as a “little-known but key” figure in science history. A decade of research following Metchnikoff’s trail led her from a zoological station in Naples to a safety deposit box at a Parisian bank on the Champs-Élysées. While unraveling the mysteries of Metchnikoff’s life, Vikhanski gained access to an exhaustive collection of primary sources, including his previously inaccessible personal letters.

As the first biography of this scientist in decades, this book reanimates Metchnikoff for the 21st century, revealing a towering figure of science complete with complex human flaws. He was a vigorous reader, prolific writer, and fiery lecturer who routinely attracted large crowds. His writing, in particular, served to vigorously defend his theories throughout the “immunity wars” and to preserve his stunningly prescient science for rediscovery.

Immunity adds an important chapter to science history, balancing quality scholarship with clear language. Aided by its concise but engaging chapters, readers will be pleased by the accessibility of the science. The book will be especially engaging to medical writers with an interest in immunology, microbiology, and gerontology.

Reviewers: Kristin A. Roynesdal, MS
Kristin is a freelance medical editor and writer in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Lab Girl

Hope Jahren

Even for avid gardeners, I wager that the thrill of discoveries in the dirt has never been more passionately expressed than in Lab Girl, written by geobiologist Hope Jahren. This is a delightful read, and the author is that rare scientist who can write a page-turner intended for a general audience.

Although much of Lab Girl is autobiographical and written in the first person, sections alternate between anecdotes of the author’s scientific and life journey, and mini-lectures about the natural world. These disparate sections are, however, thematically linked. For example, a description of how trees begin their growth from seeds precedes a chapter about Jahren’s undergraduate job in a hospital blood-typing lab. It was in that meticulous tedium that she began to envision herself as a future scientist—the seeds, so to speak, that would bear fruit in her career.

I especially enjoyed the sections where Jahren discusses the business of being a scientist. “My laboratory is a place where the lights are always on,” she says—but it is a refuge and many other things, too. Foremost on her mind is money—writing grants, keeping lab members paid, tinkering with old equipment held together with duct tape (literally). Her experiences with peer review, both speaking at scientific conferences and submitting manuscripts to journals, are thought-provoking. Remember, this is a woman who’s achieved tenure, grants, and awards. She juggles teaching responsibilities, working with students, research field trips to Norway and Ireland, and a family life. Her description of a road trip to a scientific conference, with her lab assistant and graduate student bundled into an old van, is particularly entertaining and sobering at the same time.

Lest you roll your eyes and think “Great, yet another Wonder Woman!” Jahren’s accomplishments have not come easily. In what may be the most powerful sections of the book, she discusses her struggle with mental illness, including a vivid anecdote about a harrowing psychotic break. She recovers, but her illness resurfaces when she becomes pregnant and medication side effects pose new difficulties.

Jahren’s book begins with a lovely homage to her father, a community-college instructor in a small town in Minnesota. But her family is almost never mentioned again, except elliptically. We fast-forward through her meeting and marrying her husband, their moving from Johns Hopkins to Hawaii, and her relationship with her young son. Although some readers may find it jarring to encounter important personal matters mostly in offhand comments, I sense that Jahren is a modest Midwesterner who just doesn’t like talking about those things. For you sticklers for detail, Jahren even includes an endnote explaining how she arrived at some of the calculations in the book (such as Federal funding for “curiosity-driven” research, or the length of wooden planks made in the United States in the last 20 years, if stretched end to end).

“Carefully writing everything down is the only real defense we have against forgetting something important that once was and is no more,” writes Jahren. If this idea moves you, this book will please you—with the joys of thinking deeply about science and reading thoughtfully written prose.

Reviewers: Karen Potvin Klein, MA, ELS, GPC, MWC
Karen (2014-2015 AMWA President) is Director of Grant Development and Medical Editing at Wake Forest University Health Sciences in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.