

Dreams of the past

What was your first experiment as a child?

As a young shepherd boy in *la France profonde* during the Second World War, I had the chance to observe the behaviour of domestic animals — horses, cows, goats and my own dog.

What makes a good scientific mentor?

Someone who believes in you, who is very open-minded, who looks for opportunities at the interfaces of disciplines — and with whom you can hold frank and open discussions.

Whose graduate student would you most like to have been (historical impossibility notwithstanding)?

Charles Darwin, during the voyage of the *Beagle*.

What single scientific paper or talk changed your career path?

The talk that Louis Leakey gave at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris in 1963, in which he introduced the new species *Homo habilis*.

What book has been most influential in your scientific career?

Two books by Charles Darwin: *On The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).

What gives you the most job satisfaction now?

All the young colleagues, PhD students and postdocs in my team: they are the future. I'm particularly proud to train students from Chad and to help build a palaeontology research school in the University of Chad and the Centre National d'Appui à la Recherche in N'Djaména. Of course, it's also very exciting to have found the earliest hominid west of the Rift Valley, but the conditions — in the Djurab desert — are extreme, with a lot of sand storms. In that kind of environment, you get to know your own capabilities, and those of the other members of your team, which becomes a large, second family.

What are your major frustrations?

The knowledge that I will never live long enough to achieve all that I want to, and that much of what remains must be spent on administration.

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

For the same article, one referee complained about the use of a name I had given in memory of a lost best friend, which he thought "too cute"; and another wrote that it was the most important discovery in the past three-quarters of a century.

What's your favourite conference destination, and why?

Anywhere in the company of children and young people, because you can make them dream with the past, for the future. But, of course, my favourite location is N'Djaména in Chad because of the interaction with all the enthusiastic young Chadians dreaming and thinking about a Chadian cradle of humanity.

What literary character would you employ as a postdoc?

A science-fiction author such as Michael Crichton, because dreaming is always a big part of research.

What book is currently on your bedside table?

Timeline, a science-fiction novel by Michael Crichton.

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

In a university with a research centre that ranked as among the most famous in the world, which could offer me the best conditions ever dreamed of for working; somewhere in *la France profonde*; and right now, when the biological sciences have such a promising future.

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?

I would say: "Excuse me, I'm Michel Brunet. Nice to meet you." Then it would be up to them if they wanted to talk further or not.

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

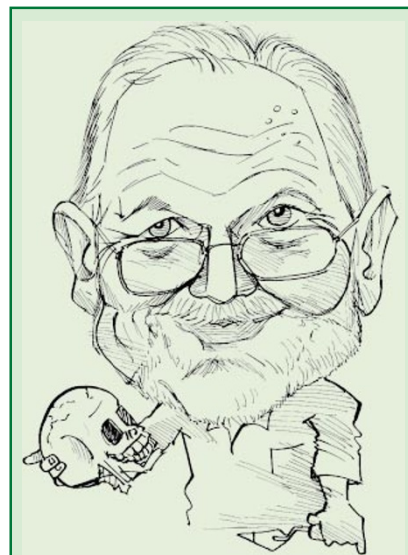
That fraternity is more important than everything else in a world of violence and individualism. Is it not a great message that our origin is African, unique and that we are all brothers and sisters?

The Internet is the bane of scientists' lives because...

...the principle of freedom of expression is not always a guarantee of quality. On the other hand, the Internet gives you the opportunity to communicate in real time with people all over the world.

What overlooked or underrated discovery really changed the science in which you work?

The discovery of the Taung child in South Africa (1924) and its publication, as the first prehuman *Australopithecus africanus* (R. A. Dart *Nature* 115, 195–199; 1925), was widely dismissed at the time, but history has shown it to have been a landmark.



Michel Brunet

Michel Brunet is at the University of Poitiers, France. A nomadic digger of bones, he is the proud parent of two of our forefathers excavated from the desert of Chad in central Africa, Abel and Toumaï (aged 3.5 million and 7 million years, respectively).

What do you do to relax?

Walk and dream in *la France profonde*.

What would you have become, if not a scientist?

A farmer rearing horses and cattle in the countryside.

What single discovery, invention or innovation would most improve your life?

The use of stents in cardiac surgery kept me alive after my heart attack. For the future, I look forward to a small prosthetic heart with the same efficiency as a biological heart.

What music would you have played at your funeral?

Vivaldi, *The Four Seasons*.

Is there a 'tyranny of reductionism' in how scientists are trained today?

There is not enough about the history of science in our students' academic courses. In addition, even if there is a consensus about transdisciplinary research, young scientists have had to specialize too early in their careers. For instance, it is quite obvious that palaeontological fieldwork requires you to be an excellent geologist as well as an anatomist.

What is the one thing about science you wish the public understood better?

That the 'truth' is always an asymptotic ideal.

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

Nothing — I don't want to change. ■