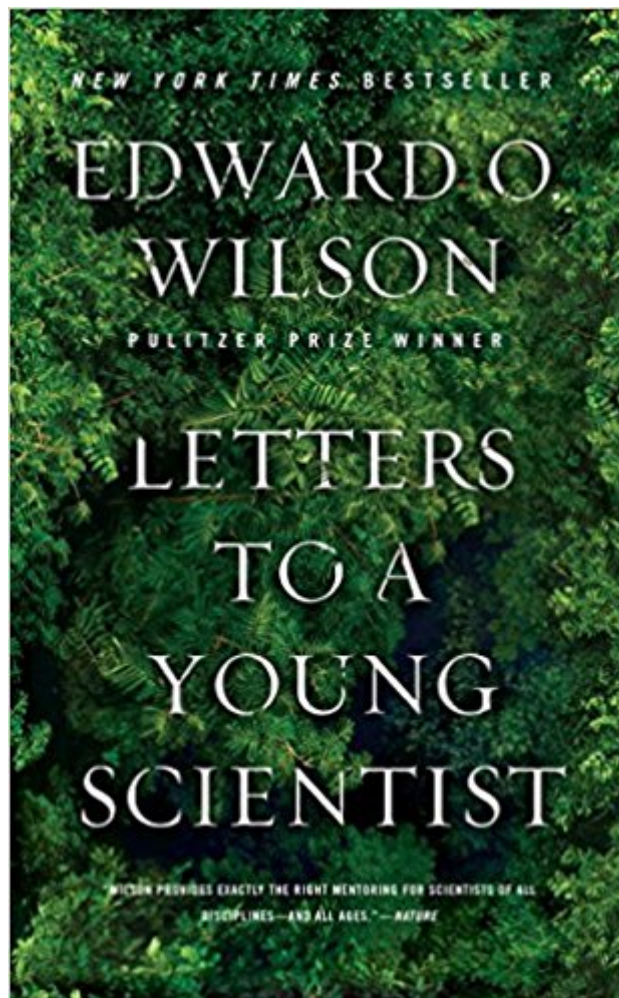


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# Letters To A Young Scientist



## Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist Edward O. Wilson imparts the wisdom of his storied career to the next generation. Edward O. Wilson has distilled sixty years of teaching into a book for students, young and old. Reflecting on his coming-of-age in the South as a Boy Scout and a lover of ants and butterflies, Wilson threads these twenty-one letters, each richly illustrated, with autobiographical anecdotes that illuminate his career—both his successes and his failures—and his motivations for becoming a biologist. At a time in human history when our survival is more than ever linked to our understanding of science, Wilson insists that success in the sciences does not depend on mathematical skill, but rather a passion for finding a problem and solving it. From the collapse of stars to the exploration of rain forests and the oceans' depths, Wilson instills a love of the innate creativity of science and a respect for the human being's modest place in the planet's ecosystem in his readers. 21 illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** “What is this grand enterprise called science that has lit up heaven and earth and empowered humanity? • Wilson, a foremost authority on ants and biodiversity now in his eighties, has dedicated his life to this “culture of illuminations” in the field and laboratory and as a Harvard professor and best-selling writer. In his newest book, he offers candid guidance and profound inspiration to young scientists. “The world needs you” —badly,” • Wilson writes, explaining that our very survival depends on our learning enough about life on earth to halt our deleterious impact on the biosphere. “Put passion ahead of training,” • Wilson advises, and don’t let a fear of math stop you.

Hard work and entrepreneurship, he assures readers, are more important than “native genius.” Practical advice, reflections, and funny and dramatic stories of his own pioneering scientific adventures and breakthroughs make for an enlivening and affecting mixture of memoir, philosophy, and instruction that brings into focus the highest missions of science. Wilson’s celebration of creativity and discipline, love for the living world, and commitment to explicating its wonders and fragility will uplift every reader, no matter her or his calling. Warm, sage, and compelling, this concise and mighty book of wisdom and encouragement belongs in every library.

--Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

“The eminent entomologist, naturalist and sociobiologist draws on the experiences of a long career to offer encouraging advice to those considering a life in science. Glows with one man’s love for science.” - Kirkus Reviews

“Edward O. Wilson, the evolutionary biologist who has studied social behavior among insects and humans, offers advice to aspiring researchers. A naturalist at heart, he plays down technology, math, even intelligence, proposing that a good scientist should be “bright enough to see what can be done but not too bright as to become bored doing it.” delivers deep insights into how observation and experiment drive theory.” - Jascha Hoffman, New York Times

“I want to express my gratitude. Thank you for reminding me and thousands of others why we became scientists. Your book *Letters to a Young Scientist* is first and foremost a book about passion and the delight of discovery.” - Bill Streever, New York Times Book Review

“In this fund of practical and philosophical guidance distilled from seven decades of experience, Wilson provides exactly the right mentoring for scientists of all disciplines and all ages. This is no pompous, deeply philosophical treatise on how great ideas develop. Wilson shares his simple love for ants and their natural history, revelling in them without hesitation. Everything else follows.” - Nature

“Inspiring. Ought to be on the shelves of all high school and public libraries.” - Library Journal

So, I was more than a little surprised that a new book by EO Wilson was out for more than 8 seconds without a single review yet posted on . I rarely write a review unless I feel passionately about an item -- at one end of the spectrum or another -- but I could not resist the chance to write the first review for a book by a scientist whom I revere and admire for his indomitable energy and unrelenting productivity. I should preface my review by acknowledging that I am a somewhat biased devotee of Wilson’s in that I think he and I share much in common: I am a snake biologist (Professor

Wilson was nicknamed "Snake" by his comrades as a teenager, as he went through a three-year stint as an amateur ophiologist [a fancy word for "snake biologist"] before he turned to studying ants), I'm a Southerner (He is too.), I'm an evolutionary biologist (He is too.), an Eagle Scout (So is he.), a science educator (yep, you guessed it...), and I am a proponent of conserving biodiversity (and Ed is the proverbial Patriarch and Anointed High Priest of that unifying concept in science). I mention these aforementioned biases not to share my résumé, but because this book bends to all of those, among others. And so, as I rightly guessed, Mr. Wilson would draw upon a lot of these shared interests in order to make his points and teach us. (This may be a downside for those of you who connect more readily with chemistry, physics, or astronomy examples. This book might have been more aptly called "Letters to a Young Biologist", but I think the title the publishers went with is the right one.) I am also among Wilson's target readers -- young aspiring scientists, but more emphatically -- anyone who would love to be a success as a scientist. This book has helped me feel less daunted by the sometimes mistaken commonly perceived demands of science. "Letters to a Young Scientist" is a clarion call for many MANY more people to join the ranks of natural scientists and to embrace a life of scientific investigation. Ed Wilson leaves no one with room for excuses to fail in this endeavor. He addresses the concept (or reality?) that if we humans are to survive the foreseeable future, we need to be a science-minded people. Perhaps some of the most comforting aspects of the book are that Wilson belabors the point that you don't need to be a math wiz or even have a high IQ to be a great scientist. (Ed did not take Calculus until he was a 32-year-old professor at Harvard, and his grade was a C.) He divulges his own IQ as a modest "If I can do it without genius levels, you can too" admission. In fact, he argues that a high IQ can be something of a detriment to a scientific career. Since many readers are likely to also be followers of Wilson's other works and thus, interested in biology, another book that I have found to have been written in a similar spirit of deep caring and empathy for the non-stereotypical and uninitiated scientist is *Reading the Story in DNA: A Beginner's Guide to Molecular Evolution*; it is written for the scientist interested in the whole organism, but who wants to understand how to DO and get started on molecular evolution research and techniques, WITHOUT all of the math. I think you'll love it. Okay. Now, back to "Letters"... Do I agree with everything written in this collection of sagely correspondence? No. One such point of contention for me was when Wilson admonished readers on how many hours they should expect to devote to teaching, administrative duties, research, etc if they choose an academic profession -- the part I didn't like was when he says [paraphrasing], "Only rest from work and seek diversion on weekends. Don't take vacations; real scientists don't take vacations. They go on field trips." As a herpetologist, I know of several friends and colleagues who

