



## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Insectopedia, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition**

Hugh Raffles  
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Ranging across numerous disciplines (anthropology, ethnography, cultural entomology, leisure, sociology) and writing styles (including prose and poetry), Raffles' encyclopedic overview

weaves an intricate narrative web depicting the complex perspectives of human-insect encounters. Historical overviews ranging from 11<sup>th</sup>-century Japan to present-day China, complimented by ethnographic field work and various interviews with scientists, researchers, artists, animal trainers (i.e., Chinese cricket trainers), and local citizens are combined to highlight the various and often contradictory perspectives that humans have of insects. This book is much more than a multidisciplinary overview of our current understanding of insects. It is also a philosophical work questioning our constructions of nature and animals, and how our "ways of knowing" influence our scientific knowledge and subsequently determine how we approach and interact with each other (as humans) as well as with other species like insects. The goals of *Insectopedia* are to highlight the dialectical relationship that many humans have with insects; to determine if people's awareness of the tiny majority of the animal kingdom (i.e., insects) can actually change their behaviors towards these creatures, and to discuss our general lack of ethics regarding these animals. Highlighted next are some of the chapters and key discussions that best describe these goals.

In the first chapter, entitled "Air," Raffles discusses how various wind currents, from the troposphere to gentle "earth currents" (1-2 m above the ground), provide various insects both with flight and non-flight abilities to disperse over great distances. The ability of insects to disperse also provides opportunities to colonize new ecosystems, thereby challenging some of our basic scientific premises such as pristine ecosystems, ecological balance, and invasive species.

The "Chernobyl" chapter highlights the important work of amateur entomologists, such as Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, and how the dedicated work of these citizen scientists provides professional entomologists with much needed data and new perspectives.

The "Evolution" chapter features the noted French entomologist Fabre, and how his particular approach to insect studies alienated him from the larger scientific community of the time. Of particular interest is Fabre's critique of theory, and how our incessant need to rationalize and analyze, to dominate and subjugate, to reduce and dissect impoverishes our abilities of apprehension and blinds us to the fact that these theories provide only partial understandings of nature.

In "Generosity (the Happy Times)," Raffles discusses the historical importance and contemporary resurgence of cricket fighting in Shanghai, China. Through an ethnographic approach (which includes participating in a cricket-fight contest, and various discussions with cricket experts both lay and professional), we are able to understand the subtle nuances involved with this particular leisure activity. Other chapters examining the recreational dimensions of human-insect interactions include the disturbing "Sex" chapter, which discusses crush fetishes (i.e., when insects and other invertebrates are crushed under one's foot to bring about sexual stimulus), the pros and cons of insect collections in "The Sound of Global Warming," and "Yearning," in which

the Japanese fixation with stag beetles and various other insects is highlighted. An underlying message with these chapters is that these human/non-human relationships are not neutral but reflect complex struggles over particular political and social ideologies in different spaces and places (Crouch, 1999; McNaughten and Urry, 1998).

In the "Jew," "Language," and "Sex" chapters, the author highlights the socio-political dimensions of science, and how such discourses have at times been distorted or manipulated for various ethnocentric narratives, or worse, genocides. It becomes much easier to hurt or eradicate a particular target group with "an easy conscience," argues Raffles, "especially when you associate them with a particular type of non-human life-form like insects" (2010, 146).

By providing a broad overview of the social dimensions of human-insect interactions, Raffles is able to illustrate the importance and magnificence of insects to a wider audience beyond the traditional realms of entomology and ecology. By challenging certain assumptions and stereotypes like entomophobia and speciesism, Raffles illustrates how some of these ideas reverberate beyond the realms of science, and continue to impact our relationship with these animals.

### **References Cited**

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- Macnaughten, P., and Urry, J. 1998.** *Contested natures*. Sage Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA.

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