The story of *The Selfish Gene*

**Michael Rodgers**

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*The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, published in 1976, famously became a bestseller and is still selling more than 40 years later. This behind-the-scenes account of its publication recounts the story as seen through the eyes of the book’s commissioning editor, from the initial experience of reading early draft chapters to publication eight months later. Elements of the story include the different views and lively debates on the right title for the book; choosing the Desmond Morris painting for the jacket; deciding whether or not to include illustrations; and the role television played when the book was launched. An American dimension places the book in the context of the fiercely fought sociobiology controversy at that time. The characteristics of the best popular science writing and publishing are discussed. Finally, *The Selfish Gene* is seen in relation to the books Dawkins went on to publish over the following 30 years.

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A few years after retiring from book publishing, I decided to set down for a general audience an account of life as a commissioning editor in science. In the book that resulted, *Publishing and the Advancement of Science: From selfish genes to Galileo’s finger* (Rodgers, 2014), I relate the story behind the publishing of Richard Dawkins’s first book. A single sentence from one of the hundred or so published reviews of *The Selfish Gene* (1976) perfectly encapsulates one reason why I found working on the book so absorbing and so intellectually exciting. The sentence, ‘The sort of
popular science writing that makes the reader feel like a genius’, from the New York Times’s review (Lehmann-Haupt, 1977), has regularly appeared on the book’s cover over the decades.

The behind-the-scenes account that follows is, I think, instructive as well as interesting. As Richard Charkin (2014) put it, in his review of my own book: ‘The story of the original publication of Richard Dawkins’s The Selfish Gene should be a case study at the Harvard Business School.’

Forty years on

At the beginning of 2016, Matt Ridley reassessed Richard Dawkins’s ‘pivotal reframing of evolution, 40 years on’, in a piece in Nature. His opening paragraph reads,

Books about science tend to fall into two categories: those that explain it to lay people in the hope of cultivating a wide readership, and those that try to persuade fellow scientists to support a new theory, usually with equations. Books that achieve both—changing science and reaching the public—are rare. Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species (1859) was one. The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins is another. From the moment of its publication 40 years ago, it has been a sparkling best-seller and a scientific game-changer. (Ridley, 2016)

Origins

On 23 February 1976, a handwritten note on New College letterhead arrived on my desk at the Oxford University Press (OUP), where I was a commissioning editor with an interest in popular science. From Roger Elliott, physicist and OUP Delegate (and later to be chief executive of the OUP), it told me that ‘One of the dons here, Dr C R Dawkins, is writing a popular science book tentatively called “The Selfish Gene” which he describes as in the genre of the “Naked Ape”. I have no idea whether he or it is any good but it might be worth looking into. I got the impression that he is looking for a publisher.’

I tried ringing Dawkins at the Zoology Department several times but without success and so wrote to him later that week asking if I might see the material so far written. In the middle of the following week, 3 March, I received a memo, the method of office communication in those pre-email days, from Dan Davin, head of the Academic Division. It reported on a conversation he had had the previous day with the philosopher Anthony Quinton, an OUP Delegate and a fellow of New College. Quinton had told Dan that ‘a New College man’ was writing ‘a rather lively book on the function of the gene’. I wrote a response on Dan’s memo and sent this back to him, explaining that I had already heard about it from Roger Elliott, had written to Dawkins, and was awaiting a response. My message ended, ‘All I have at the moment is the title, which is quite lovely: THE SELFISH GENE.’

Dawkins’s response to my letter came at the end of the next day: a brief telephone call from him to let me know that a package containing eight of the eleven planned chapters would be dropped off at the OUP’s porter’s lodge in time for me to collect on my way home. Ominously, Dawkins’s accompanying letter told me that Tom Maschler of Jonathan Cape had seen most of what so far had been written. But—a ray of hope—Dawkins
explained that he would be interested in discussing things with a ‘slightly different’ kind of publisher.

