

The English Chemist

Jessica Mills

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In Jessica Mills's absorbing biographical novel *The English Chemist*, the scientist responsible for discovering the illusive structure of DNA is denied recognition due to the duplicity of her colleagues.

Rosalind Franklin, a scientist with a sharp wit and a conflicted inner world, narrates. In an intimate way, she covers her life and studies, culminating in her pivotal contribution to DNA research. Along the way, she experiences exclusion, belittling, and embarrassment as a woman working in what many considered to be a man's world. Of her colleagues, she says, "Competition and in-fighting had eroded what was left of their souls, and they slowly calcified as they became more embittered despite their mounting accolades. It was not a fate that I wanted."

The worldbuilding is grim, featuring descriptions of dank laboratories, less than optimal equipment, and intense work often done to the tune of fierce competition. Rosalind's responses to the rigors of scientific research and the toll taken by antiquated attitudes around women in science dominate the book's progression; often, it focuses on her stand for professional ethics and personal integrity. She is a sensitive narrator here and elsewhere—for example, lamenting that music gives her vertigo, and noting that she would rather bury her feelings than share them. Fury is generated when her pioneering work is stolen by, and credited to, her colleagues. Later, in a conflicted moment, she questions whether her life might have been different had she been more outspoken.

The English Chemist is an immersive biographical novel about the woman whose discovery of the helical structure of DNA opened the door to understanding the nature of life.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September / October 2024)

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