

Country life

Summarize yourself in the form of a title of a paper in Nature.

Middle-aged housewife from small-town USA turns to dinosaurs and generates controversy by attempting the impossible.

What was your first experiment as a child?

Burning ants and grasshoppers with a magnifying glass. I was also the subject in a study to discover why people don't rely on a diet of dirt and grasshoppers. The investigator was my brother who fed me strange things that I ate without question because he was my hero.

What makes a good scientific mentor?

Patience!

Whose graduate student would you most like to have been?

Albert Schweitzer, a man who combined medical science with a deep respect for humanity.

Are you by any chance related?

He was a cousin of my ex-husband's father.

What single scientific paper or talk changed your career path?

Peggy Ostrom's presentation on stable isotopes and implications for food webs at the first meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology I ever attended, in Toronto in 1992.

What literary character would you employ as a postdoc?

Indiana Jones.

What was the worst/most memorable comment you ever received from a referee?

Something along the lines of: "I don't care what the data say, I do not believe molecular preservation is possible in specimens this old."

What book is currently on your bedside table?

Several, as I can't seem to focus on one at a time. The one that comes to mind is about the Civil War — and it's in my car, not by my bed, so I can read it when stuck waiting somewhere.

What music heads the playlist in your car or lab?

Country music, all the way. Is there any other kind?

Where and when would you most like to have lived or worked?

I would love to have joined the battle for Scottish independence, alongside William Wallace or Robert the Bruce, which would mean fighting against my own ancestors, the MacDougalls. From a scientific standpoint, I would love to have been field assistant for Roy Chapman Andrews who led the Trans-Asiatic Expeditions to the Gobi Desert in the 1920s.

The job of captain on the Enterprise in Star Trek has become vacant. Nominate any real person, living or dead, for the post.

Phil Currie of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology in Drumheller, Alberta, for his adventurous spirit, curiosity and willingness to take risks. And besides, he is a sci-fi fan.

Assuming the dead can be raised and/or time travel exists, who from the world outside science would you most like to have dinner with?

Jesus Christ — my hero and role model.

You are on a plane behind two students obviously going to the same conference, who start to talk about your work. What do you do?

Shamelessly eavesdrop. If they like what I do, I will feel honoured; if they criticize it, I might think of questions I had not considered.

What one thing would you rescue from your burning laboratory?

My technician.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Ignore the critics and do what you know is right. Following this advice is not as easy as it sounds.

What do you do to relax?

In the long Montana winters, I do a lot of reading with my cat on my lap by the fire. In the summers, the more I can get outdoors the more relaxed I am, so I ride horses, hike and bike. And, year round, I try to get in my four-mile daily run.

What would you have become, if not a scientist?

A better mum, perhaps. Professionally, a medical doctor.

What's your motto?

Carpe diem: seize the day — and choke the living daylight out of it.

What previously under-recognized sport should be included in the Olympic Games?

Water ballet.

What's the one thing about science that you wish the public understood better?

I wish people didn't see science as irrelevant or frightening. It is in their best interest to be scientifically literate, so they can make rational decisions rather than risk being swayed by arguments that are better presented emotionally, or better funded, or supported by famous people.

Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings?

Lord of the Rings, by far.



Mary Schweitzer

Mary Schweitzer is a pioneer in the emerging field of studies on biomolecules retrieved from the fossil record. She is in the Department of Microbiology and the Museum of the Rockies at Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana.

You've just been told (in confidence) that the world will end tomorrow. What do you do next?
Go to be near my children ... and pray a lot.

What's the most interesting thing in your fridge?

My room-mate left a watermelon in the refrigerator last summer. I just found it. Diagenesis in action.

What one thing would you change about Nature?

The magazine or the concept?

Touché. The magazine, of course.

I would ask for a more liberal acceptance policy! As far as the concept goes, well, it seems to be working just fine, mostly...

Which actor would best portray you in a film of your life story?

I could hope for Sandra Bullock or Julia Roberts...

Name one extravagance you can now get away with because of your eminence.

Nothing. I got away with more before I ever entered science.

What music would you have played at your funeral?

Country and country gospel music. Songs like *Prop Me Up Beside the Jukebox (If I Die)* come to mind.

What would be the title of your autobiography?

'How on Earth did I end up here?' ■