. He was the least likely man to make such an earth-shaking discovery, and yet he had gotten there before such members of the scientific elite as James Watson and Francis Crick. How did Nirenberg do it, and why is he so little known? In *The Least Likely Man*, Franklin Portugal tells the fascinating life story of a famous scientist that most of us have never heard of. Nirenberg did not have a particularly brilliant undergraduate or graduate career. After being hired as a researcher at the NIH, he quietly explored how cells make proteins. Meanwhile, Watson, Crick, and eighteen other leading scientists had formed the "RNA Tie Club" (named after the distinctive ties they wore, each decorated with one of twenty amino acid designs), intending to claim credit for the discovery of the genetic code before they had even worked out the details. They were surprised, and displeased, when Nirenberg announced his preliminary findings of a genetic code at an international meeting in Moscow in 1961. Drawing on Nirenberg's "lab diaries," Portugal offers an engaging and accessible account of Nirenberg's experimental approach, describes counterclaims by Crick, Watson, and Sidney Brenner, and traces Nirenberg's later switch to an entirely new, even more challenging field. Having won the Nobel for his work on the genetic code, Nirenberg moved on to the next frontier of biological research: how the brain works.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As the first biography of Marshall Nirenberg and one written by someone who actually was in the laboratory and understood the science, this book tells a straight story of the events leading to the deciphering of the code. It is a useful and interesting piece of history and is easy to read. It should encourage young people to follow their curiosity and not be dazzled and deterred by famous names and places and clubs. Future biographies will tell the story of Marshall Nirenberg as a profound thinker and as an extraordinary human being... .

I was in Marshall Nirenberg's lab at the time the genetic code was being deciphered and had an opportunity to witness the code being unraveled. With the utmost enthusiasm, I read Franklin Portugal's book and was not disappointed in the least. Dr. Portugal did an excellent job of capturing the history of deciphering the code, including interviews by others, who also witnessed this historic event. I strongly recommend the book be read by young scientists, who will obtain an inside view of the code being deciphered, as well as the older generation of scientists, who also remember one of the most important scientific events of the 20th Century. I agree with one of the other reviewers that future biographies will present more of Marshall, the man, who had an incredible imagination, which was second to none, was a deep, gifted thinker and a very compassionate human being.

As this book was written by someone who was in the lab at the time of the discovery, the reader gets a detailed, behind-the-scenes look at one of the greatest scientific discoveries of all time - the deciphering of the genetic code. I found it to be a quick, yet very informative read, and the scientific concepts easy to grasp. If you are interested in this fascinating period of scientific history, and whether you have or have not heard of Marshall Nirenberg, pick up this book to read and add to your book collection.

This book tells a great story about Marshall Nirenberg. It's interesting to read how humble his scientific beginnings were and how he was able to solve a fundamental question in Biology in competition with the greatest scientists of that era. The book has some fascinating anecdotes and quotes from his co-workers. This will be an important book for the historic record as it tells the story

of how the Genetic Code was "cracked." I wish it were a bit longer and had even more insight about the people in his lab at that time. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in knowing more about the origins of molecular biology as this work set the stage for many of the discoveries to follow since then.

"The Least Likely Man" is the exciting story of how an unknown scientist, Marshall Nirenberg, deciphered the genetic code of life. In the 1960's, the race to break the code was between well-known, well-funded theoretical scientists and little known Nirenberg, who was determined to experimentally prove how the DNA code of life works. Nirenberg was an always curious, unassuming, kind and generous man, and this first biography captures his spirit, his quest and his genius. The book chronicles the most profound discovery in the 20th century, while giving us a glimpse into the man behind the science. A good, exciting read.

By chance I did my most important bench experiments at NIH on the very same benchtops in the small room in Building 10 where Marshall Nirenberg was first posted to start his experiments! But I worked about two decades later, of course. I knew this in 1980 when I started working in that room because there is a small bronze plaque on the wall just outside the door. Not much detail about Nirenberg's life had been published, so when I saw this new book released I ordered it immediately because of this bit of a (remote) personal connection. I enjoyed the book and I recommend it, although it would have been nice to have a bit more illumination of the step by step technical detail. For example, Nirenberg might still have had available at the time of the interview some of his old laboratory notebooks, and it would have been historically fascinating to show multiple key notebook pages along with a running commentary from Nirenberg referring to those pages. That material could have been placed in an appendix. If Frank Portugal sees this review, he could look at an example of showing notebook pages within Gerald Geison's book, "The Private Science of Louis Pasteur." I tried something like that in my own autobiography even though I am just an ordinary clinician-scientist trying to do good work and who will never win a Nobel (I guess my autobiography could have been titled "The Even Less Likely Man," but the title actually is "Free To Decide: Building a Life in Science and Medicine"). This method of presentation and commentary, including some humor, can be very instructive and even entertaining, so I am hoping that more scientific authors will try it. James Magner, M.D.

I was fascinated by the detailed revelations about how Marshall Nirenberg and his group worked on

the genetic code problem as told in this book. It reads like an exciting mystery story even to me, who as a scientist has also participated in a "race" to find a discovery and who had some knowledge of the players before reading it. I would strongly recommend it to anyone who wishes to learn how scientists function, especially to anyone planning on becoming a scientist in any field.

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