

UCSD biologist to receive advancement of science award for scientific writings to the lay public

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UCSD BIOLOGIST TO RECEIVE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AWARD FOR SCIENTIFIC WRITINGS TO THE LAY PUBLIC

Christopher Wills, biologist and critically acclaimed author at the University of California, San Diego, will be honored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) for his work in explaining the biological wonders of evolutionary science to the lay public.

Wills, who is a researcher in microbiology and evolution and often writes on scientific subjects that are both controversial and of great interest to the public, has been named to receive the 1998 AAAS Award for Public Understanding of Science and Technology. The award recognizes scientists and engineers who make outstanding contributions to the popularization of science and help improve communication between the scientific community and the public.

Previous winners of the award include astronomer-physicist Carl Sagan and Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson. Wills will receive the award in January at the AAAS's 1999 annual meeting in Anaheim, Calif.

The author of five books written for the general public, including the recently released *Children of Prometheus: The Accelerating Pace of Human Evolution* (Helix Books/Perseus Books), Wills has helped mold current thinking on topics ranging from molecular biology to the evolution of the human brain.

In his books on human evolution, Wills emphasizes how the many ways in which we have modified our environment have had an impact on our evolution, actually driving it in new directions. This evolutionary feedback process, he believes, has resulted in the rapid growth of the human brain and mental faculties.

Wills also contends that billions of years of adaptation to environmental challenges have resulted in genes that can readily mutate in certain directions. Genes that survive assaults from the environment, he says, carry an "accumulated wisdom" that makes it easier for them to adapt to similar threats in the future.

In a forthcoming article in *Scientific American* magazine (co-authored with Oxford University biologist Richard Moxon), Wills examines newly discovered classes of genes that have these properties. Understanding such genes could further our knowledge of immune system diseases, mental illness, the nature of enzymes and our future evolution, he believes.

Said Wills in a 1989 interview with the *San Diego Business Journal*: "Evolution is already a pretty controversial subject. But I'm not... saying Darwin's theory is wrong. I'm just suggesting there's another dimension to evolution, that's all."

Wills' other works include: *The Runaway Brain*; *Yellow Fever*, *Black Goddess: The Coevolution of People and Plagues*; and *Exons, Introns and Talking Genes*. His work has been translated into many other languages. Wills is

also a reviewer of other scientific books, with more than 30 such reviews published since 1990 in journals such as Science and Nature.

Born in London, England, Wills received his Ph.D in genetics from the University of California, Berkeley. In 1972 he joined the faculty at UCSD where he is currently professor of biology.

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