I knew before reaching the bottom of the first page of the opening chapter that here was something quite extraordinary. I can remember the sharp jolt as the expectation of perhaps no more than a prospective interesting read suddenly changed: the writing had reached out and grabbed me by the lapels. I can remember, too, periodically taking my eyes off the typescript, not simply to let the ideas sink in but also to allow the nervous energy of excitement to dissipate. This may all sound like a ludicrous over-reaction but it is how I remember the experience. Those who over the years have enjoyed reading *The Selfish Gene* will know why it works so well, why it casts such a potent spell: the writing, so fluent and with its wonderful rhythms; the big, intellectually exciting ideas, rich and complicated but so beautifully explained; and the marvellous stories from animal behaviour regularly brought in to illuminate points along the way (‘alive with fascinating stories’, as we put it in the jacket blurb, ‘about fish who queue up to have their teeth cleaned and then refrain from swallowing the tiny dentist; about ants who take slaves and tend fungus gardens; about the kamikaze bees who commit certain suicide when they sting robbers of the communal honey’). It was all completely new to me: I was trained in the physical sciences, my degrees are in chemistry, I had never been taught any biology, even at school, and this opening up of a wholly different world heightened the intensity of the experience.

Something else that seemed very clear to me as I read the opening pages was that here was a book that was going to create a stir. By the time I had finished I could say that, yes, reading the chapters had been exhilarating and that, yes, the whole thing had taken a powerful hold on my imagination. But, as an editor, what was really intoxicating was feeling wholly convinced that the book was going to make waves. It was going to sell.

I arrived at the office the following Monday morning, 8 March, full of enthusiasm for the book, and at the same time also sick with worry that I might lose it to Cape or another high-profile publishing house in London. The combination of excitement and worry had been keeping me awake at night, but the enthusiasm easily won and supplied me with all of the energy I needed. I telephoned Richard Dawkins and told him I thought the chapters were terrific and that I had loved reading them.

We arranged to have lunch at the Press later in the week, on Thursday. Then I rang Professor Jim Gowans. Jim, a distinguished Oxford immunologist, was the OUP Delegate with special responsibility for biology. His support would be essential if I managed to get the book as far as a formal proposal and put to the Delegates for their approval. I told Jim about the book and the effect that reading the chapters had had on me. If I got the chapters to him today, would he read as much as he could and get back to me with his reaction as soon as possible? He would.

At the end of that afternoon, wholly fortuitously, a meeting had been arranged with David McFarland to talk about a book he was working on for the Press. David was a senior academic in the Zoology Department and so a colleague of Richard Dawkins. David knew about the book, though had not actually seen any of it. He confirmed that Dawkins’s scientific judgement was sound. The views he was putting across, David went on, represented the picture as seen by modern biologists. So, Dawkins was not an eccentric out on a limb? No, confirmed David, he was simply a good expositor wanting to gain access to a wide lay audience. David had a final snippet of information and it greatly cheered me. Another publisher, he said, and I took this to be a reference to Jonathan Cape, thought that the present version was too intellectual for a mass readership.

Jim Gowans rang me the next day. He had been able to read about half of the eight chapters and liked them a lot. That said, it was not his field and so he said he wasn’t able to give the book a clean bill of health from the academic point of view. If there is a scientific flaw, Jim said, it would need someone like the geneticist Walter Bodmer to spot it.
I met Richard Dawkins for the first time on Thursday, 11 March. Over lunch I did my best to convince him the OUP could rise to the occasion and do justice to the book. My proposal, I said, would be to put the estimated extent of the final text of 65,000-odd words into 200 pages and publish in the following spring in hardback with a selling price of £2.95, cheap enough to encourage the maximum sale, with a paperback in perhaps 18 months’ time.

We talked about Cape. Richard’s fear about going with them was that they might want to over-sensationalize the book. One appeal of the OUP, he said, was that its imprint would confer a stamp of respectability. Also, Tom Maschler did not like the proposed title, thinking that ‘selfish’ was off-putting, a ‘down’ word. I said I thought that juxtaposing it with ‘gene’ was so unexpected that the resulting title was positively arresting. Meanwhile, Desmond Morris had suggested *The Gene Machine* as the book’s title. ‘That is a more saleable title than *The Selfish Gene*,’ Jon Stallworthy jotted on the memo I wrote summarizing this meeting for Dan Davin and his deputy, Jon, my immediate boss. I ended my memo, ‘Well, Dawkins is now going to talk to his wife, to Desmond Morris, and to David McFarland (I’ve alerted him to do what he can). Also, the bit I don’t like, he is going to let Tom Maschler know about the present situation. I can just see some people doing the OUP down, saying we’re not cut out to handle a book like this. So I tried to convince Dawkins about the changed attitudes here and so on—preparing him for possible comments based on our past reputation.’

