

Nobel Laureates Who Were Not Always Noble

Racists, frauds, and misogynists: Meet the rogues' gallery of Nobel Prize winners.

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James Watson's fame for the discovery of the structure of DNA was later overshadowed by his outrageous statements on race and intelligence.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREAS FEININGER, THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY

Since the Nobel Prize's beginnings in 1901, fewer than 1,000 people have won the world's most prestigious award. As *National Geographic* has previously covered, [many great discoveries](#) have been incomprehensibly overlooked for the honor—and some Nobel Laureates could have done without.

Some failed to credit the female colleagues who had made their achievements possible. Others used their fame to promote junk science. And still others, under the guise of continuing their pursuit of knowledge, revealed their inner bigotry.

For convenience, we've divided these low points in Nobel history into categories:

White Supremacist:



John Bardeen, William Shockley, and Walter Brattain shared the 1956 Nobel Prize in Physics for their invention of the transistor. In later years, Shockley became obsessed with racist theories and endorsed sterilizing the “genetically disadvantaged.”

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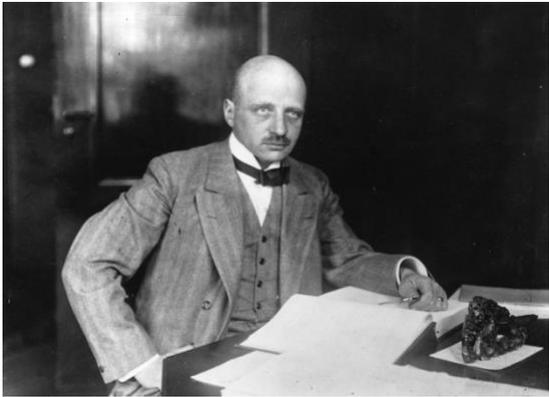
As a co-inventor of the transistor, William Shockley brought silicon to Silicon Valley. Unfortunately, he was also an unrepentant racist. He won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1956. But in later years, despite a complete lack of formal education in biology and genetics, Shockley tried to use these fields of study to support a set of racist ideas known as eugenics. In particular, he warned of “retrogressive evolution” because he believed blacks were reproducing faster than what he considered to be intellectually superior whites. His proposed “solutions” included replacing the welfare system with financial incentives for “genetically disadvantaged” individuals to allow themselves to be sterilized.

Science Denial

Kary Mullis, the 1993 winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, revels in his reputation as a "maverick." In his [autobiography](#), *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field*, he extols the virtues of astrology, describes a possible encounter with aliens (which appeared to him in the form of a talking, glowing raccoon), and cheerfully admits his repeated use of LSD. Unfortunately, Mullis' maverick theories also include AIDS denialism. He has lent his Nobel Laureate star power to endorsing the theories of molecular biologist Peter Duesberg, who asserts—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that the HIV virus is harmless and that AIDS is actually caused by recreational drug use and anti-HIV pharmaceuticals.

Agent of War

The 1918 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to Fritz Haber, who had developed a [method](#) for synthesizing ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen for use as fertilizer. The discovery increased crop yields worldwide—and Haber was celebrated as the man who had made "bread out of air." But Haber would become known for another innovation: industrialized mass-killing. During the First World War, he initiated the program to develop and weaponize chlorine for use on the battlefield. On April 22, 1915, Haber personally oversaw the deployment of 6,000 cylinders of gas at Ypres, Belgium, [killing 1,000 French and Algerian troops](#) in less than ten minutes.



Fritz Haber, the 1918 winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, reduced hunger worldwide with his invention of a process for making chemical fertilizer. Yet, he would also be remembered as the "father of chemical weapons."

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOPICAL PRESS AGENCY, GETTY

Least Qualified Winner

Nils Gustaf Dalén won the 1912 Nobel Prize for Physics to commemorate his groundbreaking research into... lighthouses. His invention, the Solventil, was a solar valve that regulated the operation of gaslight. It would shut down a beacon at sunrise and automatically relight it again at night—or during the day, if conditions became cloudy or foggy. A nifty invention, to be sure, but not exactly paradigm-changing research—especially during an era when Max Planck and others were revolutionizing our understanding of physics.

