BOOK REVIEW

INTUITION

Allegra Goodman
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Are you looking for a book that will encourage discussion of ethical issues ranging from scientific fraud to whistle-blowing and lying to truth-telling? Then you should consider Allegra Goodman’s novel Intuition. The book presents students with a wide range of ethical problems embedded in an entertaining story. The following book review provides a comprehensive overview of Intuition’s plot and introduces some representative ethical constellations in the book.

Intuition centers on “The Philpott,” a scientific biology laboratory in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Goodman places researchers of contrasting natures in this lab and interweaves their different characters in brilliant fashion. The story starts off with Cliff, a 30-year-old post-doc researcher who is desperate to make progress on his project R7 – a virus that transforms cancer cells. The people in charge of the lab, Marion Mendelsohn and Sandy Glass, need research findings in order to secure the lab’s future grant funding. Besides Cliff, a few other researchers work in the lab among them his girlfriend, Robin, and the Chinese postdoc, Feng. After Cliff’s experiments show some promising findings, the lab immediately publishes the results and applies for a new grant. At first glance, Cliff’s results get the lab some positive media coverage and guaranteed funding. This seems to secure the lab’s future, but, in fact, brings it into serious trouble when, after Robin and Cliff break up, Robin starts to question Cliff’s results and finds signs of fraud in his documentation. She voices her concerns and, after being transferred to a different project, her inquiries are dismissed during a private hearing, which finally makes her leave the lab. In her search for the truth, Robin inquires at the National Institutes of Health (NIH)’s Office for Research Integrity in Science (ORIS). ORIS unleashes a serious investigation, which tears the lab to pieces and
ultimately results in a congressional hearing investigating misconduct in federally funded scientific research. Things look grim for Cliff when problems with relapsing mice experiments occur and other labs encounter difficulties in reproducing his findings. But then Sandy wins an appeal proving the conduct of the ORIS investigation was unethical. It seems to be a whole new ball game.

This short plot summary already reveals a couple of ethical problems. Most of them have their origin in the different personalities that Goodman creates. Although small in number, her fully developed characters drive the book with their individual strengths and weaknesses. The reader often gets tempted to question the motives of the characters in *Intuition*. Robin - who is driven by a mix of passion for the truth, solicitude for the lab’s integrity, and a desire for revenge - is just one great example of this. Each character offers a unique, yet perceptive, perspective on the different ethical issues Goodman evokes, thus challenging the reader to re-evaluate his or her judgments over and over again. One student reported after reading the book that he seemed to know the characters better than he knew his fellow students. The description of the characters makes it easy to identify with them and to empathize with their different perspectives. This is quite beneficial for encouraging students’ moral imagination.

This is especially true concerning ethical problems related to scientific research. For example, lab tech Prithwish is not comfortable with killing the laboratory mice. Detailed descriptions of the treatment of lab animals and the “sacrificing” of mice at the end of experiments encourage the reader to think about these perennial ethical problems in connection with animal research.

Another enduring ethical problem in science concerns personal property claims in the laboratory. Several times Goodman describes what it is like for researchers not to hold the intellectual property rights to their work. This comes into play especially when characters consider leaving the lab; they would have to start from scratch again, since all their work would remain property of the lab. At one point, Cliff tries to add a personal note to a grant proposal by including an epigraph, but is reminded by the principal investigators that the final version of the proposal is not his call, even though it is based on experiments that he designed and conducted. Such scenes serve as excellent depictions of ethical dilemmas concerning intellectual property and authorship in science.

The question of scientific transparency also is spotlighted. Is it responsible to apply for a grant and to publish results of scientific find-
ings that have not been proven? And to what extent is science funded by taxpayer money accountable to the public? Different answers are offered by Sandy and Marion, who have opposing approaches to science. Sandy is the salesman who is concerned about publicity and recognition for the lab. He presents spectacular data and talks up the lab, even though the findings have not yet been replicated. In his view, research is about “exploration, not the delivery of specific results” (p. 352). In contrast, Marion is concerned about scientific integrity and accountability. She adheres to high scientific standards and requires researchers to follow protocol closely. After the lab’s work is questioned and indications of scientific misconduct surface, she feels guilty and wants to issue a clarification in Nature, the scientific journal in which the original findings were published. She even considers giving back grant money. These contrasting perspectives make the reader think about the correct approach to conducting and reporting publicly funded research.

Closely related to the nature of research are the roles, attitudes and conduct of individual scientists, which Goodman also covers. With the different characters we encounter in the lab, the question of what the ideal scientist should be like comes up. Which is correct: Chinese Feng, who follows protocol but withholds doubts about the methods of his co-workers? Or Cliff, who ignores protocol for killing the lab mice and scribbles experimental results on scratch paper instead of keeping meticulous records in his lab book? And what about Robin, who seems to be uncommonly emotional for a scientist? Is our image of the ideal scientist a gendered one? What are the implications for an occupation that still counts relatively few women among its ranks?

These questions could already fill a couple of ethical theory books, but Goodman’s ethical insights extend to other fields as well. For instance, she raises multiple ethical issues in the field of interpersonal communication. Is it unethical for Sandy to conceal his intention to get rid of Cliff once the ORIS inquiry has come to an end? And what about Marion’s husband, who does not like what is going on in the lab and intentionally plants doubt in Robin’s mind, persuading leading her to question Cliff’s practices? Ethical questions are also raised when it comes to Sandy’s being a part-time doctor at a hospital where he dupes his patients by omitting certain information and tailoring his word choices.

Overall, Goodman’s novel Intuition offers an entertaining approach to various ethical questions, especially those pertaining to scientific ethics. Brilliantly developed characters and very enjoyable writing make it easy to put oneself into the book. Once you start the book, you will find
yourself soon on a journey from scientific fraud to whistle-blowing and lying to truth-telling and much more. You will be taken by the hand and immersed into the story - the research scene at the Philpott Institute comes to life, as well as the walk of the characters along Harvard Square or their picnic at Walden Pond. I highly recommend this bright story weaved around researchers and their problems. It is not easy to write a book about highly serious ethical issues and entertain at the same time. Allegra Goodman passed this test with distinction.