

undersea observation tube, and hangs out with scientists of every variety. In addition to providing a comprehensive look at life in Antarctica, these portraits serve as occasionally clumsy jumping-off points for Legler's ruminations on her sister's suicide, her emotionally distant family, and her own shaky psychic state.

The humor that seems to characterize everyone who sets foot in Antarctica hastens Legler's defrosting. The bus that lumbers between the airstrip and the station is called Ivan the Terra Bus, for instance, while parishioners at the Chapel of the Snows are known as the Frozen Chosen. The scientists and support staff are as aware as Legler of the ludicrousness of their attempts to measure up to their predecessors in a place that now offers fresh basil, espresso makers, a bowling alley, ATMs, and Internet connections. Instead of battling the elements, they're checking their mutual funds.

The Antarctic literature is extensive—Legler discovers that even the walls of an outhouse are covered in scribbled excerpts from Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922) and other classic texts—and awash in testosterone. Legler's volume is a nice switch from the heroic tales of Robert Falcon Scott, Ernest Shackleton, and other early explorers, and a welcome addition to the tiny body of work featuring women in Antarctica, represented most notably by Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita* (1996).

Legler's book also offers the novelty of a lesbian perspective, with the question of whether she will let herself fall for a banjo-playing mechanic named Ruth providing the book's only real narrative drive. In bundled-up Antarctica, it seems, romance means parkas brushing or ice axes clanking against each other.

Toward the end of the author's six-month stay, she takes the "Polar Plunge," leaping into frigid water. "It was my birthday and I was born again," she writes. Although Legler leaves no mark on the outhouse wall, she leaves her readers with a fascinating look not only at Antarctica but at a woman coming back to life.

—Rebecca A. Clay

## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### Test Case

THE POLIO VACCINE IS ONE of medicine's great success stories, but its development makes for a dirty, dangerous, and far from edifying tale. Mistakes were made, as the political phrase goes, and some of those mistakes cost lives before other lives were saved. In the first half

of his book, Paul Offit, a physician, achieves an almost thrillerlike intensity with a fast-paced account of the many tribulations and errors that preceded the Salk vaccine's momentous triumph. But in attempting to trace so much of the modern antagonism between our legal and medical systems back to a single source—the Cutter incident of the title—Offit allows outrage to overwhelm reason.

Early efforts, in the 1930s, to create a polio vaccine were, by modern standards, staggeringly irresponsible. Physicians tried to kill or inactivate infectious matter in ways that bordered on quackery, then without further ado injected the products into

#### THE CUTTER INCIDENT:

How America's First Polio Vaccine Led to the Growing Vaccine Crisis.

By Paul A. Offit.  
Yale Univ Press.  
238 pp. \$27.50



Jonas Salk, developer of an experimental polio vaccine, administers a test inoculation to a Pennsylvania youngster in 1954. The vaccine was soon rushed into production, but a contaminated batch led to a landmark liability case against one pharmaceutical company.

hapless children, many of whom died or suffered enormously. It wasn't until the 1950s that Jonas Salk devised a method to render the virus incapable of causing disease while leaving it sufficiently intact to stimulate the body's immune system to generate a potent response against the live virus. After a rushed but successful government-backed test in 1954 on almost two million children, federal officials decided—under enormous public and political pressure—to swing into full-scale production of the vaccine.

But Salk's instructions for making vaccine were more recipe than engineering blueprint, and the several pharmaceutical companies engaged to mass-produce the vaccine had trouble scaling up the process. Remnants of live virus contaminated many batches, and in 1955, one company, Cutter Laboratories of Berkeley, California, sent out quantities of vaccine that infected hundreds of thousands of children, severely injuring almost 200 and killing at least 10.

Then came the inevitable lawsuit, captained by Melvin Belli, who fashioned a high-profile career making legal innovations in everything from tort cases to Hollywood divorces. The unwelcome novelty here, Offit complains, is that although the Cutter jury concluded that the laboratory had acted in good faith and done nothing culpably wrong, the judge's instructions obliged them to impose damages on the company. Thus was born the legal notion of no-fault liability.

The result, according to Offit, is today's punitive legalistic culture, in which the minutest dangers, real or sometimes imaginary, blossom into multimillion-dollar payouts, and the quest to eliminate risk, far from making medicine safer, stifles innovation and keeps promising treatments off the market. But this grandiose contention doesn't hang together: Offit's own review of legal history shows that the Cutter decision fits into an evolution of liability law that started centuries ago and continues to this day.

Offit also inveighs against bad science in the courtroom, citing among several examples the case of an effective vaccine for Lyme disease that was

withdrawn from the market in 2002 after the manufacturer came under legal attack on extremely dubious scientific grounds. Lawyers browbeat juries into blocking life-saving medicines! It's a good punch line, with enough truth in it to warrant intelligent scrutiny. But Offit, having praised the Cutter jurors for evaluating the scientific evidence carefully, now wants somehow to blame them for the increasingly irresponsible decisions of their successors.

Today's litigious society is surely a remarkable phenomenon, but the Cutter incident is at most a small element in a plot vaster than Offit's book can handle. As it happens, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study on October 12, 2005, concluding that among the many factors making flu vaccine production commercially unattractive, legal liability issues represent only a minor nuisance. It may well be true, as Offit asserts, that the pharmaceutical industry is reluctant to spend money looking for new vaccines—but it apparently has limitless dollars available to create and market pills that help middle-aged men get firmer erections. Something's out of whack here, and you can't pin all the blame on nefarious lawyers.

—David Lindley

## The Science of Life's Clockwork

AS A BOY, CURT RICHTER LOVED to tinker with clocks and locks, dismantling and reassembling them by the hour. His curiosity about how things work and his finely honed mechanical skill

ended up serving him well: During some six decades at Johns Hopkins University's medical school, from graduate student in 1919 to emeritus professor still doing lab work in the 1980s, Richter made a series of pioneering discoveries, most notably about the internal clockwork that regulates behavior. In this conversationally written book, Jay Schulkin, a research professor of physiology and biophysics at Georgetown University, sur-

**CURT RICHTER:**  
A Life in the  
Laboratory.

By Jay Schulkin.  
Johns Hopkins Univ.  
Press. 187 pp. \$49.95