



Observations of an Owl (10)

Lost in the Middle

Attentive readers of my column will already know and recall that way back when I was a young, eager lab-owl and still a bit green around the beak, I spent a few postdoc months in Japan (*LT* 02/2007, p. 14). Yes, I can tell you, it was a very interesting time in good old professor Crane's lab. Now, until recently, I thought my experiments with Crane had earned

me two, not exactly earth shattering, but solid papers.

How short-sighted! It recently increased to three!!

Last Tuesday, my good friend Harrier swooped by after a long day of university business – for a light-hearted chat (while hovering) over dinner. We had just taken off for the next tree, after I had polished off an exceptionally delicious melt-in-your-mouth mouse and Harrier had enjoyed a vole, when my friend casually mentioned that that very morning he had seen my name on a new paper. *My name? On a paper?* More than ten years after I had left active research? I was so surprised that I missed the first branch completely and landed in a very “un-owlegantly” way on the next, resembling a stray duck.

Harrier couldn't tell me much about the paper, except that it had appeared in *Molecular Avian Nutrition* and that I was third author of six.

My burgeoning suspicion was confirmed the very next day. It was a paper about one of the mutants I had isolated more than twelve years ago during my Japanese postdoc period. Good old professor Crane was senior author.

My first reaction sent me on a sentimental journey down memory lane. There I was, still an enthusiastic, unblemished, young postdoc owl sitting in that dark basement room, diligently developing assays for mutant screens... and, of course, the special smile on Crane's face one day, enquiring if I had already taken a look at the animals on that particular morning...

Yes, yes, success! I had indeed found a couple of interesting mutants. In the ensuing months, I thoroughly characterised the first two of them and wrote the last two papers of my life as a researcher. More than ten years ago. (But why were they the last? I hear you cry. Well, we'll save that story for another day...)

The new paper was about one of the remaining mutants. Apparently, it had taken years for Crane to find somebody who was willing to continue the characterisation of my mutants. I don't know who finally accepted the task, probably a PhD student, but I must say he (or she) had a lucky strike. This mutant finally turned out to be the most interesting one of my collection, by far. The paper, subsequently, made it into the top-notch journal of the field; this lucky birdlet being first author, myself as third author, flanked by three more of Crane's students and Crane, himself, as senior author.

What a nice story, you think? Yes, of course ... but, well, not quite. I have to admit, some mixed feelings mingled with my joy. Why didn't Crane try to contact me in advance? Okay, I had been

out of research for a considerable amount of time but I wasn't out of this world. I wasn't even out of science.

Come on, owl, you're *middle author*, you might think. Just three months ago a study in *EMBO Reports* (vol. 8, pp. 988) came to the conclusion that “even when the publication appears in a prestigious journal, authors receive little credit [...] when they are listed as one of several middle authors on a paper”. So why get your feathers so ruffled?

Okay, alright, I understand but that's not my point. Look, for example, into the “General Information for Authors” of *Science*. They write, “All authors must agree to be so listed and must have seen and approved the manuscript, its content, and its submission to *Science*.” *Nature*, *Neuron* and many others, including *Molecular Avian Nutrition*, state the same rule in their authorship guides. However, I never heard a dicky-bird in my case.

(Incidentally, *Molecular Avian Nutrition* also writes that they send emails to all authors to confirm receipt of each paper and that submission of a paper that has not been approved by all authors may result in immediate rejection. All words and no action! I didn't receive anything from *them* either!)

Anyway, it just would have been nice to have reviewed the manuscript prior to it going into circulation with my name on it, and not just because a rule is a rule.

“It would have been nice to have reviewed the manuscript prior to it going into circulation.”

Despite this, I still have a few positive words to say in favour of good old Crane. He could easily have left me out of the paper completely. After all these years, nobody would have queried that. However, he knew and respected that my contribution, albeit a long time ago, was substantial for the whole study. So, in order to adhere to the rules (and also, I'd like to think, for nostalgia's sake) he included my name on the author's list, and quite rightly so! Let's just put the rest down to laziness!

Interestingly, later that evening Harrier related a story about another “middle author”. By pure chance, a PhD student working in this fellow's lab produced a very powerful antibody against a protein, which, at the time, was under intensive study. As a result, there followed a multitude of requests from all over the world, to supply “his” antibody. He readily met the requests but only after he ensured that he would be included on every paper obtained with the help of “his” antibody. Hence, he managed to appear as middle author on several dozen papers, without providing any further intellectual input. I concede that in a majority of them, his contribution was listed in small print at the very end of the article as having “...provided valuable reagents,” but I doubt that anybody noticed.

So what do the two stories tell us? Perhaps that you shouldn't be too quick to judge middle authors, because their contributions can be exceedingly different.

Comments: owl@lab-times.org