That evening, I rang John Lord at his home. John was the trade marketing manager based at the OUP’s London office, Ely House in Dover Street. He asked me to get a copy of the chapters to him the next day, promising to read them over the weekend. And he agreed to come over to Oxford the following week to meet Dawkins and help in trying to persuade him to come to us.

I contacted Richard the following morning and asked him if he would postpone making any decision, and not talk to Tom Maschler, until after a meeting I wanted to arrange with John Lord the following week. Richard agreed. He went on to say that he had been thinking carefully about the possibility of rapid publication, meaning the coming autumn. He said he was afraid that the subject might well take on bandwagon proportions and that next spring could be too late to make the maximum impact. In principle this could be managed and I said we would discuss it when John Lord joined us the following week.

At John Lord’s suggestion I had a copy of the first few pages of the typescript dispatched by express mail to the OUP in New York and telephoned a colleague there to alert him. If New York liked the sound of the book, I said, and they let us know this at the beginning of next week, we could report it to Dawkins when John Lord and I met him for lunch. This could help to sway his decision. My American colleague agreed to read the pages as soon as they arrived and said he would hope to telephone me on Monday. He did but, alas, was cautious: ‘was it just another book?’ It was agreed that I would send over the eight draft chapters so that he and his colleagues could get a proper feel for the book. In my covering note sent with the chapters I wrote, ‘Forget your worries about this being just another book, as discussed on the phone. This is new ground as far as the general reader is concerned. In fact if you don’t sit up half the night finishing off the typescript and then concluding we have something really terrific on our hands …’

John Lord and I had lunch with Richard on Wednesday, 17 March. It turned out that John, like Richard, had read zoology at Oxford, a couple of years ahead of him. I took this to be a good omen, but something even more extraordinary was to follow. Richard had travelled to Oxford as a schoolboy to take the entrance examination and it was discovered that he had come without a set of the laboratory instruments needed for the practical. An undergraduate in the college who could lend Richard the required equipment was found, and that undergraduate was John Lord. I doubt that this odd coincidence played any serious part in helping to make up Richard’s mind to sign with the OUP, which he agreed to do during our lunch, but it is nevertheless a pleasing tale.

**Enter … Horizon (BBC television)**

The following morning I travelled to Long Crendon, a village about a dozen miles from Oxford, to visit Norman Gowar at his home. Norman was a lecturer in mathematics at the Open University and I had commissioned him to write a book on mathematics for the general reader. As the opening of the eventual jacket blurb had it, ‘Many people are frightened of mathematics and yet would like
to have some understanding of what the subject is about. This book is for them.’ And Norman was the man to write it: *An Invitation to Mathematics* was published in 1979. The routine Norman and I had established involved his sending me a draft chapter, which I would edit, meaning identifying exactly where I started to find the going tough, or where I simply did not understand something, or felt the need of an example to push home a point, or wanted a slowing down, or a pause with a ‘taking stock’ summary, and so on. We would arrange a date for me to come over to Long Crendon, go over the edited chapter or chapters, agree on the changes Norman would make in the revised version, and then walk down to the local pub for a beer and sandwich lunch. As soon as we got to the pub on this particular day, our working session completed, I began to tell Norman about the Dawkins book. I enjoyed having him as a captive audience and he was a good listener. Eventually confessing himself intrigued, he casually said that he would mention it to Vivienne King, someone he knew at the BBC. Norman regularly gave lectures for the Open University, filmed and transmitted by the BBC, and so he had a number of contacts there. I didn’t really register the significance of this, returned to Oxford, and thought no more about it.

Just over a week later, on Friday, 26 March, I was telephoned out of the blue by Vivienne King. She said she was calling from the BBC unit responsible for making the *Horizon* science documentary films and that she had heard some details of the Richard Dawkins book from Norman Gowar. Could I tell her a bit more about it? Vivienne went on to say that they had just begun to think about a *Horizon* programme in the genetics area for transmission in the autumn. I promised to put in the post a copy of a blurb we were in the process of polishing in order to give her a clearer idea about the book. Vivienne was on the phone again on Monday morning. The blurb had arrived, they were all fascinated, and so on. Then a request: she and Peter Jones, a producer for *Horizon*, would like to come to Oxford for a discussion and also meet Dawkins. Of course, I said. When did she have in mind? Her response was immediate: ‘How about tomorrow?’

