

Cell scientist to watch – Michael Way

Michael Way studied biochemistry at Kings College in London and did his PhD at the Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge in the group of Alan Weeds, working on several actin-binding proteins. For his postdoctoral work, he joined the lab of Paul Matsudaira at the Whitehead Institute of the MIT. There, he worked on the remarkable and appropriately named protein scruin, which bundles actin in the acrosomal process of sperm from horseshoe crabs. Sequence homology to a protein in poxviruses made him switch to work on vaccinia virus for his first independent group at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg. After a few years living on beers and pizza, he moved back to London, where he now leads a lab at the Francis Crick Institute, still working on vaccinia but also doing cancer-related work. He was recently awarded an ERC synergy grant, together with Carolyn Moores and Edgar Gomes, to work on ARP2/3 complex isoforms. He is also Editor-in-Chief at the very prestigious Journal of Cell Science. Most importantly, however, he wears non-matching socks.

Michael, thanks for coming down to the pub for this interview. Let's start with the big Michael Way mystery: why do you always wear two different socks?

Ok, nice you noticed, but this is somewhat embarrassing for starters. I once woke up after a party in the room of my best friend's girlfriend, and when realising, I got so embarrassed that I quickly got dressed and rushed to the lab, my heart pounding. Incredibly, the experiment I did that day worked out fantastically, and when I got home, I realised I had two different socks on. So, from that day on I decided to always wear two different socks.

Every single day?

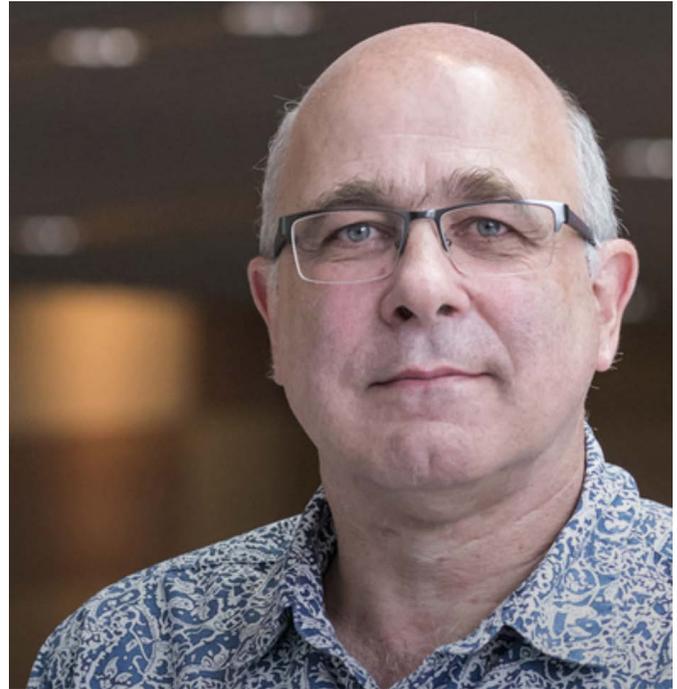
Only one day I missed out, my wedding day. But funnily enough, everyone else was wearing two different socks that day. Ok, almost everyone. My brother didn't. He's an artist, you know.

Anything else about the socks?

I once tried to get them published on a cover, but sadly was rejected.

This is curious, you could not get your socks on a cover but your sperm did end up on a cover?

Well, technically not exactly my sperm but that of a rather lonely horseshoe crab. At the time, you see, I worked on an actin-binding protein in horseshoe crabs. The protein was named scruin, as it plays a key role in forming the acrosomal process of horseshoe crab sperm, with which the sperm penetrates, essentially screws, the egg. Contrary to some popular belief it was not named by me, but by Lew Tilney. I just cloned it and did some biochemistry, while wearing non-matching socks.



Michael Way

Was this cover the reason you became Editor-in-Chief at JCS?

Probably not, although it would have been too cute. I think it was more because I rejected too many papers from JCS. Actually, that is not really true; I always make highly constructive comments on papers. Once I got a bit upset after several papers were essentially published as submitted, without taking my suggestions into account. So, I bitterly complained to the Editor-in-Chief at the time. Fast forward a few years, and well, here I am.

Did you want this job very badly, or did they have to coerce you?

Neither really, but my brother is cartoon editor at some famous journals, and my brother's partner was editor at Vogue once, and that really impressed me. You see, my brother is really the more talented of the Way brothers, and he always had these impressive girlfriends; so I thought to myself, why not be Editor-in-Chief?

You read Vogue magazine?

Only on the toilet really.

What's the most challenging aspect of being Editor-in-Chief?

At Vogue or at JCS?



Michael focusing on keeping different balls in the air.

