

The permanent postdoc

My Life in Science

By Sydney Brenner. As told to Lewis Wolpert

Edited by Errol C. Friedberg and Eleanor Lawrence

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Reviewed by Alan Packer

Dear Uncle Syd,

It's been a long time since I've heard from you, so I thought I'd drop you a line to see how things are going. Ordinarily I wouldn't be writing an open letter, but the editors of *Nature Genetics* have been kind enough to invite me to review your new book, *My Life in Science*. As you were never hesitant to post your letters to me, your nephew Willie, in the pages of *Current Biology*, I hope you won't be taken aback by this public missive.

Not everyone will know this about you, Uncle Syd, but as you acknowledge in your new book, writing is not one of your favorite activities. You're a reader, a thinker and a talker (something of a legend in this department), so it will come as no surprise, at least to your intimates, that you dictated this slim autobiography to Lewis Wolpert over the course of some fifteen hours of

videotaped sessions. The editors, Errol Friedberg and Eleanor Lawrence, imply that the video is available; given the choice, I would rather take in your personal oral history accompanied by your voice and visage. This seems like a short book for fifteen hours worth of talk, and I can't help but wonder if most of the juicy parts are on the cutting-room floor. A peek at the video would, at the very least, tell us why there are so many exclamation points in the transcript (!)

In any case, the book has its ups and downs. I liked the early bits in which you describe your childhood in South Africa—born to Latvian immigrants, reared in the back of your father's cobbler shop, exposed to an indifferent educational system in the provinces, more or less teaching yourself what you needed to know. It's always inspiring to read about talented young people discovering their

lives' work in an obscure public library. Your self-motivated nature certainly seems to have been essential in finding your way through the rather haphazard—though by no means inadequate—medical education that you received.

I was also amused to learn that you earned money by attending synagogue every morning, serving as the essential 'tenth man' during the recitation of the prayers for the dead. It seems that you were never tempted by the rabbinic, which I suppose is just as well.

And then of course there's your spectacular rise to prominence. A grand story indeed, Uncle Syd, but perhaps too well known to be thrilling. Those of us for whom Horace Freeland Judson's *The Eighth Day of Creation* was regular bedtime reading will know about phage and codons and the RNA Tie Club. I don't mean to sound ungrateful; after all, it's not your fault that the professional historians beat you to it. I should further add that there is some interesting news here—for example, your appreciation of John von Neumann's theory of automata as an important influence on early thinking about the nature of information transfer in biology.

Your part in the identification of messenger RNA at Caltech is always worth hearing about. I love the description of you and François Jacob at the beach, despairing of having to return to Europe without a positive result, when all of a sudden you realized that adding a bit more magnesium would keep the ribosomes intact and allow you to detect the elusive intermediate in gene expression. Rather dashing of you to make an epochal discovery while watching the waves in southern California, Uncle Syd. I only hope there was no sand in the test tubes.

What else can I tell your potential readers? How about your thoughts on your scientific style: "So when someone said to me once 'What is the nature of the organization in your laboratory?', I could only think of one answer, which was, 'Loose gangs!' There were just groups of people who got together and whose aim was to push the subject forward." Quite right. Peter Medawar once described the founders of molecular biology as participants in a noisy tea party, but 'loose gangs' is also a good description of the manner in which you and your crew carried out the groundbreaking experiments, leaving the details to the converts. What was the RNA Tie Club, if not a gang of sorts?

The best part of the book is your account of the cottage industry in nematode genetics that you established in the 1970s. One can't help but admire the patience and playful curiosity you showed while searching for the perfect organism in which to study the molecular genetics of development. You called it "HAL (Have A Look) biology," which in one case prompted you to enlist the Shell Oil Company in your research program. It seems that many of the original *C. elegans* strains were obtained from soil samples extracted from Shell's far-flung facilities along the equator.

Your prediction that experimental approaches are about to transform the study of evolution seems right on the money. I wish we had heard more of your thoughts on this; perhaps we will. I'm inclined to think so because of your habit of being ahead of the curve. As you note, "I think my real skills are in getting things started—that's gone through my whole life. In fact, it's what I enjoy most, the opening game. And I'm afraid that once it gets past that point I get rather bored and want to do other things. So being a permanent postdoc is really very attractive to me, and is I think the exciting part of intellectual life in science."

Finally, I have two requests. First, please hold on to your reprint collection and old notebooks. One day, someone will write a proper biography (not I; don't worry) and I imagine that your notes will serve as excellent source material. Second, I'd like to know why you gave me all of that sage advice on career advancement in *Current Biology* if I might just as well have remained a happy, prosperous postdoc. Just wondering.

Take care, Uncle Syd. Don't forget to write.

Yours,
Willie

