A Gallo Gotcha

February 1, 2003 By Lawrence Goodman

Science Fictions
By John Crewdson
(Little, Brown)

In 1983, a big-deal federal researcher announced he'd discovered the retrovirus that causes AIDS. But is Robert Gallo a national hero -- or a fraud who blinded us with science? In this gripping but galumphing account, John Crewdson argues that Gallo's claim was one of the great hoaxes of modern medicine. Gallo hadn't "discovered" the AIDS virus, Crewdson says; he'd stolen it -- from a competing French team. The powerful and wily bureaucrat then hid the deed, Crewdson alleges, with help from a Reagan administration anxious to cover up its own AIDS inaction.

How does Crewdson know all this? Well, he invested 10 years of his life playing undercover Javert, scouring Gallo's every pronouncement and chasing him hither and yon. Indeed, Crewdson's prose rattles at times with his desperation to trace these shenanigans -- and to justify the book's melodramatic subtitle: "A Scientific Mystery, a Massive Cover-Up and the Dark Legacy of Robert Gallo." The whodunit is most compelling when it nails the many government machinations to protect the rep of America's star AIDS researcher.

But by page 240, Crewdson still hasn't proved that Gallo committed anything worse than a routine lab blunder. This doesn't, of course, excuse Gallo's double-dealing. But the browbeaten reader may begin to sympathize with the too-much-protested-against subject -- and hope the author can get on with his life.

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