"This remains the least impressive award in any science category," writes Burton Feldman in his [book](#), *The Nobel Prize: A History of Genius, Controversy, and Prestige*. "It seems to have happened because of the academy's deadlock over far more impressive candidates such as Planck."

It was later revealed that the academy originally had intended to offer a joint-prize to Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison for their contributions to developing electricity. Tesla, however, refused to share the honor with Edison. Some historical accounts say Tesla remained bitter over a financial disagreement with Edison; others say that Tesla considered it an affront to share the award with a mere inventor. And so, the prize instead went to a man who found a way to build a better lighthouse

Clueless Sexists

Quite a few laureates deserve inclusion in this category—notably, those who denied their female colleagues the public acknowledgment they deserved for their research (see "Credit Stealers," below). Still, one name stands out for special recognition: Sir Tim Hunt, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine. The British biochemist created a social media tsunami in June 2015, when, during a luncheon for female journalists and scientists in Seoul, he [remarked](#): "Let me tell you about my trouble with girls. Three things happen when they are in the lab: you fall in

love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticize them they cry. Perhaps we should make separate labs for boys and girls?” Hunt later issued a [pseudo-apology](#), saying that he was sorry for causing offense and that his remarks were “intended as a light-hearted, ironic comment.” But, he had also told a co-panelist that his comment was rooted in “honesty”—reflecting an apparent cluelessness about the vast [underrepresentation](#) of women working in STEM fields. “Statements like this are indicators of an ingrained attitude that, yes, does make it harder for women to advance in the world of science,” [wrote](#) Pulitzer-Prize winning science writer Deborah Blum.

Credit Stealers

There is a long, not-so-proud history of Nobel Prizes awarded to men in place of their female colleagues. (Check out [National Geographic’s story about women scientists snubbed by the Nobel committee](#)).

Perhaps one of the most egregious is Joshua Lederberg, awarded the 1958 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for research he conducted with his first wife, microbiologist Esther Lederberg.

[Esther Lederberg](#) discovered a virus that infects bacteria, and, with her husband, developed a way to transfer bacteria between petri dishes. Their first experiments used the powder puff from her compact to pick up and deposit bacteria in a lab dish. Today, scientists still use a similar technique to study antibiotic resistance.

For all of her contributions, she did not share the Nobel Prize with her husband, who mentioned her [only once in his Nobel lecture](#).

Just Plain Wrong

Danish scientist Johannes Fibiger won the 1926 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for discovering what he thought was a cancer-causing parasite—a bold idea that turned out to be phenomenally wrong.

Fibiger studied wild rats with warty growths, which Fibiger believed was a form of cancer caused by parasitic worms. His Nobel Prize was [awarded with the declaration](#) that these findings were “the greatest contribution to experimental medicine in our generation.”

Only, it wasn’t. While it’s true that some [infections](#) can lead to cancer, his rats’ disease wasn’t caused by parasites. It wasn’t even cancer. The warty bumps in the rats’ stomachs were actually caused by a Vitamin A deficiency, exacerbated by the parasites.

Why the Nobel? “The dawn of the microbial age was at the end of the 19th century, and he was in the early 20th century,” says Stanford professor of epidemiology [Julie Parsonnet](#). “People were very excited about this possibility that infections caused everything.” And it certainly didn’t hurt that Fibiger had friends on the Nobel committee.

Being James Watson

James Watson is a category unto himself. The co-discoverer of the structure of DNA doesn’t miss an opportunity to offend. During a [lecture](#) at Berkeley, he suggested there are biochemical links between sexual libido and skin color (“That’s why you have Latin lovers.”) and between body weight and ambition. He declared in an [interview](#) that “some anti-Semitism is justified.” He [never gave credit](#) to Rosalind Franklin, whose work with X-ray crystallography made his discovery possible—though he made it a point to criticize her appearance and taste in clothing.

Just when it seemed there were no more lines to cross, Watson [declared](#) himself “inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa” because “all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours—whereas all the testing says not really.”

In a fit of pique and self-pity, Watson auctioned off his Nobel Prize medallion in 2014 for \$4.1 million; he is the only laureate to have done so.

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