

BOOK REVIEW

Molecular Memories by Robert G. Jahn and Brenda J. Dunne. Princeton, NJ: ICRL Press, 2015. 120 pp. \$12 (paperback). ISBN 978-1936033218.

For more than a quarter century, there was a surprising and curious intellectual ferment in the basement of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Princeton University. This was the PEAR Lab, short for Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Laboratory, and though its works and contributions to the world of consciousness research are widely known, there is a back story that is worth telling, not only for its intrinsic interest but for the more subtle implications and encouragements it brings. In the interest of full disclosure, the review author was part of the PEAR family for some 22 years.

The PEAR Lab was built on a collaborative foundation laid by Bob Jahn and Brenda Dunne, and grew quickly into its role as a leading research center that was a magnet for professionals interested in the nature and capacities of human consciousness, and for students exploring the range of intellectual possibilities. It also drew ordinary and not so ordinary people from the public, as well as from government and industry. The attraction of unusual and sophisticated research was enhanced greatly by a warm and welcoming environment different from what most of us envision as a university laboratory. One might say the place was more PEAR than Lab, and yet it hewed without question to the canons of best practice in scientific terms. Quite a place, and deserving of the documentation, descriptions, and anecdotes gathered here in *Molecular Memories* by Jahn and Dunne.

This is the proverbial “slim volume” (119 pages), but it contains a delightful collection of short chapters, each providing some flavor of the richly creative environment of the PEAR Lab. Most chapters focus on the “molecular” of the title, namely the interactions and the complementary relationship of the two authors. Bob Jahn became persuaded in the late 1970s that possible effects of human consciousness on physical systems deserved a high-tech examination. He began setting up a research project that would need hands-on management that he, as Dean of the School, would not be able to provide. He found the right person in Brenda Dunne, and that set the research program—and a decades-long collaboration—in motion. The first four chapters of *Molecular Memories* are about putting

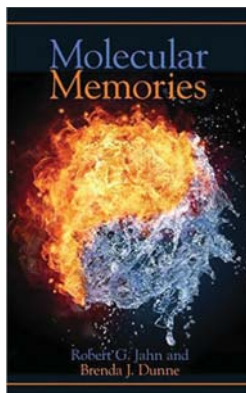
the necessary resources together, with some uphill challenges and some decidedly remarkable assists from chance meetings and connections. Chapter 5, named “Christening,” explains how the PEAR Lab got its name, and points to the collection of anomalies that made it clear there really wasn’t any choice—it had to be PEAR.

Many of the anecdotes are about who came to the Lab. Some were visitors with an agenda, perhaps having to do with government programs or intelligence operations. Many were just curious, but sufficiently so that they became what we called “operators” or participants in the experiments.

Some were so deeply struck that they became part of the PEAR family, either as volunteers or, in a few cases, as staff members. Possibly the most interesting of our guests were schoolchildren, about 10 years old. In the chapter, “Tell the young people,” Brenda and Bob describe the repeated and delightful visits from nearby schools of batches of a dozen or so bright and energetic kids. Inspirational—in both directions.

Though the book covers a lot of territory, the authors couldn’t include all the many incidents that helped define the Lab. For example, a remarkable moment when we were talking about the Lab environment—coffee tables and comfortable chairs, interesting pictures, nice music or pleasant ambient sounds like flowing water. Though no tape was running, we suddenly noticed extremely realistic water sounds, which we discovered were coming from pipes above the drop ceiling in the next room. The source turned out to be very curious indeed—the pipes, which had once been part of an AC system, were no longer connected. Or the time we agreed not to mention the name of an unpleasant character who had visited a few months earlier from Eastern Europe, only to have him appear the next day. Or the awesome Halloween parties that stimulated the real creativity of the PEAR family and friends. Obviously, “you had to be there,” but *Molecular Memories* is a window into a unique program populated by interesting folks.

The Lab was sometimes more intense than the engineering school environment would suggest, because the challenges and the promise of the experiments aroused strong emotions in powerful personalities. Though there was deep mutual respect, there was also an unspoken but clear commitment to unfettered and unfiltered expression. The idea was to get it right and get it done, using ideas that could survive strong, critical discussion. A hint of this can be found in three chapters called The Meds, The Feds, and Professional Societies and Skeptics.



Long ago, I suggested to Brenda that she needed one day to write the raconteur's version of the PEAR Lab's life and times. Those who know her will understand what I meant by that, because she is a marvelous storyteller. And those of you who have spent any time with Bob know his impeccable wit and fine sense of history. There are, as noted earlier, many more stories that could be told to illuminate those three remarkable decades of science and art Bob and Brenda put together at PEAR, but this opens a door. *Molecular Memories* is different from the more technical books these two scientists have published. It gives a taste of the contextual chemistry that allowed that work to be done.

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