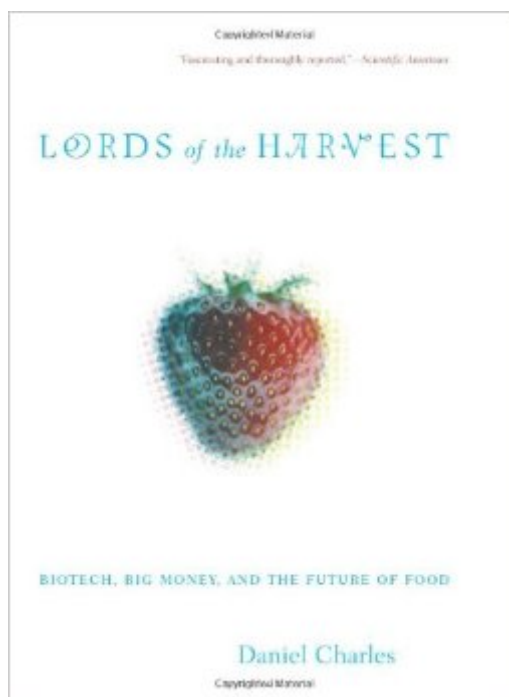


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Lords Of The Harvest: Biotech, Big Money, And The Future Of Food



Synopsis

Biotech companies are creating designer crops with strange powers-from cholesterol-reducing soybeans to tobacco plants that act as solar-powered pharmaceutical factories. They promise great benefits: better health for consumers and more productive agriculture. But the vision has a dark side. In *Lords of the Harvest*, Daniel Charles tells the real story behind "Frankenstein foods"-the story you won't hear from the biotech companies or their fiercest opponents. He reveals for the first time the cutthroat scientific competition and backroom business deals that led to the first genetically engineered foods. And he exposes the secrets of campaigns on both sides of the Atlantic aimed at bringing down the biotech industry. A riveting tale of boundless ambition, political intrigue, and the quest for knowledge, *Lords of the Harvest* is ultimately a story of idealism and conflicting dreams about the shape of a better world.

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Customer Reviews

Just as science learned to decode DNA through reverse genetics, a little bit of reverse reading might help explain why NPR correspondent Daniel Charles set out to write the agrobiotech equivalent of fly-on-the-wall industry epics like *World War 3.0*, *Liar's Poker*, and *Hit Men*. Read the epilogue first--here's where he most eloquently explains the dueling American myths (of both scientific progress and the sanctity of the land as God-given gifts) that have fueled the recent battle of biotechnology against environmentalism and consumer advocacy over genetically modified crops. It's a necessarily stirring justification for a story that, however well told, may lack for a general

audience some of the pathos or glamour of similar tussles within such fields as medicine or entertainment. This is really the story of one company--American chemical giant Monsanto, which, some 20 years ago, pushed forward the technology of injecting different plants such as corn and soybeans with genes that would make them able to act as their own insecticides (insects would simply die upon eating them). From there, Monsanto went on to orchestrate a stunning takeover of much of the seed business, but its plans for what seemed like world agricultural domination were trounced when first European, then U.S. activists sparked a massive backlash against GMOs ("genetically modified organisms") pumped up with the company's patented genes--even absent substantive scientific evidence that genetically modified crops were any more harmful (or, for that matter, more modified) to people or the environment than those without designer genes. Given the recent explosion of genetic research, it's fascinating to see the relatively primitive origins of this field in the early 1980s, and to discover the inner workings of world agribusiness, especially (as the farm-bred Charles rightly points out) in a society where most people have no idea where their food comes from, or what happens to it along the way. It's just that Charles's valiant attempt to make a bunch of nerdy, competitive scientists and soulless, profit-grubbing Monsanto execs interesting is mostly in vain. Still, you have to love the early '90s comedy of errors that was the grandiose launch and swift demise of the superengineered tomato--especially when an old-school tomato breeder tries to tell her boss, a biotech exec and agricultural illiterate, that nature's breeding process can't be accelerated to meet production goals. His curt response? "Think out of the box." (Or crate, as it were.) --Timothy Murphy --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A former technology correspondent for National Public Radio and Washington correspondent for New Scientist, Charles is also an excellent storyteller. Here he covers the history of genetic engineering in plant crops from the early 1980s to the present. Among the episodes covered are the surprise appearance of Starlink genes in taco shells, the Flavr Savr tomato, and the infamous Terminator gene that would produce crops with sterile seeds. What makes this book particularly interesting are the author's tales of the key individuals and groups involved in the biotechnology controversy: researchers, corporations (especially Monsanto and Pioneer Hi-Bred), farmers, the media, environmental and consumer activists, and the consumers themselves. This carefully researched and balanced account is intended to help the reader understand the how and the why of genetic engineering rather than make an argument for or against it. Charles saves his own ideas and opinions for the epilog. Two other thorough, recent primers on the subject are Bill Lambrecht's *Dinner at the New Gene Cafe* (LJ 8/01), which evenhandedly presents the pros and cons of the

debate, and Alan McHughen's Pandora's Picnic Basket (LJ 8/00), which focuses more on biotechnology. Recommended for public and academic libraries. William H. Wiese, Iowa State Univ. Lib., Ames Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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