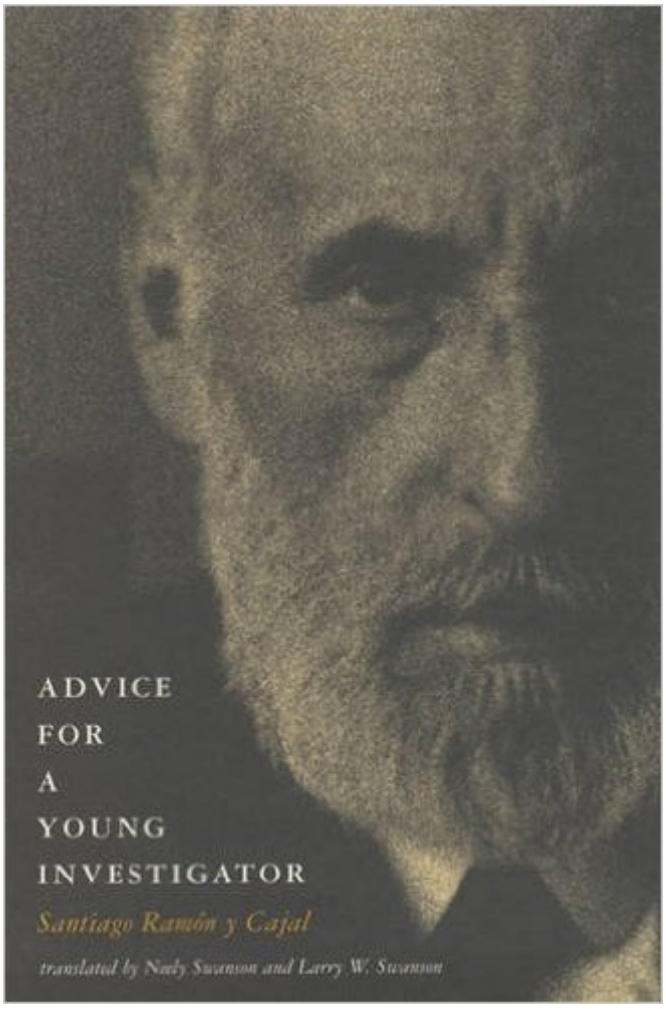
Advice For A Young Investigator (MIT Press)



Synopsis

Santiago RamÃ n y Cajal was a mythic figure in science. Hailed as the father of modern anatomy and neurobiology, he was largely responsible for the modern conception of the brain. His groundbreaking works were New Ideas on the Structure of the Nervous System and H istology of the Nervous System in Man and Vertebrates. In addition to leaving a legacy of unparalleled scientific research, Cajal sought to educate the novice scientist about how science was done and how he thought it should be done. This recently rediscovered classic, first published in 1897, is an anecdotal guide for the perplexed new investigator as well as a refreshing resource for the old pro.Cajal was a pragmatist, aware of the pitfalls of being too idealistic -- and he had a sense of humor, particularly evident in his diagnoses of various stereotypes of eccentric scientists. The book covers everything from valuable personality traits for an investigator to social factors conducive to scientific work.

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Customer Reviews

Santiago Ramon y Cajal’s achievement, the neuronal doctrine -undoubtedly the foundation of all relevant knowledge about the nervous systems, including the human brain-, was not the product of teamwork, technology or fashion. It was the achievement of his educated insight and uncomparable dedication. Scholars in the field of psychology teach us that advice can be interpreted as an attempt to justify the thoughts and actions of its originator. It seems inevitable that this work should reflect

Cajal’s disillusions with the institutionalization of mediocrity and with the arbitrariness of academic hierarchy. Surely, today, readers in numerous parts of the world will find these commonplace. Yet, Cajal’s voice sounds as loud and clear as ever as a guiding light in the obscure path of human accomplishment. It will prevent any cultured reason from originating the kind of monsters that arise from its dreams. The book will -quoting Lucian- "...ornament your soul with what concerns you most: temperance, justice, piety, kindliness, reasonableness, understanding, steadfastness, love of all that is beautiful, ardour towards all that is sublime; for these are the truly flawless jewels of the soul... for though you yourself depart from life, you will never cease associating with men of education and conversing with men of eminence".I have returned to these pages constantly since I was in medical school.Recommended to lay people or scientists alike of an inquisitive nature who disregard authority, distrust officiality, wish to create, and consider themselves perpetual students of men and nature. A vey useful resource, too, when things go wrong in the lab.

I am a graduate student (not in biology-ralated field) looking for general advice from this book. To my surprise much of Cajal’s advice is still applicable not just today but in different disciplines. However, this is not a run-of-the-mill advice book for graduate students, and definitely not kind of advice my advisor will give me. Cajal is very passionate about doing science, and he doesn’t hesitate to point out (sometimes very harshly) what he thinks the wrong ways of doing science.It’s expected that part of books are dated (remember it’s first releasesd in 1897), but should not deter interested readers from reading it. Sometimes Cajal made comments upon which any readers today will frown, like "A woman [...] is in different to all work related to change and progress". But don’t call Cajal a sexist, and don’t interpret his work in the value system of the 21st century. Cajal is so enthusiastic about science that few other things matter to him. Anyone can easily feel and understand his commitment to science after reading few pages of the book.

Too often our science is cleaned and polished to the point that it appears logical and quite easy. This remarkable monograph gives a much clearer view of the strenuous, adventurous, and often confusing nature of actually being a pioneer. It explores the social and political nature of scientific advance in a remarkably honest way, and each chapter rings true to the ears of a practicing neurobiologist today. It has quickly become favorite reading and the subject of discussion at our university, and is a must read for anyone interested in the actual craft of doing biology.

In this brief, well composed work, Cajal- a most notable scientist in his own right, outlines his

thoughts on what it takes to succeed in science. In fact he covers most of the intangable information that I seem to remember learning in graduate school. Not a bad deal, a few nights reading as opposed to 7 years of indentured servitude.More seriously, Cajal has a clear idea of what it means to be a scientist and what it takes to be a successful practitioner. He even provides some leavity in the form of diagnosees of scientists' personalities.All in all a good book, what he said back in the early 1900's is as true today as it was then. I plan on giving copies of it to my grad-school bound students.

A good book captures the time in which it was written, and preserves that time for the future. A great book describes all times. Most of this book is great, current and pertinent a century after its first edition.I was glad to see a scientist describe science as a personal, passionate, maybe even religious act. He describes the progress of a life in science, from young researcher, to professional, teacher, and finally retiree. At every step, he describes the emotional, social, and even spiritual value of that stage of life. Best, he speaks from an acknowledged place within the world of science.Only a few parts of this book seem dated. Many specifics of a biologist's education have changed, though some - like the Zeiss brand name - have not. Marie Curie notwithstanding, he assumed that men would generally make or direct the real contributions. Women mattered mostly as support for the husband, though he did note that educated and professional women might be the most understanding company.What he says about scientists is equally true about serious artists - the dedication, intellectual honesty, and rewards are much the same. His examples are nearly all drawn from the sciences, though. That may prevent artists from seeing themselves in his descriptions and prescriptions.This book is true inspiration. I can't wait to pass it along.

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