

**ME, “VIRUS TRAFFICKER”:
*A STORY OF SCIENCE AND BITTER INJUSTICE***

by **Ilaria Capua**



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Synopsis

Often in the history of science, religion, gender and race stood between scientists and their scientific goals. Galileo (1564–1642), the Italian astronomer and physicist, was tried and convicted in 1633 for publishing a treatise on his observation that the earth revolves around the sun. The Inquisition banned his writings, and Galileo spent the remainder of his life under house arrest. In the 1930's, Einstein, like other Jewish emigrants, fled Nazi Germany for America, where he revolutionized science and technology. The recent book and popular film *Hidden Figures* tells the story of African-American women mathematicians who helped win the Space Race in the mid-twentieth century. Prior to that research, few people knew that Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson overcame racial and gender discrimination while working at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Such examples from history compel us to examine our present: what adverse forces hinder women scientists today as they strive to become expert and trustworthy defenders of science?

Io, Trafficante di Virus makes a valuable contribution to that discussion. Written by one of today's leading women scientists, Ilaria Capua, this memoir is a fascinating account of the scientific, political and legal challenges Capua faced, as well as how she transcended those challenges.

It is June 20, 2016. Ilaria lands at the Orlando International Airport in Florida. She is alone with her cat and her two large suitcases. Her husband and 12-year-old daughter will join her one week later. She has sold her house in Padua, and resigned as a member of the Italian Parliament. She is a world-renowned virologist who has been charged with international trafficking of viruses. The charges carry the punishment of life imprisonment. But she has arrived in the US to start a new life. A prestigious position at the University of Florida awaits her. As she writes, "I am starting over at age 50."

Since she was a child, Ilaria knew that she wanted to be a scientist. She followed her passion, enrolling and successfully completing – two years ahead of schedule – her degree in veterinary medicine. Years later, Capua became a renowned virologist, focusing her efforts on avian influenza (known as bird flu), establishing a research laboratory of international repute. Together with her team, she developed the first vaccination program for bird flu in Europe. She also provided leadership for pandemic preparedness, challenging the World Health Organization (WHO) position, and igniting an international debate on genetic data sharing in the face of an epidemic. Her leadership led to a change in the international approach to pandemic preparedness. Her achievements were reported by mainstream media worldwide, including the Economist, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal.

Her success was evidently too much for some people. After being included in Seed's Revolutionary Mind series and being named the first woman to receive the Penn Vet World leadership award in Animal Health, things at her institute got rough for her. She began receiving anonymous letters of warning, and the working environment became very challenging.

She decided that it was time to leave the country and find a job abroad, since work at the institute had become an ongoing frustration. But then, in early 2013, then Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti asked her to run for office. Monti wanted experts to cross-fertilize the political environment. She ran for election and was elected.

Less than a year after her appointment, Capua was questioned by a journalist from the weekly magazine, Espresso, who informed her that she was being indicted, along with her husband and 38 other people, for corruption, international virus trafficking, and deliberately causing an epidemic out of personal interest. She immediately asserted her complete innocence, explaining why the science behind the accusations was incorrect, and defended her reputation from violent political attacks and unfair press coverage. Regardless of her plea to be heard by a judge, she had to wait over two years before her case was examined. The investigation exposed Capua to intense attacks by her political opponents, who did not hesitate to make her a “lame duck” in Parliament. Despite the intense psychological pressure, during her three years in politics, Capua continued to co-chair the Science Education and Culture Commission, where she promoted the discussion of scientific issues and the funding of scientific organizations.

On July 5th, 2016, three weeks after leaving Italy with her family and moving to the US, the court finally rejected the charges as false and “fabricated.” All the criminal accusations were

dismissed because the evidence for most of the charges was simply “unsubstantial.” In other words, the crimes did not happen and there was never going to be a trial. It was the end of an unnecessary nightmare lasting almost a thousand nights, which would forever transform Ilaria’s life and that of her family. After she was completely cleared, Capua resigned as a member of the Chamber of Deputies.

This memoir is a striking story of someone who was able to transform a devastating experience into an opportunity. Since June 2016 Capua has been the new director of the One Health Center of Excellence for Research and Training at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville. After the abuse Ilaria experienced, which resulted in severe psychological and physical distress for both her and her family, she is once again exhibiting outstanding leadership. As she writes, “Resilience is the essence of survival, and no one can do it for you.”

At the heart of this memoir are conflicts that Capua experienced with organizations like the WHO as well as the media. In the former, she successfully fought to democratize information; in the latter, she was a victim of real fake news. The irony will not be lost on readers. Capua emerges as an expert and responsible proponent of making scientific information more widely available, against the backdrop of investigators and media who irresponsibly misused the power of publication by spreading baseless rumors and false accusations of scientific misconduct. This conflict makes the story both intellectually intriguing and tragic: Capua’s own goals of the wider dissemination of scientific information are turned against her by the irresponsible and unscientific forces of the media, police, and politics. Her success in ultimately landing a new, prestigious position at The University of Florida makes for a positive shift in the story and a great conclusion.

In the end, Capua’s book leaves us with an urgent question: do scientists today face a conflict between making information more widely available and its potential weaponization?