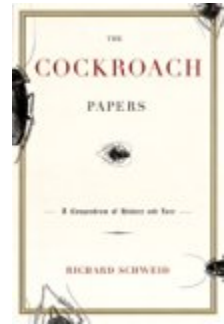


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Schweid. *The Cockroach Papers: A Compendium of History and Lore*. New York and London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999. 171 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56858-137-8.

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Consider the Roach

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Schweid, who now lives in Barcelona, begins his compendium with an autobiographical incident, a technique he repeats throughout the volume, making it clear that the history and lore of the cockroach he presents is, unlike others, personal as well as intellectual. He emphasizes that the cockroach has influenced and will continue to influence his (and hence all human) lives just as humans have influenced the lives of cockroaches worldwide—and especially those of the six species who share our homes. The first incident occurred when the author was twenty-one and shared a Greenwich Village apartment with hippie friends, all “determined to save not only our own asses but those of our friends, neighbors, and every sentient being in that order” (p. 2). The closest sentient nonhumans were the cockroaches with whom these idealistic young people cohabited. Periodically, while the human roommates were out working at whatever jobs came to hand, the cockroaches fell victim to the exterminator. After one such purge, Schweid woke up to find his “supine body was a charnel house, a killing field of dead and dying roaches that came out from . . . all their sanctuaries . . . in confusion as their poisoned bodies broke down, and their nervous systems went haywire. They died slowly, on their backs, legs kicking feebly in the air. The spasmodically jerking legs are what I had felt upon awaking. The roaches covered the floor, thousands of them, and they were dying all over me” (p. 2).

The horror of their suffering, not his horror of the

roaches, is what haunted Schweid, moving him to compile *The Cockroach Papers*. He recounts the roach-human relationship not only from his own experience but also from an impressive collection of historical and scientific accounts, natural histories, and appearances in art, folklore, literature, and film from around the world. For truly the roach is ubiquitous, having followed humans from the rain forest habitats in which roaches first flourished (and continue to flourish) to every nook and cranny of the globe that man has explored and claimed.

While presenting ample evidence that the domestic roach is a potentially dangerous pest, against whom lethal deterrents must be used, Schweid remains the optimist dedicated to saving all sentient beings, the roach among them. What becomes clear is that the problem is not the roach per se, by choice a creature who spends as much time as any cat cleaning itself, a scavenger who serves a critical purpose in whatever habitat she finds herself. The problem is the habitat humans have created and now share with the six species of roach who are our urban and suburban neighbors. Schweid’s personal experiences have led him perhaps better than any except the fictional “roach writers” to see why the ostracized—poor, third world peoples, slaves, criminals and drug addicts, women, and children—take the roach as their totem. The roach is a common figure in their tales and art, an outsider invariably commenting on the foibles of the insiders. In that *The Cockroach Papers* is uniquely valuable. Of course others have made the connection as well: Jay Mechling (“From archy to Archy, Why Cockroaches Are Good To Think,” *Southern Folklore* 48[1992]:121-140) and

David George Gordon (*The Compleat Cockroach*, 1996) come immediately to mind. But Schweid makes it personal and, in doing so, brings his readers closer to a possible change of heart about the worth of cockroach kind. And, finally, this writer's purpose remains to save all sentient beings—even the loathsome cockroach, the least-loved of all creatures, from unfeeling use and abuse.

Toward that end, the reader hears examples of the cockroach's intelligence and sentience not only from novelists and poets, but also from scientists and exterminators. For his foreword, Schweid chooses a Neapolitan folk saying that, in translation, reminds us that "every cockroach is beautiful to its mother." Others as well speak to the beauty of roaches—especially the rain forest roaches—and remark on the individuality of each roach. For instance Terry Page, a biologist at Vanderbilt University, who has been researching cockroach brains for clues to the control of circadian rhythms, comments: "after you've done this [dissected cockroaches] as many times as I have you realize that each cockroach has its own individual face. . . . Each one is slightly different" (p. 94). Henry H. Curran, deputy mayor of New York City in 1938, commented: "Alas, poor roach. Industry, courage, thought, philosophy—they are the gifts which come, night by night, in the kitchen sink, from the roach as he rises hand-in-hand with mankind on the long, long climb from savagery to civilization" (p. 165). That quote is followed by Schweid's reminder that:

"Cockroaches help to clean up the garbage that humans leave around, and they have performed one other service for us—they have died by the millions to increase our body of scientific knowledge about life and how it manifests itself. And they have done so without even the minimum safeguards of comfort and humane treatment that federal law requires of scientists who use dogs, cats, monkeys, and other animals in their laboratories. Cockroaches are not covered by the Laboratory Animal Wel-

fare Act [even in its updated 2000 version!]" (p. 166)

What follows adds to the Dr. Moreau-esque detail of cockroach experiments described throughout *The Cockroach Papers*, culminating with recent bio-robot experiments in which chips are implanted in living roaches.

Another incident Schweid narrates tells of his caring for an insectarium of Madagascar Hissing Roaches while he was researching both the scientific and fictional literature pertaining to roaches. Not romanticizing his charges, he is, however, forced to consider their needs and to see their relationship to him as personal. From this concern, empathy if not love develops and, though he is not as optimistic as he was at twenty-one that he can save all sentient beings, he is convinced humans and roaches can coexist.

Schweid's final chapter is called "Coexistence" and suggests that the remedy for cockroach abuse lies in our understanding to what degree we have used these insects as scapegoats, visiting on them the outrages we feel free to visit on those so designated. Qualities we praise in humans, as Curran notes (in the quote above), we damn in the roach, especially resenting that the likelihood is that their kind rather than ours will prove the ultimate survivor. Instead we need to recognize, as downtrodden humans seem to do spontaneously, that the roach is simply another being caught with us on "the great wheel of sufferings." After his experiences and research, it seems clear to Schweid that "a cockroach that has not been your mother at some time in the past is difficult to find" (p. 170). That insight may at least give his reader pause before he stomps on or sprays another roach!

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