

Immunity: How Elie Metchnikoff Changed the Course of Modern Medicine

Luba Vikhanski

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Luba Vikhanski's *Immunity: How Elie Metchnikoff Changed the Course of Modern Medicine* makes newly fascinating the story of this once-legendary scientist. At one time a giant of immunology, Elie Metchnikoff dropped into the back pages of history during the twentieth century. However, as understanding of the role of bacteria in the human body improves, his theories are returning to the forefront.

Metchnikoff's theories centered on digestion as a critical component of cellular health and human longevity. His work focused on both the cellular and macroscopic levels, delving first into immunology, where his proposed "phagocytes" (which we know as macrophages) digested cellular-level invaders, and then into the search for longevity by way of diet. In this, he was a man before his time. Metchnikoff's study of sour milk as a source of "good" bacteria capable of correcting health problems presaged the current probiotics movement by close to a hundred years.

Metchnikoff is a powerful personality capable of soaring highs and suicidal depths. Passionate about his subject, he both attacked and accidentally nurtured his enemies, and the book deftly illustrates both the valiant struggles and the tragedies of his life. Having gleaned a personal perspective from letters, the author builds Metchnikoff into a magnetic character and sets him in a vibrant scientific and historical scene.

Immunity is smoothly written, with charming turns of phrase that engage and demand attention. The author adroitly incorporates information about Metchnikoff's personal life into the overall theme of his research, often blurring the line between the man and his passion while always telling the story of his remarkable life. The fussiest of scientific squabbles take on a liveliness that will keep even the least scientifically minded minds interested. No background in immunology or history is necessary to understand the book's subject, and its language remains highly accessible throughout.

Immunity will be of special interest to medical personnel and students who are interested in gut flora. However, thanks to current interest in Metchnikoff's focus of study, it is likely to have broad appeal as well. As a biography, it is easily strong enough to recommend to general fans of the genre.

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