

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

Journal of Cell Science 114, 4137-4138 (2001)
© The Company of Biologists Ltd



Reflections on turning fifty

No, I am not fifty years old! I have several years to go until then, despite the apparent aging of Caveman that is occurring in the journal (memo to self: “Send more money to Pete to start the rejuvenating process for Caveman”). So, not to worry. This is not some boring retrospective of my life in science and some nonsense about how it is my hobby or how I got lucky with a discovery, blah, blah, blah.

No, this is the 50th article I have written for the Sticky Wicket column. Yes, and I am just as amazed as you are!

It was about 2½ years ago that the Editors of this, what I thought of at the time, esteemed scientific journal (until they started publishing this stuff) approached me to write short articles about anything I liked. While I’d have appreciated this invitation as a free pass to submit any of my science to the journal for immediate publication, these apparently fairly intelligent and rational people were giving me *carte blanche* to write on any topic. I was told that there would be no editorial oversight. I often wonder how they must have cringed over

some of the articles (Hmm? How about “The (f)art of criticism?”) (JCS 113, pp. 4373-4374).

Why Sticky Wicket? As I noted at the beginning, the credit goes to Editor-in-Chief Fiona Watt. It is a great title. The Brits can nod knowingly, everyone else shrugs their shoulders, and I can occasionally rant and rave about the lunacy of the game. Yes, a game not a sport. Sorry, cricket is not a sport - a sport requires no protective clothing, no equipment, can be played anywhere, has minimal rules and language (“The googly was snicked to the First Slip who cried, “How was that?” - Oh, come on!), lasts no more than 1 to 2 hours, and has a definitive outcome. But, I digress. The title, Sticky Wicket (the correct definition was given in the first article, despite some recent reinterpretations by foreigners), does capture the overall theme of the articles nicely.

Why on earth would a journal with a rich tradition of publishing scholarly papers in the general field of cell biology make such a risky proposal to a potential lunatic? (It’s still a good question!) Credit, as I said at the beginning, goes to the Editors, especially Fiona Watt and Gary Borisy; Richard Sever, the Executive Editor, is an accomplice, who

prods me for more articles and acts as the 'drop-box' for my correspondence. Why me? You need to ask them. At the time, I had some idea about discussing serious scientific issues, such as how we got to understand the function of microtubules. Well, it's a great relief to everyone that I fell over and hit my head and never wrote such tripe. I cannot imagine that I would have lasted so long if I had stayed with that pretentious beginning.

You might wonder where I get the topics? Not surprisingly, they are from everyday observations. Look around you, and you'll see what I mean. During the course of writing a paper, we were discussing the data from several experiments and whether the results were the same or similar - hence: "similar. Not the same; in other words different", from "A critical reader's guide to science-speak" (JCS 113, pp. 569-570). Other times, the topics for articles come to me as I attend seminars - "I, I mean we, and whose ideas and data are these anyway?" (JCS 112, p. 3193) and "Dancing pointers, preachers, sweating slides and other distractions in seminars" (JCS 114, pp. 1-2). I also feel

that there is not sufficient mentoring and have used Stickies to 'preach' on this topic. I did wonder at the beginning whether there was enough to talk about in the long term, but so far the supply seems never-ending. I do most of my writing on long-haul flights; so as long as my science keeps going well and I get invited to meetings, I'll continue to write these articles. We'll see.

I understand that a few people read Sticky Wicket articles, and some write to my rock-mail address about the articles. As you know, some of these are published. More often than not, they raise interesting issues that give me an excuse to embellish the point further. It is funny how some have used a form of Neolithic name (e.g. Alpine Caveman and Tony the Trilobite). Again, I am reassured that I am not alone in my little world. However, I am constantly baffled by the popularity of Stickies. Don't you all have something better to do than read this stuff? Surely, you have experiments to do or research articles (in this journal) to read? Why read these articles, and why publish them in a scientific journal? I think that part of the answer is that the articles touch on

problems in science, everyday issues that we all contend with, and the frustrations and pleasures of doing science. They also tend to see the silly side of life and people that blunts any tendency to take each other and science too seriously.

I, or should I say you, got Pete, who has drawn the great cartoons that have accompanied these articles. There is no collusion between us on the drawings. Frankly, it is reassuring for me that another person is just as silly as I am and finds humor in everyday aspects of science. Our latest collaboration is a calendar. (I have drawn the line at 'action figures'.) This gives Pete a larger canvas for his imagination. Pete has also drawn the cartoons for others who have written a 'Sticky'. I have had to caution him not to draw Caveman and The Wicked Witch of the West in any compromising positions!

So, that leaves one more question to answer. Who am I?

Caveman, of course. Cheers!

Caveman

Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: caveman@biologists.com). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

Journal of Cell Science,
140 Cowley Rd,
Cambridge,
CB4 0DL,
UK.