

Intriguing Reading

Although much science is tedious and unexciting, there are “intrigues that go on in this blessed world of science” (Thomas Henry Huxley, 1852) that make fascinating reading. The engaging articles described below deal with literature, language, and publication in science.

Mayr E. Darwin and natural selection. How Darwin may have discovered his highly unconventional theory. *Am Sci* 1977;65:321-7.

Ernst Mayr, a professor at Harvard since 1953, has received many awards, including one in 1998 honoring him for “his extraordinary achievements as an evolutionary biologist, historian, philosopher, and *writer*”^{*} (italics added). Here Mayr tells a great mystery story. Also there might be no better illustration of how the scientific literature serves science; the catalyzing event leading to Darwin’s theory was reading another person’s scientific article: Malthus’s “Essay on the Principle of Population”. In the 1970s scholars were vigorously debating whether the theory of evolution developed gradually or represented a drastic break from previous thought. To solve this mystery, Mayr dissects the creation of the theory. He describes with enlightening clarity how, on 28 September 1838, the theory of evolution coalesced out of five well-recognized facts, four largely unconscious changes in Darwin’s beliefs (documented from his diaries), and three inferences—an event precipitated by what Darwin called “the one sentence of Malthus”. Mayr argues that it took nearly three generations for the theory to be accepted scientifically because it was both so complex and so drastic a change in thinking. ^{*}www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/1998/04.30/news.html.

Rymer R. Annals of science. A silent childhood—I and II. *The New Yorker*, 1992a, 13 April, pp 41-5, 48-51, 54, 64-72, 74-5, 78-81; and 1992b, 20 April, pp 43-6, 48-50, 55-77.

Editors may take exception to Ernst Mayr’s opinion that “mathematics is as little a science as grammar is a language”. “A Silent Childhood” contains a counterpoint: “The organization of our brain is as genetically ordained and as automatic as breathing, but,

like breathing, it is initiated by the slap of a midwife, and the midwife is grammar.” Thus, although it far surpasses grammar in complexity and power, language, at least verbal language, can never fully develop in a person without the experience of grammar before a particular age. That is one possible conclusion from this fascinating and compelling story, which actually encompasses several stories. Foremost is the story of Genie, an abused “wild child”, that is, a child raised essentially in isolation—in Genie’s case, to the age of 13 years. She was unable to talk, and this proved to be of great scientific interest. Ironically, Genie’s abuse was discovered in 1970, the same year that a movie about a “wild boy” discovered in France in 1800 was released.^{*} His story is also told here, as are the stories of the people, including several scientists, who each had their own interest in Genie and how they revolved around her. Interwoven through all is the story of the human quest to understand language and the linguistic theories and debates on how we develop language. Lastly, there is the cautionary tale about the risks of human experimentation. (Rymer turned this article into his first book, *Genie: A Scientific Tragedy*, which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and selected as a Grand Livre du Mois in France. The story has also been presented on the PBS series “Nova”.)

^{*}François Truffaut’s “The Wild Child”.

Menger FM, Haim A: Struggles to correct published errors. *Nature* 1992;359:666-7.

This true tale is Kafkaesque: It portrays events that seem surreally distorted and conspiratorial. Two scientists discovered independently what both characterized as gross errors in two papers published in the same journal by a third scientist. From 8 March 1991 to 12 June 1992, both attempted to publish their papers addressing the errors but were thwarted repeatedly by the journal that published the errors. Both correction papers were finally published because of persistence, one in a different journal. The details about the errors are not comprehensible to nonchemists, and the sequence of events is long and winding; but the story has all the elements of a good caper, and, in the end, good triumphs over evil.