Tomorrow it was and I took the three of them for lunch at the Trout in Godstow, just outside Oxford. Before the arrival of the BBC duo, Richard repeated a point he had made before, that he was not the originator of the basic ideas described in the book. For this reason, he told me, he wished to take something of a back seat in any television presentation. I think too that he felt some nervousness at the prospect of being in front of the camera for the first time: would he be able to carry it off, or would he freeze? Peter and Vivienne asked early on over our lunch if he would consider presenting the programme and, on receiving a tentative no, immediately switched to asking who might be suitable. The answer to that was John Maynard Smith (JMS). Richard later wondered if he had done the right thing, but there was no turning back: Peter and Vivienne now had JMS firmly in their sights. The best we could hope for was Richard being listed in the credits as the author of the book, *The Selfish Gene*, and, most important of all, that the film would be called ‘The Selfish Gene’.

Peter and Vivienne said they now had to persuade *Horizon’s* editor, Michael Goodliffe, but they were so completely sold on the idea that this seemed to be a formality. They took away a couple of copies of the typescript and said they would now outline a possible approach for the programme for discussion with Richard.

**An editor’s role**

Formal acceptance of the book for publication required academic reports confirming that the science was sound. I rang Professor Walter Bodmer, head of Oxford’s Genetics Department, and asked if he would read the Dawkins typescript in a hurry to check for scientific flaws. Walter agreed to do what he could and said that a copy ought also to be read by an American population geneticist working in his department, Dr Glenys Thomson.

Walter telephoned me on Friday, 26 March. He said that he and Glenys Thomson had picked up a number of points they thought were wrong and that the best way of dealing with this was for Richard to have a meeting with them. Walter wanted in the mean time to give me an instant reaction. His central point was that the simple parts of the book would be too simplistic to satisfy a professional audience and that the passages dealing with the more sophisticated concepts that Dawkins covered would be too sophisticated for a lay audience. In short, there was a danger that it would fall between two stools. I set down a summary of this conversation with
Walter in a note for Dan Davin and Jon Stallworthy, and on this particular criticism of Walter’s wrote, ‘This is a question of publishing judgement and although it is a fair point I do not myself agree with it. My view is that the book is so well written and so compulsively readable that whenever sophisticated concepts are dealt with there is a positive momentum carrying the general reader along. In other words, he has a positive incentive to follow through the arguments, which are put over in a very readable fashion.’

On the following Monday morning, 29 March, I went round to the Genetics Department and spent an hour or so with Glenys Thomson going through her annotated copy (and also Walter’s copy) of the typescript. Walter came by for a brief word and it was arranged that Richard should have a working session with them in the department that afternoon. In my note on my meeting with Glenys I wrote, ‘The central criticism seemed to be this. Dawkins argues that one can talk about individual genes. These are the potentially immortal replicating units the book is all about. Glenys Thomson and Bodmer say that one cannot really talk about individual genes: one must talk about all the genes in an individual body. One cannot separate out the operations of individual genes.’

I asked Richard to give me a ring when his afternoon meeting with Glenys and Walter had finished. He gave me an account of how it had gone over a drink early that evening in the Royal Oak in Woodstock Road. He had spent three hours with them and they had talked through each of their points of criticism. Richard told me that virtually all of these points stemmed from the one central issue about whether one talks of individual genes or the so-called ‘genome’—all of the genes in a body taken together. ‘This’, I wrote in my note on the meeting, ‘is a point of controversy. After talking to Dawkins I am convinced that this is what it is rather than a black-and-white right or wrong issue.’

My note continued, ‘If Dawkins took the Bodmer–Thomson view to its logical conclusion it would completely emasculate the whole message of his book. Bodmer and Thomson argue that one cannot really talk about individual genes: one must talk about all the genes in an individual body. One cannot separate out the operations of individual genes.’

What followed is pretty unimportant in the grand scheme of things but it made an impression on me and it has stayed in my memory. It was a hot, sunny day and the window of my office, overlooking the main quad of the OUP building, was wide open. Richard arrived in the middle of the afternoon and suggested that perhaps the best way of proceeding would be for him to read some of his revised passages. It was the complete contrast between Richard’s chosen style of spoken delivery, completely neutral, and the words and sentence rhythms, which were anything but, that made the episode so memorable. Occasionally I asked him to clarify or expand on a particular point and he would do so, giving the impression that he thought the imparted facts were commonplace. They were small details, certainly, but rather wonderful nevertheless and I urged him to in-
corporate them. I can remember just one example, tiny, but it gives the flavour. Richard was explaining how plants often propagate by means of suckers.

