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# Francis Crick's "Secret of Life" Letter Sets Record

by Jeanne Schinto



*Christie's and Heritage Auctions, New York City*

A letter handwritten 60 years ago by scientist Francis Crick to his 12-year-old son, Michael, sold on April 10 at Christie's in New York City for \$6,059,750 (including buyer's premium). Christie's said the price is the new world auction record for any letter by anyone on any subject.

In seven pages Crick succinctly outlined his co-discovery of the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule and its function as the carrier of our genetic makeup. "Jim Watson and I have probably made a most important discovery," the letter begins. "We have built a model for the structure of de-oxy-ribose-nucleic-acid (read it carefully) called D.N.A. for short. You may remember that the genes of the chromosomes - which carry the hereditary factors - are made up of protein and D.N.A.....Now we believe that the D.N.A. is a code...."

Michael Crick, now of Bellevue, Washington, and his daughter Kindra Crick, who lives in Portland, Oregon, were witnesses to the sale at Rockefeller Plaza, as was James D. Watson, who with Crick and a third researcher, Maurice Wilkins (1916-2004), shared the 1962 Nobel Prize in medicine.

Francis Wahlgren, international head of Christie's books and manuscripts department, opened the bidding at \$550,000. Phone bidders were in pursuit, along with two bidders in the salesroom, one of whom dropped out at \$2.6 million. The other ended at \$3.9 million. Thomas Lecky, head of Christie's New York books and manuscripts department, came in with a new phone bidder at \$4 million. The eventual winner was later emphatically identified by Lecky as "anonymous."

Francis Crick (1916-2004) was born in Northampton, England. During World War II, his graduate study of physics at University College London was interrupted by his service as a scientist for the British Admiralty. After the war, he conducted biological research at the Strangeways Laboratory in Cambridge, then transferred to the Cavendish Laboratory, where he met the American James Watson. Together they showed through Watson's carefully constructed models "... the basic copying mechanism by which life comes from life," in the words of Crick's letter to Michael. "You can understand that we are very excited," Crick wrote in his letter's concluding lines. "Read this carefully so that you understand it. When you come home we will show you the model. Lots of love, Daddy."

"At that time there was a prevalent belief that animals and plants were embodied with a 'life force' that explained how cells behaved and how like produced like," Michael Crick wrote in a catalog essay for Christie's. Francis Crick "passionately wanted to show that in reality everything could be explained in terms of physics and chemistry. In particular he wanted to solve the central mystery of how the instructions to build a complex organism are stored and copied and exert their effects...."

Everything came together about three weeks before Crick wrote to Michael on March 19, 1953. On February 28, "the last piece of the puzzle fell into place," Michael's catalog essay recounted. "It became immediately obvious how the base pairs could act as a code—and also how that code might be copied," he recalled. "It just was 'so beautiful' it had to be right. My father's enthusiasm could not be contained. The story is told of him sweeping excitedly into a local pub called the Eagle and announcing to all who would listen that he had found 'the secret of life.'"

When Michael received the letter, he was isolated in his boarding school's infirmary while recovering from flu. That gave him plenty of time to study his father's words. As Michael wrote in his catalog essay, he has since realized that those pages were "the first public description of these ideas that have become the keystone of molecular biology and which have spawned a whole new industry and generations of follow-on discoveries."

After leaving Cambridge in 1977, Francis Crick spent 27 years at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, where he switched the focus of his research to consciousness and the brain and helped establish the Crick-Jacobs Center for Theoretical and Computational Biology, which is devoted to brain research. In a statement, Michael Crick wrote, "My wife, Barbara, and I therefore decided that we would donate a significant portion of the proceeds from the sale of the letters to benefit the Salk to help fund continuing research in ways that my father would have wanted."

Christie's offered two more Crick items at this special sale. One was an early 1950's scientific notebook containing four pages of handwritten ink and pencil diagrams and equations by Crick. It sold to the buyer of the letter for \$21,250. According to the auction house, these data may be early DNA-related studies, or they may relate to his protein research on polypeptide chain structures. In either case, Crick manuscript material from this period is extremely rare on the market.

The third and final item was a 10" x 15" pencil on paper portrait of Crick from about the same period. Executed by Crick's second wife, the artist Odile Crick (1920-2007), it sold for \$17,500 to an anonymous absentee bidder. When Crick and Watson published their first, one-page paper about their DNA discovery in *Nature* on April 25, 1953, it was Odile who illustrated it with a schematic drawing of the double helix. That sketch has since been reproduced widely in textbooks and scientific articles, and as the *Washington Post* pointed out when Odile died at age 86, it "has become a symbol of the achievements of science and its aspirations to understand the secrets of life."

The evening at Christie's was not the end of the Crick family adventures in Manhattan. On the following morning, April 11, Heritage Auctions, headquartered in Dallas, opened its historical documents sale in New York City with ten items that belonged to the Francis Crick Family Trust. Most notable was Crick's Nobel Prize medal. Struck in 23-karat gold, it is 65 mm in diameter (approximately 2½") and features a profile portrait of Alfred Nobel on the obverse and a depiction of the Genius of Medicine quenching a sick girl's thirst on the reverse. Engraved below the figures are Crick's name and the year the prize was awarded, "F.H.C.Crick / MCMLXII."

The auction took place at the Ukrainian Institute of the Fletcher-Sinclair Mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side. On hand again were Michael and Kindra Crick, neither of whom had seen the medal until recently, they said. It had been in storage along with Francis Crick's Nobel Prize diploma, two handwritten pages on vellum, which was being sold along with the medal. Estimated at \$500,000 and up, the lot went at \$2,270,500 to a bidder in the room who said later that he had been prepared to pay twice as much.

