

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Erich Hoyt, Ted Schultz, eds. *Insect Lives: Stories of Mystery and Romance from a Hidden World*. New York and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1999. viii + 360 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-471-28277-8.

Reviewed by Marion W. Copeland (Department of English (emeritus), Holyoke Community College, Holyoke, Massachusetts)

Published on H-Net (February, 2000)

Appreciating the Neighborhood

This anthology, edited by Hoyt and Schultz (the former a Scottish science writer with ten books, including *The Earth Dwellers: Adventures in the Land of Ants*, and many articles to his credit, and the latter an entomologist at the Smithsonian Institution and former editor of *Whole Earth Review*), should be of particular interest to readers concerned with human/animal interactions or fascinated with the power of stories. In their Introduction, Hoyt and Schultz describe their “ultimate goals,” reinforcing them through their introductions to the ten sections that comprise the anthology as well as through the order of those sections and, of course, through the selections themselves. They mean to: “Give enlightening pause to the steppers, swatters, and screamers who live in fear or dread of six legs – that would be reason enough. But we also hope that this book will illuminate insect lives in such a way that it transports and frees the curious general reader from the constraints of being human – for at least a mayfly’s brief lifetime or two – in suspended appreciation of that other, hidden world beneath our feet and beyond our rolled-up newspapers” (3).

Such willing suspension of disbelief, which allows individual insects and insect species to come to life on the page, requires not only an imaginative leap on the part of the reader but also the story-telling skill of the writer. It is therefore understandable that the writings collected here include those of poets, novelists, cartoonists, film writers, popular writers, and visual artists as well as those of science writers and entomologists. What surprised me was how many science writers and entomologists are represented in comparison to the number of poets, cartoonists, etc. Of course, given my own interests, I would like to see more work included here from the humanities because there is so much art dedicated to making human readers and viewers aware of the conscious life led by our nonhuman neighbors. Hoyt and Schultz include Burns’ “To a Louse,” Wordsworth’s

“To a Butterfly,” Cowper’s “Ode to a Cricket,” an excerpt from Byatt’s *Angels & Insects*, cartoons by Larson and Hunkin, a scene from the script of the horror film *Them*, and a host of popular writers (Dave Barry, David George Gordon whose *The Complete Cockroach* [1996] I highly recommend because it does include more literary examples than one finds here, David Quammen, and Jonathan Snell), and a number of scientific illustrators. To be fair, they also do allude both to Kafka and to the “countless poets, songwriters, and novelists [who] have symbolized transcendence with the image of an earthbound caterpillar transformed into a delicate butterfly” (226). That they do not enumerate the writers is fine since the editors desire to enhance appreciation of earthly life rather than reinforce the impulse to escape it for some purportedly “better thing.” But there are many more creative artists and writers, equally as effective in illustrating what Hoyt and Schultz do seek to accomplish, to which the editors do not even allude. While I am grateful to them for waking me to the number of entomologists and popular science writers who are skilled storytellers, I must urge colleagues in the humanities/popular culture to supplement this anthology with others that bring more stories of the lives and adventures of nonhumans to human readers.

In the interim, Hoyt and Schultz’ collection should be applauded for making available essays and excerpts by scientists and science writers that reveal both the romance and mystery of the lives of insects. I found particular delight in Howard Ensign Evans’ “Enjoying Insects in the Garden” which, like a scientific *Rabbit Hill*2, shows the gardener’s love of his fascinating nonhuman neighbors leading him to “plant a little more than we need and simply enjoy the insects, the rabbits, the birds” (20) instead of warring with them over the territory they share with us (or we have taken from them). May Berenbaum, who oversees the Annual Insect Fear Film Festival at the University of Illinois and is the head of its Depart-

ment of Entomology, has a mission very like Hoyt and Schultz's and so they understandably include excerpts from her book *Bugs in the System*. But the anthology's thematic thrust is even better served by excerpts from writers like Maurice Maeterlinck who concludes in *The Life of the Bee* (1901) that the insect's "life seems very simple to us, and bounded, like every life, by the instinctive cares of reproduction and nourishment. But let the eye draw nearer, and endeavour to see; and at once the least phenomenon of all becomes overpoweringly complex; we are confronted by the enigma of intellect, of destiny, will, aim, means, causes" (quoted 145). Other scientists, like wasp researcher George D. Shafer, write of their coming to "appreciate [their subjects] as individuals with unique personalities and 'minds'" (299), and readers will long remember insects like Shafer's Little Crumple-Wing with the same fondness and affection Shafer himself developed for the crippled mud dauber. Caring and providing for her, Shafer ends by seeing her less as his subject or as an example of a species than as a friend he misses when she dies.

No reader can doubt the controlling purpose of *Insect Lives* after reading the excerpt from Donald R. Griffin's *Animal Minds* (1992) used to cap its argument. An analysis of the importance of the work of Karl von Frisch and his successors in translating the dances of honeybees, Griffin's essay on "Insect Consciousness" is clearly intended to cement the reader's by now heightened impression of insects as conscious individuals, but to do so well within the bounds of scientific method. Perhaps there is no better way to end this review than simply to quote Griffin's concluding paragraph: "All this communicative versatility certainly suggests that the bees are expressing simple thoughts. One significant reaction to von Frisch's

discovery was that of Carl Jung. Late in his life he wrote that, although he had believed insects were merely reflex automata, 'this view has recently been challenged by the researches of Karl von Frisch; bees not only tell their comrades, by means of a peculiar sort of dance, that they have found a feeding place, but they also indicate its direction and distance, thus enabling beginners to fly to it directly. This kind of message is no different in principle from information conveyed by a human being. In the latter case we would certainly regard such behavior as a conscious and intentional act and can hardly imagine how anyone could prove that it had taken place unconsciously. We are faced with the fact that the ganglionic system apparently achieves exactly the same result as our cerebral cortex. Nor is there any proof that bees are unconscious" (348).

While this thought may not stop our impulse to step on, swat, or scream at the appearance of an unexpected insect neighbor, one would hope, as Hoyt and Schultz intend, it will at least cause us an enlightened pause. And in that moment, perhaps we will remember some of the amazing stories of romance and adventure *Insect Lives* led us to experience in the normally hidden world of the insect. With this hope, like editors of *Scientific American* (Feb 2000: 104), who also recommend the anthology, I urge even (maybe especially) those not keen on insects to read *Insect Lives*. As *Scientific American* claims, it provides "a sweeping tour of the human fascination with insects" and makes "mighty good reading."

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Marion W. Copeland. Review of Hoyt, Erich; Schultz, Ted, eds., *Insect Lives: Stories of Mystery and Romance from a Hidden World*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3820>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.