‘You mean, a whole wood of elm trees could be a single individual?’

‘Yes.’

‘I think it’s worth putting that in!’

In early June, I wrote personal letters to the managers of the OUP’s branch offices in Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Desmond Morris had stressed to Richard at an early stage the importance of having a publisher who would push the book so hard initially that it would start being talked about. But this was nothing to do with that; it wasn’t a carefully orchestrated plan to promote the book throughout the OUP. I had been swept off my feet, and my spontaneous reaction was to want to share my enthusiasm, whether this was in chatting to Norman Gowar at his local pub in Long Crendon or, now, writing to the OUP branch managers. They would find out about The Selfish Gene, and many other titles coming in the same season, through the standard communication channels, but I urged them not to think that this book was ‘routine, or even slightly better than routine popular science’. Then followed my attempt to persuade them: ‘This is not some worthy attempt to try and popularize an area of science. Forget about science, popular or otherwise, and just think of this as a book that is so readable, so gripping, and so fascinating that, cliché or not, you won’t be able to put it down. And I don’t just mean you. I defy you to find anyone in your building—accountants, secretaries, salesmen, packers, editors, the lot—who will not find the book fascinating. How many books can you say that about?’

In due course, sets of proofs went out so that people could judge for themselves. An out-of-the-blue response from David Cunningham, manager of the Australian branch in Melbourne, was heart-warming and astonishing in equal measure. It was a request for a quote to supply them with 3000 copies of the book, and it ended with a plea for me to tell him if we thought they were ‘mad’ for contemplating such a staggering quantity. I had had some contact with David at the OUP in Oxford and had him down as the quintessential Mr Caution. It was nice to have been proved so utterly wrong on that particular score.

The right title?

There was much agonizing over the book’s title. I loved the original The Selfish Gene from the moment I first read it in Roger Elliott’s letter. For me it had a brooding presence and I sometimes imagined the words suddenly appearing on a screen, as if the title of a film, accompanied at the same instant by the doom-laden opening chord of Mozart’s overture to Don Giovanni. But the trouble with having the word ‘gene’ in the singular, argued some colleagues, is that it implies one mutant, rogue gene among a population of normal ones. At an early stage, John Lord suggested Our Selfish Genes but, over our drink in the Royal Oak, Richard rejected this, though he said he would accept the compromise The Selfish Genes. Other colleagues felt strongly we should go for Desmond Morris’s suggestion, The Gene Machine. I argued against this, ending my note describing the sessions involving Glenys, Walter, and Richard, ‘I can see clearly all the advantages but it is simply the wrong title. It does not convey the central message of the book that genes behave as if they were selfish. The Gene Machine is neutral.’

In his memoir, An Appetite for Wonder, Richard revisits the issue of his first book’s title. Describing a meeting with Tom Maschler at Jonathan Cape, he writes,

He’d read my chapters and liked them, but urged me to change the title. ‘Selfish,’ he explained to me, is a ‘down word’. Why not The Immortal Gene? With hindsight, he was very probably right. I can’t now remember why I didn’t follow his advice. I think I should have done. (Dawkins, 2013, p. 275)

As Matt Ridley put it in his Nature piece, marking the 40th anniversary of The Selfish Gene’s publication, taking Tom Maschler’s advice on the title ‘might have short-circuited the endless arguments, so beloved of his critics and so redolent of the intentional stance (in which we tend to impute mental abilities to unconscious things, from thunderstorms to plants), about whether selfishness need be conscious. It might even have avoided the common misconception that Dawkins was advocating individual selfishness.’
Richard is nevertheless wrong! The Immortal Gene is boring and unmemorable; The Selfish Gene is the opposite. As a trade title (one that would appeal to a general readership), it was the right choice.

Choosing the jacket picture

There was much agonizing too over the jacket. We struggled with a variety of approaches, from images of birds with huge gapes to a scene of aggression in a children's playground, but nothing seemed to work. Then Richard telephoned me out of the blue to tell me that he had just been talking to Desmond Morris. In his spare time, Richard began, Desmond was a Surrealist painter, his paintings being influenced by biological shapes and structures, and Desmond wondered if we would be interested in looking at the ones on display around his house in Oxford and perhaps choosing one for the jacket of The Selfish Gene. Richard and I, together with Andrew Thomson, the OUP designer to be responsible for the design of the book and jacket, walked over to Desmond's house one afternoon at the beginning of April. His paintings were on display all over the house and I think our tour took in every single room. Eventually we converged on one painting. Everyone agreed that this was the one. Its strong central focus would clearly lend the finished design a powerful impact.

