

Always talking to some purpose

Distinguished molecular biologist, Sydney Brenner, has said he won't write an autobiography. **Mark Ptashne** reviews the next best thing.

I once asked Professor Brenner when he was going to write his autobiography. He did a Brenner-style eyebrow push-up and replied "Never!" Well, he still hasn't. What he did do (perhaps even more remarkably) was to sit still long enough (15 hours!) to tell his story to Lewis Wolpert. The interview, which can be supplemented, I gather, by a videotape, was edited and is here presented by Errol Friedberg and Eleanor Lawrence.

The story starts at the beginning, a part that might be of interest primarily to those who know Sydney. But since everybody knows him, that's not a problem, and this background is quite touching. Sydney's father, a

Lithuanian Jew, emigrated to South Africa in 1910. (He would have gone to America but he couldn't afford the fare.) He married and had two children there, and worked as a cobbler until sometime past the age of 80. He could neither read nor write, and young Sydney learned those skills from a nice lady around the corner.

Despite being recognized as a particularly bright lad, Sydney and his family were so poor that, when the time came, he couldn't afford to go to graduate school. A small stipend from his town did allow him to go to medical school in Johannesburg which started him on his way. Eventually he won a scholarship to Oxford.

There is not a hint of bitterness in Sydney's description of his rather provincial and difficult (financially, anyway) early life. To the contrary: he gives the impression that the early isolation from the 'real world' inculcated strengths, in particular his devotion to self-teaching, and to reading everything. He gives advice: if you want to learn about a subject, start doing it. He speaks with great affection for senior scientific figures he met early on, but doesn't say much more about them. He says little about his family, and so one can only wonder where his famous sense of humor (including a devastating gift for mimicry) came from. Someone in the family, one suspects, was a riot.

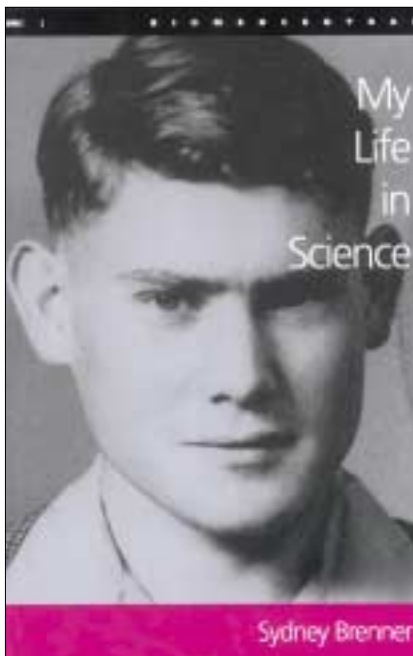
The young Sydney made an important discovery: he could learn about the world by looking, literally looking. He developed a fascination with ways to stain and section organisms. This interest percolated as he engaged in his other justly celebrated more abstract endeavors — like thinking about the code with Francis Crick and others (which led to the experiment demonstrating that the code was a triplet), and about the problem of how

information got from DNA to protein (which led to a demonstration of the existence of mRNA in an experiment performed with Francois Jacob and Matt Meselson). The combination of this interest in how things look with how, in a more abstract sense, things might work has proved to be, in Brenner's case, a rich source of complexity. Eventually the microscopic urge led him to the insides of the nematode worm, *Caenorhabditis elegans*, and the founding of an important new field for developmental biologists.

Throughout the book one feature prevails: Sydney's love of talk. Talk, talk, talk. One reason he cherishes his years with Crick is that the two of them made it a rule to say whatever came into their heads, however wrong any idea might turn out to be. Only by talking and thinking, worrying about what words really mean, trying to imagine a 'what if' and then thinking about testing it, does science really come alive.

Without the video one can only imagine the extravagant facial gestures, the accents (South African, of course, but also German, Japanese, Indian... one wonders if they have been edited out). Many of the jokes will be familiar even to those who have followed Sydney only in his writings (he was a popular columnist in *Current Biology* for several years), but we learn he hates to write. Maybe someday there will be a serious compilation. In the meantime, do you know what is Avogadro's number? Answer: the number of molecules in guacamole. Is this Marx Brothers? No: Sydney Brenner.

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Microscopic urge: "The young Sydney made an important discovery: he could learn about the world by looking, literally looking."

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