That bidder was Jack Wang, the Chinese-born American CEO of Biomobie, a medical technology company in Shanghai, China and Menlo Park, California. Wang said that the company plans to award the medal and diploma to a scientist engaged in research in regenerative medicine. "We're going to form a committee and then judge which scientists have contributed to the new technology, and then we're going to pass that medal and diploma to the winner," he said. "It's like a Nobel Prize again," he added.

Wang also bought Crick's Nobel Prize check, endorsed on the back "Doctor Francis Crick." The amount, 85,739 Swedish kronor, represents one-third of the prize that Crick shared with Watson and Wilkins. Estimated at \$50,000/75,000, the canceled check sold to Wang for \$77,675.

Asked if Biomobie was planning a monetary award along with the medal and diploma, Wang replied, "Well, we just spent money on this."

Wang also paid \$8962.50 (est. \$3000/5000) for a lab coat that had belonged to Crick. Made of the typical white cotton, it has Crick's initials, "F.H.C.," in two places on the inside of the collar and an embossed gold spiral, reminiscent of a double helix, on the breast pocket.

Wang said that he had not been a bidder on the letter at Christie's and didn't know anything about that sale.

While Wang was speaking to the press, an Internet bidder paid \$1792.50 (est. \$3000/5000) for a lot containing Crick's nautical logbooks, a map of the Balkans, and a maritime flag, all of which pertain to Crick's Bertram powerboat, *Eye of Heaven*. The two logbooks date from 1966 and 1968-71 and give details of the trips Crick took with family and friends through the islands of Greece. Another Internet bidder spent \$10,775 (est. \$3000/5000) for four of Crick's garden journals and three maps of his garden at Well Cottage, Suffolk, England, dating from November 1968 through September 1976.

Crick's personal copy of a 1994 four-volume limited-edition facsimile of Charles Darwin's *The Zoology of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle* went to an absentee bidder at \$4182.50 (est. \$1000/1500). Four other books from Crick's library sold individually at \$310.70 (*Brain and Conscious Experience*, 1965); \$478 (*The Dictionary of Roses in Colour*, 1971); \$1553.50 (*Minds, Brains and Science*, 1984); and \$1792.50 (*New Western Garden Book*, 1984).

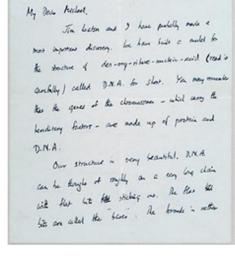
All told, the ten Crick lots offered by Heritage brought \$2,378,002. A portion of the money, Kindra Crick said, will go to the development of the Francis Crick Institute in London. A partnership among six research entities, it is scheduled to open in 2015.

For more information, contact Christie's at (212) 636-2000, Web site ([www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com)); or contact Heritage Auctions at (214) 528-3500, Web site ([www.HA.com](http://www.HA.com)).

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Seated in the Christie's salesroom (from right) are Francis Crick's son, Michael, a video-game inventor ([www.wordzap.com](http://www.wordzap.com)); Michael's daughter Kindra Crick, an artist ([www.kindracrick.com](http://www.kindracrick.com)); two unidentified women; James D. Watson; and an unidentified man. While the bidding took place, Michael snapped photographs of the auctioneer, room bidders, and phone bid-takers. Afterward he said it was surprising to learn from Kindra that by her calculations the sale of the letter had taken only six minutes. For more information about the extended Crick family and their many accomplishments, see the Web site ([www.crick.com/family.html](http://www.crick.com/family.html)). Schinto photo.



A page from Francis Crick's seven-page letter to his son, Michael, dated March 19, 1953 (est. \$1/2 million). The letter sold for what Christie's said is a new world auction price record for a letter, \$6,059,750. Photo courtesy Christie's.



Pictured is one of four pages of a Francis Crick scientific notebook from the early 1950's that sold for \$21,250 (est. \$4000/6000). Photo courtesy Christie's.



Portrait of Francis Crick by his second wife, Odile Crick, *F. in The Green Door*, 10" x 15", pencil on paper, \$17,500 (est. \$8000/12,000). Photo courtesy Christie's.



Francis Crick's 23-karat gold Nobel Prize medal, 65 mm in diameter (approximately 2½"), and his Nobel Prize diploma (not shown) sold to Jack Wang of Biomobie for \$2,270,500 (est. \$500,000 or more) at Heritage Auctions in New York City. According to Heritage, only one other Nobel Prize medal has previously come on the market. It was awarded in physics in 1975 to Aage Niels Bohr (1922-2009), whose father, Niels Bohr, won the Nobel Prize in physics in 1922. The medal's inheritor consigned it, the presentation box, and some associated ephemera to Denmark's Bruun Rasmussen auctioneers, which sold it on November 13, 2012, for €37,500 (est. €53,500/80,500) or \$47,605. The buyer was anonymous, and the fate of the medal is unknown.

On May 2 this year, however, Bruun Rasmussen auctioneers sold two more Nobel Prize medals. Ben Mottelson's 1975 medal in physics (est. €27,000/33,500), accompanied by the original presentation box, went at €61,500 or \$80,525, and Sune Bergström's 1982 medal in physiology/medicine (est. €27,000/33,500) brought €43,000 or \$56,300. Schinto photos.



Pictured is Francis Crick's endorsement on the check he received for the Nobel Prize in 1962. The check sold to Jack Wang of Biomobie for \$77,675 (est. \$50,000/75,000) at Heritage Auctions. Schinto photo.

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