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Lessons from literature

With the Nobel prizes celebrating their centenary this year, the science awards have received a lot of attention. But on the eve of next week's presentation ceremony, perhaps it is time to look at the literature prize — especially the 1930 award won by Sinclair Lewis in part for his story on immunologist Martin Arrowsmith.

Arrowsmith's career path is neither smooth nor easy — but it offers some useful lessons. At medical school, he apprentices under a professor of bacteriology, who is a stickler for methodology. After a sabbatical, he returns as a disciple to the dean, who is an expert at pacifying people (lesson 1: choose your adviser wisely).

After going into practice, Arrowsmith finds it difficult to balance medicine and research — a public-health position proves to be more politics than science. And a pathology post turns out to be repetitive and dull (lesson 2: if you're committed to research, avoid other options).

His old methodology mentor helps Arrowsmith find some solace at a well-funded private institute (lesson 3: networking pays). But, free of patients and politics, he is instead challenged by economics and ethics when he has to choose whether to freely administer a new vaccine against bubonic plague or to conduct a controlled, blinded trial. When his decision ends in equal parts success and tragedy, Arrowsmith and a friend retreat to a small lab in Vermont, ostensibly for the purity of basic science. But even then, they must establish a business to fund their work (lesson 4: there is no such thing as a free lunch).

Arrowsmith, with all his sector-hopping, seems like a twenty-first-century scientist. His ultimate career lesson — that every position, no matter how promising, comes with its share of frustrations and trade-offs — certainly still resonates.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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