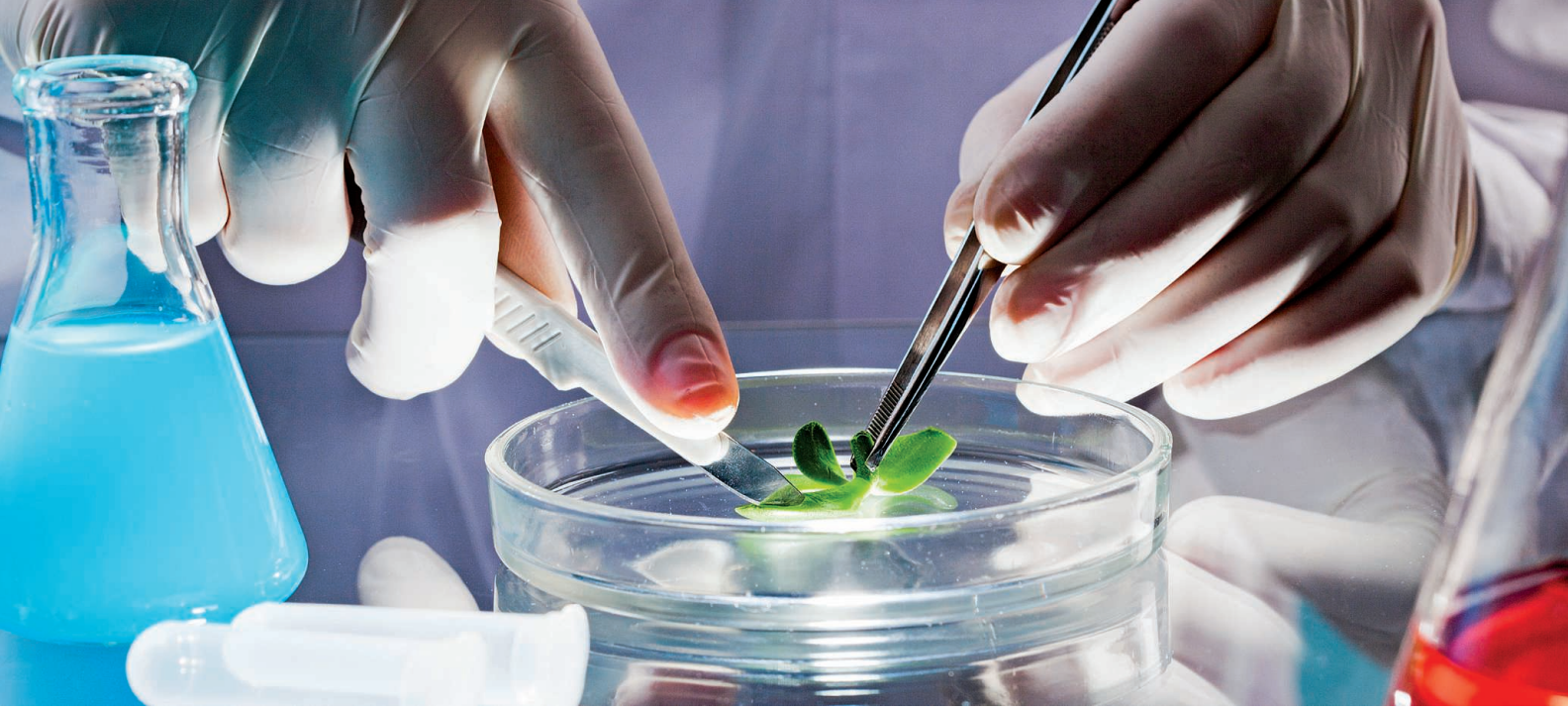

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SCIENCE LIVES

Life in the lab

A new memoir revels in the joys, sorrows, and occasional absurdities that come with a career in science

By **Meg Lowman**

"You may think a mushroom is a fungus. This is exactly like believing that a penis is a man." If this evocative statement does not capture your attention, then perhaps nothing will. Hope Jahren, the woman who wrote it, could be described as the Jane Goodall of botany. Whereas Goodall's writing elevated chimps to the top of our lists of charismatic megafauna, Jahren has set out to draw attention to a much more challenging group of organisms. In her new book, *Lab Girl*, she has transformed the sedentary, slow-growing lives of plants into a vibrant series of stories that are interwoven with tales of her own research career in the field of paleo-plant physiology.

As a field biologist myself, with the entire forest as my laboratory, I gained enormous insights into the world of the indoor laboratory from this book. Jahren sets the record straight about the value of having a scientific "base camp" as a place to ask pivotal questions. "My lab is the place where I put my brain out on my fingers and I do things. My lab is a place where I move. I stand, walk, sit, fetch, carry, climb, and crawl. My lab is a place where it's just as well that I can't sleep, because there are so many things to do in the world besides that," she writes. "All the baffling things that arrived unwelcome with adulthood—tax returns and car insurance and pap smears—none of them matter when I am in the lab."

The reviewer is at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, CA 94118, USA. E-mail: canopymeg@gmail.com

Lab Girl
Hope Jahren
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Jahren tells it like it is, mincing no words to describe the loneliness and uncertainty she experienced early in her scientific career. Recalling her first semester as an assistant professor, she writes, "I think I made more mistakes on the homework than the students did."

She is equally frank about the creative efforts that went into setting up her first laboratory. "We went to the Salvation Army and got old camping equipment for the lab and amateur oil paintings for my office. We visited the state surplus warehouse, where anyone with a Georgia state employee ID card could help themselves to the mountain of outdated equipment that had been discarded by local government agencies."

The characters who populate Jahren's world are as lively as the drought-stressed plants she studies. Her longtime friend and lab manager, Bill, is central to the narrative, playing the part of the quiet and reliable fixer and confidant.

"Science has taught me that everything is more complicated than we first assume," writes Jahren.

The stories she shares are compelling because they are relatable. How many of us have a "Bill" in our lives: a Renaissance man or woman who can resolve seemingly hopeless dilemmas and is there to listen during times of doubt? And although not all of us have had a student who crashed the university van en route to a conference, we all have at least a few student-related tales of woe.

I must admit to reading this book twice—once for the incredible descriptions of plant physiology and botanical experiments and the second time to focus on Jahren's life as a woman working in a field that is predominantly male. In the end, I am not sure which is more extraordinary, the plants or the woman who studies them. If the next generation of scientists have role models like Jahren, then the world of science will be better off indeed.

Our libraries are full of books written by Darwin, Pasteur, Leakey, Ehrlich, and many hundreds of acclaimed male scientists. The shelf of titles by women doing science is much smaller, yet it is growing. As a woman who has written a book about her own (mis) adventures in science (*1*), I look forward to the day when my bookshelf reflects the rich diversity of all those who are engaged in the scientific enterprise.

REFERENCES

1. M. Lowman, *Life in the Treetops: Adventures of a Woman in Field Biology* (Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT, 1999).

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