

# Book Reviews

Rita Hoots

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## HISTORY OF SCIENCE

**The Ascent of Science.** By Brian L. Silver. 1998. Oxford University Press (198 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016). 534 pp. Hardback \$35.00.

 The history of science is extremely interesting, and this particular view of the past is a comfortable journey. Silver's writing is a rich mix of details and generalities, of abstract concepts and personal glimpses. He invites the reader to sit at his knee while he reflects upon what has happened and up on the implications, perhaps, yet to be seen. He takes great care to weave a background picture around each event, that creates well-directed stories which leave the reader wanting more.

Every story consists of two components. First, the text outlines the ideas and happenings of the time in a way that takes the reader back to understand the social pressures and mores that colored each new discovery. At the same time it describes a particular discovery briefly yet in sufficient detail to illustrate its significance and impact. It shows how preconceived notions influenced the attitudes of the times and hindered acceptance of many new ideas, often leaving contemporary scientists unimpressed by discoveries that would later shape our understanding of the natural world. Stories of

discoveries in physics and chemistry are told with clarity and insight. The detailed explanation of each discovery rivets one to the page. Discoveries in biology are often not as well explained. One feels that there is a lack of familiarity with biological terminology that should flow easily from the page.

This non-technical approach to the history of science was written for the layperson. It is a very readable, enjoyable picture of how science happened and some hurdles that scientists of each era encountered both from society and from the state of scientific knowledge. Its strongest suit is its ability to make connections between revolutionary scientific ideas and the prevailing attitudes of the time. Clearly, when one reflects upon the different times and the social pressures on many scientists, the internal conflict about whether to publish unpopular or unfashionable opinions must have been immense. We learn of great ideas that were wrong and of the difficulty some had publishing manuscripts that later had major effects on humanity. These are stories from which one can gain inspiration, insight and perspective.

All books have their strengths and weaknesses. This one is a wonderful source of information about the history of science presented in an interesting and insightful way. It would be an excellent selection for most teachers of science, or it would work well as a text in a course on the history of science. However, I would not select it for use in a course designed as a history of biology.

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## BIOGRAPHY - NOBELIST

**Rosalyn Yalow, Nobel Laureate: Her Life and Work in Medicine.** By Eugene Straus, M.D. 1998. Plenum Press (233 Spring St., New York, NY 10013-1578). 277 pp. Hardback \$26.95.



**Rosalyn Yalow, Nobel Laureate: Her Life and Work in Medicine,** written by her colleague and friend Eugene Straus, is a very

important book for the history of science, and for the comprehension of this unique Jewish scientist. In no other source do you find such a candid look at Rosalyn Yalow, the woman, the science researcher, and the family person. You develop an appreciation of the milieu in which she lived and worked.

Straus met Yalow in 1972 when he was a young physician in Solomon Berson's department at Mt. Sinai. "And I want you to do something for me," said Berson, "which will be good for you as well. I want you to go up to the Bronx VA [Veteran's Administration Medical Center] and work in the lab with Ros." Straus was ambivalent about doing so because his father, Bernard Straus (to whom this book is dedicated), was fired from that facility in 1954 for refusing to give Senator McCarthy's committee a list of names of supposed communists. However, Straus did see Yalow, and the meeting changed both their lives. The author thanks Rosalyn for her cooperation in preparing the book, although she did forgo all editorial rights. This makes the book an uncensored source of material.

The book starts out on the fateful day, New Year's, 1995, when Straus received a call from a friend who had found Yalow in a coma, on the floor of her home. Subsequent chapters are initiated with an update on her condition, followed by her progress and setbacks, until, at the end of the book, she has returned to her desk at the VA.

Revealed throughout the chapters is a deep insight into Yalow's relationships with family, her few friends, colleagues, and "professional children" (those people who worked in Yalow and Berson's lab and were trained by them). For example, you learn about the relationship between Rosalyn and her first romantic love, Sherman Lawrence. They are still good friends. Sherman says, "She was a beautiful soul to be with. And she was very stable, very well organized." Throughout the book photos add to the intimacy of the textual material.

There are also wonderful quotes from Rosalyn and others who knew her. Yalow and Berson never received

**Rita Hoots**, Book Reviews Editor, is a Professor at Woodland Community College and teaches classes in the biological sciences, human anatomy, and chemistry. Her various degrees in the sciences, counseling, and education come from the City University of New York, University of Wisconsin-Madison, California State University-Sacramento, and the University of California-Berkeley. Before entering the education field, Hoots was for many years a researcher in cell ultrastructure and immunology. Her predominant passion in education is directed to the popularization and illumination of science for the public. Her address is: **Science Dept., Woodland Community College, 41605 Gibson Rd., Woodland, CA 95776; e-mail: rahoots@ix.netcom.com.**