

Books & arts

“seeds of infection that killed thousands of grandmothers and grandfathers”, an opinion shared by some Democrats.

Thrasher is an excellent investigator. The reader sees how and why the narratives develop in particular ways, and feels fury and despair, as well as occasional glimmers of hope. But the stories also leave lots of questions. Wasn't the core exploitation of Johnson the fact that he was allowed to graduate from high school despite being barely literate, and had been enrolled in a university just because he would add lustre to its wrestling team? How much should Cuomo be blamed for (according to him and his followers) following the best medical advice for rehabilitating older people, during the first panicky months of 2020?

Thrasher assumes that if only other people had the right perspectives and information, their values would lead them to endorse his social and policy proposals. In his view, knowing the right context would surely lead us all to agree that Johnson did not deserve a substantial jail sentence, and that the US government broadly failed to disseminate HIV medication because “the priority became protecting private pharma profits and intellectual property over providing public prophylaxis”. Thrasher might be correct on both points, but if recent US politics has taught us anything, it is that people who share commitments to justice and dignity cannot be assumed to agree on appropriate policies and practices to bring them into being.

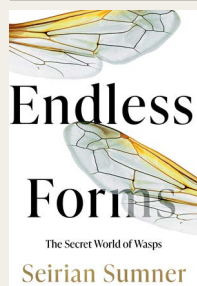
The Viral Underclass will provide motivation and evidence to people who already agree with Thrasher's views, but it might not be persuasive to others. Something more is needed for those unconvinced that the United States has a viral underclass or, at least, that the members of any such group are not responsible for their situation. What is to be done? The book's list of unjust structural designs is dauntingly long and deep; it is insufficient to conclude, as Thrasher does, that “if we believe that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are not separate, but that we face common challenges, then our hierarchies might melt away”. Well, I wish, but history shows that a commitment to the collective good does not imply the rejection of hierarchies.

Thrasher knows, of course, that his moral commitment is not a plan of action or even the beginning of one. So he offers one more proposition: that viruses “offer us perhaps the best possibility of a new ethic of care”. They “have the potential to help us make a world predicated upon love and mutual respect for all living things”.

I hope Thrasher is right, but I still think that we also urgently need a serious debate about structural reforms for the collective punishment he posits.

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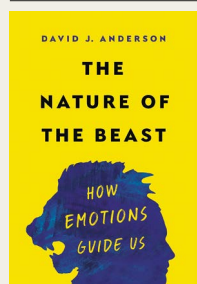
Books in brief



Endless Forms

Seirian Sumner *William Collins* (2022)

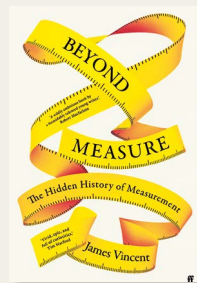
There are more than 100,000 species of wasp, compared with a mere 22,000 for bees. Wasps are crucial pest controllers, pollinators, seed dispersers and decomposers. Yet much less is known about them than about bees, writes entomologist Seirian Sumner, who disliked wasps as a child — but embraced them during her PhD, after an experience lying flat on a jungle floor with a wasp nest above her nose. Her enchanted, engaging study observes that “bees are simply wasps that have forgotten how to hunt”.



The Nature of the Beast

David J. Anderson *Basic* (2022)

What are emotions, and what is their role? Neurobiologist David Anderson explains all the ways in which we cannot know. Brain scanning reveals blood flow, not electrical activity — and it's unclear whether emotion causes brain activity or vice versa. Scientists resemble the blind men in the parable, describing separate parts of an elephant, and “don't even have the same word for ‘elephant’”, he says. Animals — key to this deep, delightful book — cannot, alas, confirm or deny pet-owners' emotional readings of their behaviour.



Beyond Measure

James Vincent *Faber* (2022)

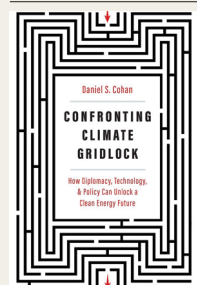
Journalist James Vincent became engrossed in measurement while interviewing scientists in 2018, when the kilogram was formally redefined in terms of Planck's constant. His appealing book encompasses much more than science; measurement, he says, is “a mirror to society itself”. Consider warehouse workers whose labours are monitored every second — a complex relationship that Vincent compares to William Blake's classic satirical portrait of Isaac Newton obsessively measuring minutiae with a compass.



Transformer

Nick Lane *Profile* (2022)

Biology has for too long been dominated by genetic studies, argues biochemist Nick Lane. Genes do not reveal whether a cell is alive or dead, nor how it undergoes one billion metabolic transformations per second. These involve the Krebs cycle, a sequence of reactions by which cells generate energy, and the focus of this analysis. Deeply researched and cogently written, it is sometimes tough going, as Lane admits: “for many people”, biochemistry is “full of runic symbols that suggest a priesthood intent on concealing the path to meaning”.



Confronting Climate Gridlock

Daniel S. Cohan *Yale Univ. Press* (2022)

“Faced with the grandest environmental challenge of our times,” observes environmental engineer Daniel Cohan, “the US Congress has repeatedly failed.” In his proposals for how to break this gridlock, he argues that action will come not from one piece of legislation, but from international diplomacy to leverage US actions, policy to stimulate innovation, and investment in infrastructure. Chapters consider technological efficiency, clean fuels, carbon capture and geoengineering. **Andrew Robinson**