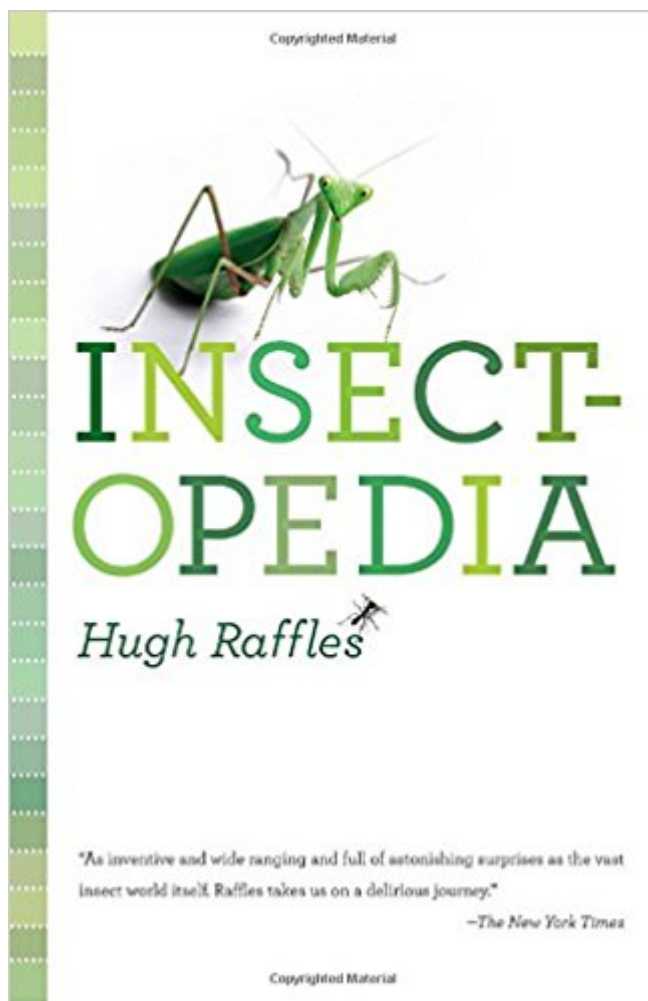


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Insectopedia



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book A stunningly original exploration of the ties that bind us to the beautiful, ancient, astoundingly accomplished, largely unknown, and unfathomably different species with whom we share the world. For as long as humans have existed, insects have been our constant companions. Yet we hardly know them, not even the ones we're closest to: those that eat our food, share our beds, and live in our homes. Organizing his book alphabetically, Hugh Raffles weaves together brief vignettes, meditations, and extended essays, taking the reader on a mesmerizing exploration of history and science, anthropology and travel, economics, philosophy, and popular culture. Insectopedia shows us how insects have triggered our obsessions, stirred our passions, and beguiled our imaginations.

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Customer Reviews

Neil Shubin Reviews Insectopedia Neil Shubin is provost of The Field Museum as well as professor of anatomy at the University of Chicago, where he also serves as an associate dean. Educated at Columbia, Harvard, and the University of California at Berkeley, he lives in Chicago and is the author of the national bestseller, *Your Inner Fish*. Read Shubin's guest review of *Insectopedia*:

Insectopedia is one of the most remarkable books I have read in a long time. Like its subject, it is many things, all of them fascinating. First, it is a reference book of the first order: it is loaded with facts--some profound, others curious, and still others laugh-out-loud funny. Insectopedia is also part personal memoir, scientific detective story, and even cultural study. We travel the , visit Chernobyl,

and enter laboratories and sidewalk cafes in search of insects and the ideas and cultures they inspire. Insects stir eerie fascination: they are beautiful, disgusting, important, and annoying. To some they are tasty. To others they are a source of sexual fetish. Who knew? In Raffles's hands insects become windows into our culture, science, health--even our psyche. In each page of *Insectopedia*, the more we learn of insects, the more we come to face--and sometimes even challenge--our own views of the world. Hugh Raffles's work stands alone for what it says both about its subject and about us. After reading *Insectopedia*, it's hard to look at a cricket, a bumblebee, and a human being the same way ever again. I adored the book. What an accomplishment. And I thought I knew insects...