Without further ado Desmond transferred the chosen work to an easel, strategically placed underneath a spotlight, and then produced gin and tonics for us to sip while we gazed at The Expectant Valley. In 2006, the OUP published a special 30th anniversary edition of The Selfish Gene, pleasingly reproducing this original jacket illustration.

Who might write the foreword?

At the beginning of the summer, Richard raised the question of having a foreword written for the book. Who might write it? The originators of the main ideas described in The Selfish Gene were Bill Hamilton, at Imperial College London, John Maynard Smith, at the University of Sussex, and Bob Trivers, at Harvard University. A foreword from any of these giants would be wonderful but one from the American would carry extra weight with the OUP in New York, who would be selling the book in potentially the biggest single market.

We discovered that Trivers was on sabbatical leave from Harvard, carrying out fieldwork in the depths of Jamaica, but contact was made and a copy of the typescript dispatched to him there. The timetable was tight: with our planned publication date set for October, we needed to have the foreword, if Trivers agreed to write one, by the end of June. Richard received a letter from Trivers in the middle of June: 'The Selfish Gene has reached me in Jamaica ... I’ve thoroughly enjoyed reading your book. From start to finish it is well written and well argued. I hope it gets a very wide readership. It’s especially gratifying that the first popular account of the new social theory should have been written by a scientist with a full grasp of the relevant theory and a sure feel for the most telling illustrations. I only hope you can get the book out in time for my fall course. It will be a pleasure to write a short foreword and I should have it to you by the end of June.'

Handwritten, the foreword arrived in the nick of time in early July. It was typed in the office and sent off to the typesetter on the same day. A covering letter from Trivers requested that 400 copies of the book should be shipped to Harvard as soon as they were printed in order to be ready for his fall introductory course.

Should the book be illustrated?

The book was presented to the sales reps at the summer sales conference at the beginning of July and an issue that had been raised previously was aired, briefly, again: should The Selfish Gene be illustrated? Would pictures make this important book even more attractive from the selling point of view? The question revolved for me around what people get out of reading a popular science book. In many cases there is a genuine desire to find out more about a subject, a subject that seems on the face of it to be intrinsically fascinating. ‘I want to know more about it,’ says the reader, ‘and experience some of its intellectual buzz.’ Popular science books of this kind, and there are many wonderful examples, have an overt didactic purpose, recognized by author and reader alike, and in these cases pictures, including diagrams, are positively helpful—along with top-quality writing, needless to say. The Selfish Gene was outside this category, or so it had seemed to me when I first read it. It had felt like reading a novel, appealing wholly to the imagination, with no accompanying conscious wish to learn about
a new field—though that was happening, delivered in spades. Having illustrations would dilute the impact, I thought, and lessen the intensity of the experience of reading the book.

Horizon: reprint before publication?

Peter Jones rang from the BBC in the middle of September to let me know that the transmission date for Horizon’s ‘The Selfish Gene’ had been set for Monday, 15 November, with a repeat on the following Saturday. This meant that the programme would be going out just over two weeks after the book had been published (the publication date had earlier been amended to 28 October).

What would be the effect of the television programme on sales of the book? This boiled down to a simple, specific question: should we order a reprint of the book before publication? The dilemma was a familiar one: a reprint would need to be put in hand before the programme went out. If we went ahead with one, but the effect of the film on book buying was minimal, then we would be left with unsold stock in the warehouse; the opposite would mean the book would go out of stock at a critical time.

John Lord, Martin Cowell (the OUP’s home sales manager), and I arrived at the BBC’s Television Centre on 1 October for an advance viewing of the film. Afterwards, we got into Martin’s car, having resolved to come to a decision on a reprint before we went our separate ways, and drove around Shepherd’s Bush while we agonized. Back to our starting point and still no decision, John gave an order to Martin: ‘Drive round Shepherd’s Bush again.’ More agonizing, and yet a third circuit of Shepherd’s Bush, but finally a decision: a reprint of 4000 copies would be put in hand immediately. It turned out to be the right decision.

