

BOOK REVIEW

Insect Lives: Stories of Mystery and Romance from a Hidden World.

Erich Hoyt and Ted Schultz (Eds.) (1999).

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 360 pp.

The editors have collected an eclectic assemblage of writings, covering more than two millennia of insect studies. The earliest author is Aristotle but most are 19th to late 20th century naturalists and entomologists. Wallace, Darwin, Fabre, Maeterlinck, von Frisch, Pergande, Eisner, Snodgrass and many less widely familiar authors are represented. A scattering of biblical insect references, humorous writings, poems and illustrations (mainly early insect drawings, but also a few Gary Larsen cartoons) makes up the rest of the compilation, so that the reader can never be sure what surprises may await the turn of a page.

In putting together this volume, the editors' intention was to appeal to lay-people who regard most insects as unpleasant pests, to be destroyed with whatever firepower may be at hand. The various chapters illustrate both the differences and the similarities between insect and human biology and so seek to elicit positive attitudes of appreciation and curiosity about the worlds of insects. The book is loosely arranged in ten themes (for example, *Insects Praised*, *Insects Reviled*, *Insect Behavior*, *The Superorganism*) with five or six items, each with a brief introduction from the editors, within each theme. Hoyt and Schultz confess to a bias towards the social insects and the parallels of insect to human societies are appropriate to the objective of converting entomophobes. While some items were originally written as scientific papers, more often they were letters, or writings intended for a lay readership.

The editors (whose introduction shows that they write very well themselves) have taken great care in selecting 'good writing on insects', so that as well as the intrinsic fascination of the subject matter, the writing itself is enjoyable. In other words, it is not only correct, but clear, evocative and often lyrical. The insect characters in some accounts are treated with a degree of anthropomorphism – a mud dauber wasp 'seemed overjoyed' for example – but the editors' point out the unscientific nature of remarks of this kind. On the other hand, there is little overt teleology (we are not told 'it does something because.... or in order to...'), such a common fault in many writings for a lay or even a scientific readership. And only one chapter included acronyms, that bane of contemporary scientific writing! I found little to complain about in the editorial presentation. The papers seem to have been scanned and then edited from OCR documents and by coincidence the only errors I noticed were misrepresentations of the same word pair – 'caves' for 'eaves' in one chapter and 'eaves' for 'caves' in another. The illustrations, all in black and white, are perhaps not as bright and sharp as we could hope.

For experienced entomologists, the book lacks the fascination of novelty. We know most of the material in principle if not in detail, and can be seduced only by imaginative writing or particular case studies that had previously passed us by. For this reviewer, some of the highlights were May Berenbaum's detailed account of succession in carrion, Pergande's ant-decapitating phorid larvae, Asher Treat's conducted tour of the ear-cavities of moths, and John Alcock's beautifully descriptive accounts of habitats and insects: "*backlighted on its perch, the creature [a robberfly] assumes a radiance not usually associated with flies*". (I wish I could write like that).

A by-product of the structure is the insights we sometimes gain into the activities and characters of entomologists. While we may not feel that the description of the development of a botfly in the human scalp is likely to bring entomophobes on-side, this item, and an attempt to develop a pain index for various stings are the most memorable ones giving insects a bad name. In contrast, Snodgrass, doyen of morphologists, displays an unexpected sense of humour in his description of bee metamorphosis: "*Yet it is a great advantage to the bees in their social life to have their young in the form of helpless grubs that must stay in their cells until full-grown, when, by a quick transformation, they can ... become at once responsible members of the community. Any parents distracted by the incorrigibilities of their offspring in the adolescent stage can appreciate this.*" That was 1930!

It's difficult to judge how successful the editors will be in their objective of reaching out to non-entomologists, who need first to be persuaded that they want to buy/read a book outside their normal ambit. If they take the

plunge they can scarcely fail to find plenty to interest and inform them. Ideally, we need another two reviews of this book, one by an entomologically virgin adult. This would give a better idea than I can of the book's likely success with its target readership. The other would be by a bright child of 10-12 years. About fifty years ago my introduction to the study of insects was through the works of Fabre and Maeterlinck, and other less well-known writers on natural history. There's no doubt that this early reading led me to my own observations of insect and spider behaviour and ultimately to pursue a career in insect biology. Perhaps this book would inspire young readers in the same way, although it might be better to feed them selected chapters rather than suggest they read the whole book, as it is a trifle polysyllabic in parts.

In summary, entomologists will find much to enjoy in this book. Non-entomologists will be amazed by the range of insect activities and adaptations recounted in its pages, and may thence adopt more empathetic attitudes to the little inhabitants of the world(s) of insects.

Dr. Dinah Hales
Senior Research Fellow
Department of Biological Sciences
Macquarie University, NSW 2109