--Neil Shubin

A Q&A with Hugh Raffles

Question: You're an anthropologist who has written about life in the Brazilian *Inia*: *A Natural History*. Why insects for this book? Have you always been fascinated by insects and people's interactions with them?

Hugh Raffles: Actually, no! But since I started researching this book a few years ago, I've become completely obsessed by insects and our relationships with them. Now they seem like the most amazing creatures. But before that, they were around me but weren't something I paid that much attention to unless they were biting me or invading my apartment. For a long time though, I've been interested in the connections between people and animals of all types. And I've thought a lot about what other worlds exist alongside the ones that we people live in. Most of these worlds are invisible to us. To give an example: we usually assume that time is a universal measure that everyone experiences in more or less similar ways. But it seems likely that other animals experience of time is completely different from ours--that for them, their short lives might actually last a very long time. Despite the complexity of our own reality, it's quite a limited universe when we consider all the parallel realities within which other beings exist. Insects are fascinating because they're so different from us. It's almost impossible to imagine what the worlds they live in are like. Recreating those worlds is one of the things I try to do in *The Illustrated Insectopedia*, often by meeting people (artists, musicians, and scientists, for example) who have their own interesting ways of thinking about this.

Question: How did you decide on this encyclopedic format of A to Z? Did that seem a natural order after you wrote the essays or did you plan that from the beginning?

Hugh Raffles: I'm one of those people who's interested in pretty much everything. After spending a long time writing a book about one small community in the Brazilian *Inia*, I wanted a project that would give me the freedom to find out about as many things as possible. The form of an encyclopedia seemed perfect for that. Now, I also realize that the insects pushed me in this direction: there are so many of them and so many different species, they're everywhere and they won't stay still--the book needed a structure

that would capture some of that energy. There were two other reasons for the A to Z. One was that, much as I like encyclopedias, I also wanted to make fun of them--the vanity of the idea that it's possible to know everything, and then possible to collect all that knowledge in one place. My entries are a little arbitrary, but then, so are the entries in a real encyclopedia when you compare them with all the possible information that could be included. The second reason was that I wanted to find out what it would be like to write with such a constraining form. It was tough! In fact, it was exhausting to be locked into 26 entries. There was a long period when I'd already written enough chapters for a whole book but still wasn't even halfway through the alphabet. I'd say there were a couple of years when I lost hope that I'd ever get the thing finished. But on the other hand, there's no doubt that the alphabet pushed me to be more creative than I would have been otherwise--and it let me experiment with writing essays of different lengths and different styles. And it was fun--it encouraged me to be playful, which is always good! Question: How did you research topics in this book? What led you from one topic to the next? Hugh Raffles: I started working on this book back in 2003 and since then I've been constantly on the lookout for interesting stories and situations about insects. Lots of people sent me ideas and I built up a collection of possible topics. I wanted an "encyclopedic" spread of chapters--a wide range across history and geography. And, in fact, the book visits 11th century Japan, 16th century Prague, 19th century France, modern-day China, Niger, and Florence, among many other times and places. I was especially interested in situations in which people and insects encountered each other in such a way that the superiority of human beings was no longer certain. I looked for situations in which the meeting between people and insects led to the person discovering something new about themselves, about his or her relationship to other beings, and about what it means to be human. I'd like to say that the insects had some kind of experience in these encounters too, but I don't think I've managed to figure that out yet! Question: What was the most bizarre thing you discovered about people and insects? How about the most universal thing? Hugh Raffles: The most bizarre thing? Well, it's probably the most universal thing too. The more I've learned about insects and the more amazing they've become to me, the more strange it seems that we kill them without the least thought. Elias Canetti said that insects are "outlaws" because they are the only living beings which we kill with absolutely no moral qualms--think of Obama and the fly he swatted during that CNBC interview. What did he say? Something like "Got you, sucker!" That seems pretty bizarre to me and, unfortunately, more or less universal! (Photo © Michael Lionstar) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review. Though the title suggests a Latin-heavy lexicon of insects from aphids to wolf spiders, anthropologist Raffles (Inia) takes a decidedly different approach in his erudite and entertaining paean to bugs. Some chapters focus on nations: the paradox that in Niger, where crops are regularly ravaged by locusts, that very scourge—when salted and fried or boiled like shrimp—is also a protein staple; the craze in Japan for stag and rhinoceros beetles as pets; and the revival of a Chinese tradition—now televised—of crickets locking jaws with the ferocity of fighting dogs. Other sections feature individuals who have dedicated their lives to the contemplation of insects, e.g., the Austrian painter Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, who draws inspiration from radiation-deformed leaf bugs. One short chapter considers same-sex behavior (interspecies ass play); a longer one studies the crush-freaks who fetishize the close-up sight and amplified sound of bugs being crushed by women's feet. Raffles' eclectic examination of our diverse reactions to bugs, ranging from scholarly and aesthetic awe to revulsion or phobia, is an enthralling hodgepodge of historical fact, anthropological observation, and scientific insight. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Hugh Raffles approaches the subject of human-arthropod interaction from a unique point of view. He is an anthropologist so he brings to the table the point of view of one well acquainted with the details of human culture. Written as a series of essays that can easily stand alone, the stories presented are often unique and memorable. Partly tracing the history of Entomology and partly dealing with commercial and cultural uses of bugs, these vignettes never cease to delight the reader. Be prepared for some topics to bother the squeamish, however. Use of bugs in fetishes, combat, and as food, may not be easy subjects for all to enjoy. But the parts you do like will inform and delight you. As a person just beginning the study of insects, I found this book considerably more approachable than my textbooks. Often I chose to pick it up instead of keys and memorizing technical terms. And most of all, it was a fun read.

