



# **In the Beginning Was the Worm: Finding the Secrets of Life in a Tiny Hermaphrodite**

*Andrew Brown*

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This is the story of how three men won the Nobel Prize for their research on the humble nematode worm *C. elegans*; how their extraordinary discovery led to the sequencing of the human genome; how a global multibillion-dollar industry was born; and how the mysteries of life were revealed in a tiny, brainless worm.

In 1998 the nematode worm?perhaps the most intensively studied animal on earth?was the first multicellular organism ever to have its genome sequenced and its DNA mapped and read. "When we understand the worm, we will understand life," predicted John Sulston, one of the three Nobel laureates, and his prediction proved astonishingly accurate. Four years later, the research that led to this extraordinary event garnered three scientists a Nobel Prize. Along with Robert Horvitz and Sydney Brenner, Sulston discovered the phenomenon of programmed cell death in the worm, an essential concept that explains how biological development occurs in animal life and, as Horvitz later showed, how it occurs in human life. *C. elegans* is about as simple as an animal can be, but understanding its genetic organization is helping to reveal the mechanisms of life and, by extension, the mechanisms of our own lives. *In the Beginning Was the Worm* shows that in order to unlock the secrets of the human genome we must first understand the worm.

But this story is about more than just the worm. It is about how an eccentric group of impassioned scientists toiled in near anonymity for years, driven only by a deep passion for knowledge and scientific discovery. It is the story of countless hours of research, immense ambition, and one of the greatest discoveries in human history.

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