An advertisement was prepared linking the book and the Horizon film, to be carried in some of the Sunday newspapers on 14 November, the day before the transmission date. It read as follows:

Konrad Lorenz, Robert Ardrey and others have popularized the theory that animals behave for the good of the species. They do not: they behave for the good of their genes, whose world, as Richard Dawkins shows, is a world of savage competition, ruthless exploitation, and deceit. This important, controversial issue is the theme of BBC2’s Horizon programme tomorrow night: see it, and read the book.

But it was not to be. Peter Jones rang me on 5 October to give me the bad news. He had just had a session with his boss, not the editor of Horizon but someone more senior, and the boss had heard about our plan to link the book with the television programme in an advertisement. The boss was strongly opposed to any such linking, saying that it reeked of ‘collusion’, and was even prepared to take the ultimate step and cancel transmission of the film if we went ahead with the planned advertisement. The matter was resolved amicably, and a modified advertisement agreed in a discussion between John Lord and the new editor of Horizon, Simon Campbell-Jones. John summarized for me what lay behind the drama in a note reporting on his conversation:

From what Campbell-Jones had to say, it would seem that his ‘bosses’—he mentioned no names—are as much concerned about the timing of the ads as about what goes into them. Apparently, it’s alright for a commercial concern to mention a BBC programme in advertising once the programme has been broadcast (and its audience rating forever incapable of being affected by the additional publicity!), but quite another if this is done beforehand. It is the evidence that that affords of the BBC favouring some outside bodies with details of its programming before the information had been made generally known (e.g., by announcement in Radio Times) that worries the top brass.

Peter Jones told us a few weeks after the programme’s transmission that the audience had been about 1.5 million. Rather low for Horizon, he said, going on to explain that, although the programme had been up against the highly advertised Royal Variety Show, the opinion at Horizon was that the film’s title had lost them a potentially larger audience. The with-hindsight view was that the title had put people off because having ‘gene’ in any title implies hard science and a laboratory-based programme. From the book’s point of view, the title was of course perfect.

American dimension

The OUP in New York were printing their own copies
of the book, their publication scheduled for December, but in the meantime 400 copies of the UK edition were shipped to Harvard to be in time for Trivers’s introductory course. These quickly sold out and Harvard ordered a further 200 copies. I was visiting New York at the time, in late October, and had arranged a flying visit to Boston, principally to meet Bob Trivers for the first time. Bob’s course was already in full swing, the latest of his lectures timetabled to be given at the end of the morning of my visit, and I asked him if I might sit in on it. The class was large, several hundred students, and what was especially satisfying was hearing Trivers announce at the end the reading assignment to be done before next week’s lecture: a couple of chapters from The Selfish Gene.

The New York biology editor of the OUP at the time was Bob Tilley, who travelled to Boston with me. He had spent most of his editorial career at Columbia University Press and while there he had enjoyed a long association with Richard Lewontin, now a senior academic at Harvard. Bob had arranged to call on Lewontin during our visit and he invited me to join him. Almost a quarter of a century later, I commissioned Ullica Segerstråle’s definitive account of the sociobiology controversy, Defenders of the Truth: The battle for science in the sociobiology debate and beyond, published by the OUP in 2000, but at the time of my visit to Harvard in 1976 I was not fully up to speed with the finer points of this battle and its dramatis personae. An amusing incident in Bob Trivers’s office had provided me with a small insight, however. Bob’s phone had rung just before we were about to leave for his lecture. Bob looked over to me and identified the caller: ‘Lewontin.’ Then with a grin, he spat out with a pantomime delivery, ‘The snake!’

The sociobiology controversy had begun in the summer of 1975 when Edward O. Wilson, a distinguished Harvard entomologist, published his Sociobiology: The new synthesis, in which he defined sociobiology as a new discipline devoted to ‘the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behaviour’. The book was soon subjected to intense criticism because Wilson devoted his final chapter to our own species, Homo sapiens, suggesting that human sex role divisions, aggressiveness, moral concerns, religious beliefs, and much more have a genetic basis. In one dramatic episode, some three years after the book’s publication, Wilson, about to speak at a symposium sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, had a jug of water poured over his head by a group of hecklers. Ullica Segerstråle interviewed all of the central participants in the controversy. ‘The characters in my story,’ she wrote, ‘are all defenders of the truth—it is just that they have different conceptions of where the truth lies.’