Erudite, well-travelled, better read, and concentrating on an area that gives most of us the jitters ... bugs! A tour de force in the classic sense: meandering, without strong focus (unless it is the mysterious "umwelt," itself a lonely desire). Read this book and you will have 20 more to read, provided in the copious, well-thought out notes. Read this book and you will learn that the other is not just the other, but could be the moth fluttering around your lamp or the cockroach in the corner.

Read it and you can, as well, be put off by the author's person and personality - who cares that sand flies pestered him in Santa Barbara? But aside from his occasional winging and whinging, those who want to know more about insects, and more about what it means to think of insects, will be well-served by *Insectopedia*. Thoughtful and written to be mentally munched over: if you like to read about what you think, as well as think about what you read, you will profit by Raffles; the Diderot of our six-legged creatures.

The book starts strong but then wanders off into the authors thoughts on a variety of subject, some only tangentially associated with Insects. Felt like a bit of a bait and switch actually, so if you buy this book because you want to learn about the world of arthropods, you'll learn a bit, but not as much as perhaps you wanted to learn.

If you're looking for a very detailed historic, back to the 1500s and forward review of insects, this is your book. I listened to the author on radio before a lecture in Texas and he was very interesting and more to the points I was looking for. Interesting account of importance of crickets in China and Japan for gambling and breeding today. If you're looking for details such as in 1699 Maria Sibylla Merian rode a donkey through the tropical forests of the Dutch colony of Suriname to pursue her science and engravings of insects and not how to prevent bites or handling fruit flies in your kitchen, this book is ideal. I liked the section on bees and the author's notion that a human brain is nowhere as intelligent relative to size.

I have to confess I have not read all the way through this book but started to read it as my nature book group picked it out. It is very interesting in parts but a real slog to get through in others. As a result of that plus just not having enough time, I only got less than halfway through it before we met to discuss the book. Many of the eight people there felt the same way. It was interesting but not an altogether easy book to read. I'm hoping to finish it ... someday.

The title is misleading, this is not a comprehensive look at the world of insects. Rather, it's an idiosyncratic collection of some of the odd and fabulous stories of how human beings interact with insects. Some of it is historical/cultural, some is current. The book strikes a balance between items that can easily interest most readers and in-depth sections on more arcane subjects. It is never boring. I highly recommend it.

A delight.

This is a marvelous read. It is beautifully written, prosaic and poetic at times. I had no idea I would have such an interest in those who study and love the insect world.

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