



Book Review: Navigating an Academic Career

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A Book Review on

“Navigating an Academic Career: A Brief Guide for PhD Students, Postdocs, and New Faculty”

Jeffrey J. McDonnell (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., American Geophysical Union), 2019, 96 pages ISBN: 978-1-119-64210-7

SUMMARY

This book is a little gem that can be defined as a “survival guide” for PhD students, postdocs, and new (and not only new) faculty members to approach a career in scientific research with a conscious attitude. The book is based on the academic experience of prof. Jeffrey J. McDonnell and his leadership in his scientific field, and offers plenty of suggestions, personal advice, practical thoughts, and solid recommendations on how to live a happy life in academia, especially in the initial period of a researcher’s career. There are several available resources (books, articles, blogs, interviews, etc.) about how to conduct a successful PhD and achieving personal goals when working in university. However, this book addresses these concepts from a different point of view, offering real life-based examples and personal perspectives deriving from the long experience of the author in mentoring young and less young students and postdocs, and accompanying them to successful careers. The author focuses on how to approach science in terms of personal behavior, inclination, relationships with colleagues and peers, and balance of working and family life . . . elements that all members of academia deal with on a daily basis.

CONTENT

The book is built around a series of articles published by prof. McDonnell in the “Working life” section of the “Science” magazine between 2015 and 2017, and expanded with similar articles, each forming an individual chapter. The book is organized around three main sections that follow a chronological order through the initial part of a typical scientist’s career: “The PhD student and Postdoc years,” “Surviving and thriving in the first few years,” and “Tenure and beyond.” The chapters are logically related to each other but at the same time they are stand-alone pieces, containing a perfect balance of personal view advice and citations from scientific, social, and “philosophic” sources. This allows the readers obtaining several conclusions from each chapter embracing the messages that suit them most according to their individual career path and personal situation. The Postface is not a mere and trivial addition but a really integrated part of the book condensing its main message and offering some final valuable thoughts about (academic) life. The book ends with a dense section reporting further references that are surely helpful for readers who are eager to delve deeper into the topic.

In my opinion, the book includes three most important aspects (**Figure 1**): i) practical advice; ii) approach (to working life) advice; and iii) quotes and “equations.”

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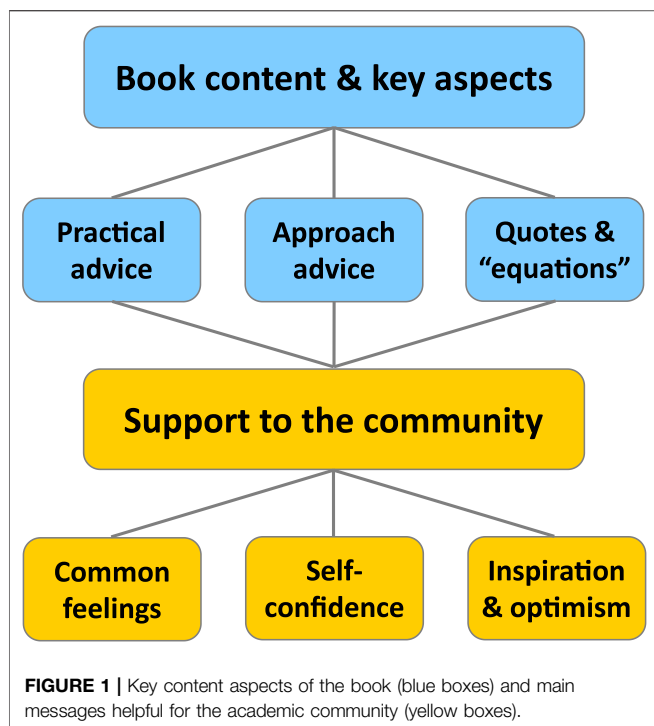
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Practical advice encompasses pragmatic and functional suggestions useful for everyday activities, such as the do-to list before going to bed (Chapter 3), the 1-h workday (Chapter 10), and going to the gym for a mental reset (Chapter 16).

What I call the “approach advice” consists of valuable recommendations, based on the author’s experience and past memories, on how to face specific situations and make good use of the working day and of research efforts at longer time-scales. For instance, approach suggestions that particularly impressed me are finding great people to collaborate with who eventually become friends (so true!) (Chapters 5 and 17); identifying one’s own research brand identity (Chapter 9); the skill to say “no” (Chapters 9 and 16); concentrating on important questions (Chapters 13 and 17); the laser-like focus and ruthless time management (Chapter 16) for a sustainable and balance work-private life; filtering out the white noise (Postface).

Quotes and “equations” (i.e., sum of concepts that provide a given result) represent a fantastic means to corroborate the main messages of the book, and are perfectly blended in the text. I am aware that these quotes should not be extracted from the context of the book but nonetheless I report here some of my preferred ones (in no specific order): “Only do what only you can do” (Anonymous); “The best people to work with know things you do not” (Anonymous); “The things which are most important don’t always scream the loudest” (Bob Hawke, 23rd Prime Minister of Australia); “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important” (Dwight Eisenhower, 1890–1969, 34th US President); “It’s not always that we need to do more but rather that we need to focus on less” (Nathan Morris, American Personal Finance Expert). Some equations that I found really illuminating and that made me reflect are the following: “Academic happiness = reality – expectations” (Anonymous);

“Progress = pain + reflection” (Ray Dalio, American hedge fund manager); “CQ + PQ > IQ” (I do not explicit the terms not to deprive the readers of the pleasure of discovering what the equation means!).

HOW THIS BOOK MAY SUPPORT THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The three main aspects the book relies on reflect into serious support to people who are starting or are in the initial phase of their academic career (Figure 1). The readers will find themselves in most of the situations described in this guide (e.g., overwhelming feeling, frustration, satisfaction, etc.), demonstrating that the author is able to directly connect to the readers’ needs and feelings. This makes the book highly engaging, easy, and fun to follow. Most importantly, perhaps, the book is able to induce a strong sense of self-confidence in the reader and a positive attitude toward future academic and research activities. Additionally, the author’s opinions and indications on how to survive the academic overload, accomplish personal goals, and successfully balance work and personal life make the reader aware that all these achievements can be really reached. All these aspects make the guide a very useful toolkit to positively face the challenges of a career in academia.

I only found a small drawback related to the (unavoidable) “bias” deriving from the geographical origin of the author. Despite his large knowledge on how academia functions almost anywhere in the world, some (important) differences exist between the academic system in North America (which the author mainly refers to) and in other countries. Some views on how grants and positions are obtained can be quite different according to the specific properties of a given university system (for instance, teaching load lightening after becoming a “rain maker,” see Chapter 5, does not happen in many other countries at all!), and some situations might not apply to all types of readers. However, the author addresses very well common needs and potential feelings of (early career) scientists all over the world, irrespective of their geographical origin, academic national system, and scientific domain, as well as race, gender, and social identities. As a result, the core message of the book is universal and suitable to readers from different cultures and disciplines.

As a conclusion, I love this book, and I believe many researchers and academics of different age will love it too!

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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