use their vacation-time to take their families looking for snakes (for fun and research) in prime, wonderful habitat; they have formed rich memories that lasted a lifetime, and all family members seem to have enjoyed those times and remember them with fondness. I do hope to adopt that with my toddler. And perhaps Wilson's assertion is slightly tongue-in-cheek here, BUT, as a father, I'm also cautious to not subject my son in his vacation time to always doing dad's hobby or livelihood. And hey, I love Disney World, so my son won't know it's not totally for him. ;) But, once again, I digress...If you have already read other works by Wilson, you will likely see some redundancy of ideas and stories in this book, such as his informal rules of biological evolution he has pointed out in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, for instance (i.e.. "For every unanswered problem or question in nature, there exists a species suited to solving that problem."). You will also hear of how he and MacArthur came up with the Theory of Island Biogeography. He uses his collection of examples and ideas as a teaching tool for how to think and create like a scientist. And keep in mind, this book is meant as an introductory rabble-rouser, in the best sense -- as a shot in the arm for the passionate tenderfoot -- so some review of Wilson's life's work is expected, albeit it is in a fresh, new light. And there are new nuggets of wisdom gleaned from over 60 years as an Ivy League researcher. He has offered two different ways that convergently lead to the formation of a scientist: (1) the problem-solver who often employs models -- organismal or otherwise -- to get to the bottom of unanswered questions, and (2) the naturalist who loves and finds pleasure in his or her favorite species or phenomenon for the sake of its mere existence, who tries to learn all that is currently known on the topic, and is naturally led to questions. Again, since Wilson is drawing on his own experience, he mostly explores the latter pathway to sciencedom. Overall, I would highly encourage young and old scientists to read this book. It is, as the title suggests, non-technical, and is suitable for high schoolers and mature-minded middle schoolers. (And older.) E.O. Wilson can indeed offer advice on most aspects of doing science, from encouraging "quick and sloppy" experiments on a whim (some of his own produced no noteworthy results for him at all; others paid handsome dividends beyond reasonable hope), the importance of daydreaming and fantasizing about science, taking the responsibility of being a world expert on a subject (which he asserts is often easier and quicker than most people think), to devising testable and successful frameworks of conceptual knowledge that we call scientific theories. I've a very sorry track record when it comes to finishing books, but I read this one in three or four days quite easily. It's a quick read, even for this notoriously slow, easily distracted reader. The main idea of this book is that you don't need to fit the stereotype of a scientist (e.g. math wiz, genius, poor communicator [I added that last one]) in order to be a good scientist. AND if you don't fit the stereotype, you are exactly what the world and

scientific community at large really lacks. Ed Wilson says that the world needs your unique talents, badly. I agree. Happy reading! I would recommend this book as a gift to young people. Buy a copy, read it yourself, and then give it away.

E.O. Wilson has again written another very good, readable book. My reason for giving it only three stars is that the title "Letters to a Young Scientist" is somewhat misleading. It could more accurately be titled "A Brief Autobiography of E.O. Wilson with Occasional Advice to a Young Scientist Interested in Biology." Wilson's title chapters certainly appear to make their subjects appear to be some form of counsel or another, and in the introductions and conclusions they generally contain some modicum of it. However, it does not take long before Wilson begins waxing on about his own work and history (which is of course incredible). I would certainly recommend this book to anyone interested in biological sciences, particularly entomology or ecology, but it may prove a long-winded mass of reminiscence to anyone actually looking for some advice on pursuing a career in science.

This small book could have been further condensed into an article in a magazine. There is good advice in it, but there are wide swaths of excessive autobiographical details in it with the advice slapped on as an afterthought. Bit disappointing. Would have given it two stars, but the scant advice given in this book is indeed good. Save money, watch his TED talk instead.

Wilson does an excellent job at summarizing some very important pieces of advice in science. He espouses the importance of the "prepared mind", the necessity of in-depth and general knowledge of the subject area, and the benefits of being passionate about your area of interest. He provides some encouraging remarks for students who do not excel at math, and some observations about the importance of IQ in science (he actually argues that a high IQ may be harmful because it does not necessitate that the individual persevere). But his advice is not broadly applicable to all types of scientists. Wilson is a naturalist—he derives questions about the world based on observations in nature. He then thinks about possible ways in which those phenomena occurred. While this path worked for Wilson, I don't think it is the only possible meaningful path. Molecular biologists, as an example, spend very little time in the "natural" world, and instead focus on phenomena that are difficult to observe with our unaided senses. He also categorizes faculty as fitting into one of two categories: the insiders and the outsiders. He recommends that budding scientists opt for the latter, and eschew, as much as possible, teaching responsibilities and departmental obligations beyond serving on a thesis committee. He also advocates against so-called think-tanks, and instead

recommends a more solitary approach, catering especially to the introvert. I don't think that his advice is wrong, but I also don't think it is balanced. This book is basically a case study of a successful scientist, and I think it should be viewed as such, rather than a general book of advice. And as a scientist, I wished he would have provided more reasoning as to why he makes specific recommendations or at least provide more examples that support his claims.

Dr. Wilson's book is advertised as a collection of letters to encourage and advise young scientists. What I got out of it (as a young scientist) was "be passionate, be antisocial, never take breaks, pick your friends, get really lucky". I was hoping to read this to be inspired to continue my PhD aspirations, it neither hurt nor helped me.

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