At JCS

There are many challenges; luckily, we have a great team at The Company of Biologists. Maybe it's deciding what type of cartoon to put with the story from Mole or what type of image to choose for the cover when there are not enough really cool images suggested. Vogue never has this problem. More seriously, the toughest aspect is dealing with misconduct. We sometimes spot clear image manipulations and point these out to the authors. Some take this as valid critique, but others not so. It's astonishing.

How do you spot misconduct?

Essentially, I have a keen eye for spotting bands on blots, even if they are upside down and turned around in manuscripts I handle. There is also a dedicated team at the journal, who looks at all articles using special software; you know, even I might not spot everything.

What is the most rewarding thing about being Editor-in-Chief at JCS?

It's about being important. People come and talk to you at conferences. Important paper here, important paper there.... and then, seeing people start wearing two different socks to talk to you, hilarious. Also, there are the conferences organised by The Company of Biologists. Those have all been fantastic events, and I am happy we can give back to the community in this way. Also, there is a lot of free food.

So let's talk about science. What's the most exciting thing you have been doing?

Too many things. Although none of them as cool as what my brother did. Working with proteins is amazing, as is working on vaccinia virus and microscopes. Never gets boring. The most exciting thing is always what we work on right now.

“The most exciting thing is always what we work on right now.”

Working with poxviruses sounds dangerous, was it?

Well, we only worked with the vaccinia virus, not the real poxvirus; you can essentially inject vaccinia by the billions into your finger and not much happens. A student accidentally did the experiment. However, we once thought we could work on the real virus in collaboration with others. When a Russian scientist offered to send us some poxviruses by mail, we got a bit scared. Makes you think, doesn't it?

Scary indeed. Could you have ever imagined doing something other than science?

Oh yes, actually, I was very interested in arts, still am. Turns out my brother went into the arts and became a really famous and celebrated cartoonist. Made way more money than me, had all the fun... you cannot imagine. Much more relaxed life too. He's the real Way guy. I am very jealous.

Are you jealous of any other scientists?

Not really, maybe a guy who became FRS and is some type of bigwig in Cambridge. But then again, I never liked being on committees.

We heard you are still in the lab every day doing cloning

Yes, that is true. I have cloned so many genes in my life that I could have run 15 labs characterising what they are doing. It's completely pointless to clone any more, but it calms me down and focuses me on what really matters.

So, what does really matter?

Food. You see, as I pointed out, my brother is really smarter than me. He was already eating good food when I still survived on beers and pizzas. Now, I am married to a wonderful woman, and she taught me many things, including about the importance of good food (could have listened to my brother before, of course). From her I learned to appreciate good food. Delicious food and good wine. So, to find the best possible food takes quite some focus. Same is true for shirts. I like fancy shirts, with lots of colours, the louder the better.

What do you talk about over dinner?

Science. While I do spend quite some time finding fancy shirts and the best food, I actually only ever talk about science. Sometimes about music, but mostly about science. Not just science science but also science gossip I should admit. A lot of science gossip to be honest. Ok, probably mostly science gossip.

Any favourite gossip?

Oh yes, and I am sure you would love to hear the one about... a-ha-ha, gotcha. I just can't have this in print. Then it wouldn't be good gossip anymore, right? Catch 22.

You are quite a philosopher?

No.

Ok, so a more mundane question: how does it feel being 60?

Oh well, no thanks for asking. But hey, I see it this way: I am feeling like being 12 again, just for the fifth time.

“...I am feeling like being 12 again, just for the fifth time.”

What happened when you were 12?

Oh well, nuclear missiles and stuff. I'd rather forget, but there was some nice music then. Funnily enough, I really enjoyed Kraftwerk, probably the only real music ever to come out of Germany, or well, make that the continent.

Favourite music or band?

Anything that irritates the lab, really. I usually come to the lab a little late, when everyone is already in. I then put on some

music, turn it up really loud and go to see some colleagues down the corridor or have some tea. It's amazing how long it takes people to realise that they could just turn it down or off, or put on something different.

Hmm, so any advice for young PIs on how to run their lab?

Of course. Have fun. There is no point running a lab if you can't have fun doing it and have fun with your people. You need to be there all the time, and engage and challenge your students. Tell them not to do certain experiments, so that they do them. And of course, you have to listen to music. Also: buy expensive microscopes. Also: drink tea. Also: learn to juggle; it helps. Really, I am actually very good at it, keeping different balls in the air; it focuses your mind.

And finally, any wisdom you would like to share?

Have fun and do something crazy with your life. Like drawing cartoons or wearing different socks.

The anonymous interviewers only realised during proof corrections that they accidentally conducted the interview with Michael's brother Steve, who tricked them by wearing non-matching socks. Never mind.