Lewontin was in good humour when Bob Tilley and I arrived at his office. He told Bob with evident delight that Nature had just sent him a copy of The Selfish Gene to review. Bob explained that I was the book’s editor and, simply to be polite, I said something along the lines of my hoping he’d enjoy reading it. ‘You don’t expect me to be nice about the book, do you?’ was the response. He then turned back to Bob and changed the subject. The review in Nature (Lewontin, 1977) appeared the following March and was critical in the extreme. Bill Hamilton, one of the giants whose work is described in The Selfish Gene, wrote to Nature about the review. His letter, published a couple of months later (Hamilton, 1977), began,

Bob explained that I was the book’s editor and, simply to be polite, I said something along the lines of my hoping he’d enjoy reading it. ‘You don’t expect me to be nice about the book, do you?’ was the response.
existing outsider's introduction to a new paradigm and a new field of knowledge but, in its overview of the situation and in many original details, is itself a significant contribution to this field.

Enter … Vogue

*Vogue*’s interest in the book was, for me, and for Richard Dawkins, a surprise out of the blue. Shortly after the publication of *The Selfish Gene*, before the book had had time to become a talked-about bestseller, Dawkins was invited by the editor of *Vogue* to write an article for them on selfish genes. This was a subject, she assured Dawkins, that would be of great interest to their readers.

*Vogue*’s introduction to the piece (Dawkins, 1977) reads: ‘The author’s book *The Selfish Gene* throws a new and disconcerting light on our supposedly highest instincts. Sir Peter Medawar, reviewing it, described Dawkins as “one of the most brilliant of the rising generation of biologists”. Here he explains how maternal tenderness, sexual love and friendly self-denial may all be weapons in a selfish fight for survival, the survival of your genes.’

I admired *Vogue* for spotting ahead of the crowd that ‘selfish gene’ was likely to enter the currency of everyday conversation. I had visions of their readers dropping the term into conversations at hunt balls and cocktail parties. Perhaps, I thought, some of them would go on to read the actual book.

**Epilogue**

*The Selfish Gene* was published in hardback in the UK on 28 October 1976 (list price £2.95). The print run was 5000 copies and a reprint of 4000 copies had been put in hand before publication. The planned publication date of 21 October was moved back a week when it was realized that it would clash with another OUP star title, *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*, the latter taking precedence for the earlier date (21 October is Trafalgar Day). The OUP in New York printed their own copies, publishing the book in December (list price US$8.95).

Matt Ridley concluded his 40th-anniversary piece on the book for *Nature* thus:

“It was an immediate success, garnering more than 100 reviews, mostly positive. Dawkins went on to write books that were better in certain ways. *The Extended Phenotype* was more groundbreaking, *The Blind Watchmaker* more persuasive, *Climbing Mount Improbable* more logical, *River out of Eden* and *Unweaving the Rainbow* more lyrical, *The Ancestor’s Tale* more encyclopaedic, *The God Delusion* more controversial. But they were all variations on the themes he so eloquently and adventurously set out in *The Selfish Gene*.”


**Postscript: The world of the first-edition collector**

In the summer of 2016, I received an email from Richard Dawkins, forwarding to me a message from an American who knew him. In his covering note Richard explained that the forwarded message was from a collector of first editions. A very serious collector, Richard added. This collector’s library contained a Gutenberg Bible, more than one *On the Origin of Species* by Darwin, and—a bizarre touch, this—a copy of *Mein Kampf* containing a handwritten dedication: ‘To J. Goebbels, from A. Hitler’. In his message the American told Richard that he thought that—at last—he might have acquired a first edition of *The Selfish Gene*. It had the right year on the copyright page, and the right jacket, but it had been printed in the United States. Was it a first edition (which I took to mean, from the first printing)?

Readers of this account of the book’s history will know that the answer was no. After explaining this in my response, I went on to say that I happened to have on my shelves a spare copy from the first impression. The offer was gratefully accepted, together with an additional request. ‘May I be greedy?’ he asked. Might I get Richard Dawkins to sign the copy before it was dispatched? This was arranged.

A friend who knows the world of collectors’ editions later told me that I had been very generous, inviting me to visit the viaLibri website, the marketplace for old, rare, and out-of-print books, to see for myself. Yes, I discovered, prices for first editions of *The Selfish Gene* can be impressive. No matter: it was enough for me to know that my spare copy was going to a good home.
References
