

The common termite is one of many insects that help human detectives solve crimes.



The Corpse Police

CSI: Crime Scene Insects

Pink Palace Museum
3050 Central Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee
www.memphismuseums.org
Through May 8, 2005

North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences
11 West Jones Street
Raleigh, North Carolina
www.naturalsciences.org
June 25 through September 18, 2005

Maggots the size of mice greet guests visiting CSI: Crime Scene Insects, seeming to leap out from a stroboscopic light sculpture that animates all four stages of the fly life cycle: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. "The Fly Wheel," which forms the centerpiece of this exhibit, reveals one of the ways in which forensic entomologists determine how much time has passed since a crime victim's death. Since different insect species arrive at a corpse in a predictable order, such experts can read a decaying body like a calendar simply by analyzing the type and number of creepy crawlies present.

Rookie detectives can participate in this process with the aid of whiteboards scrawled with synopses of crime cases. One scenario describes a human skull infested with dermestid beetles—which can feed on bones and hair—found in 1991 inside an extinct Hawaiian volcano. The beetles were metamorphosing from larvae to adults, which occurs when they are about 53 days old. The finding showed how long the skull had been lying there and helped convict a prime suspect of murder.

Entomologist M. Lee Goff of Chaminade University in Honolulu, who helped assemble these displays, clearly prizes good science over gross-out spectacle. Happily, the two often go together. Visitors who peer into glass terrariums will see dermestid beetles munching away at a meal of mouse or pig snout. They can also view courtroom footage from cases solved with the aid of insects. No loopy CSI plots here, just bona fide facts—and a dose of six-legged charm. —Elizabeth Svoboda

WE ALSO LIKE . . .

The Bomb: A Life

Gerard DeGroot

Harvard University Press, \$27.95

Pausing to consider the glory days of atomic enthusiasm (check out the mushroom-cloud-adorned Miss Atomic Bomb of 1957), DeGroot traces the vexed history of nuclear weapons from the Manhattan Project to present-day proliferation. Disarmament campaigns get their due, but the author also argues that talk of arms reduction became futile once nations had accepted "the mad giant of deterrence."
—Chris Jozefowicz

Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession

Don Kulick and Anne Meneley, editors; Penguin, \$16.95

Moving beyond diet fads and exercise schemes, each writer in this anthology shows how one's perception of fat—whether it's bulging, beautiful, deadly, sexual, or repulsive—is shaped by the culture of the beholder. The 14 essays flesh out such topics as the stout feminine body ideal in western Niger and the fat-stealing vampires that have become symbols of oppression in Peru.
—Zach Zorich

Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature

David P. Barash and Nanelle R. Barash
Delacorte Press, \$24

Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, possesses wit, intelligence, and courage. Her inheritance, however, is meager. So when she falls in love with the haughty but wealthy Mr. Darcy, a man with what evolutionary psychologists describe as "reproductively relevant resources"—money, social prestige, and good genes—she is simply practicing the ingrained female art of hypergamy, or marrying up. Flaubert's faithless Madame Bovary may be more devious, but she obeys no less a biological imperative: She engages in "extrapair copulations," as do the females of nearly every species of animal, ostensibly so that they can obtain parental assistance from one mate and the best possible genes from another.

Dissecting literature through the lens of evolutionary psychology may seem a bit fanciful, but David Barash, a zoologist at the University of Washington in Seattle and his daughter Nanelle, who studies literature and biology at Swarthmore College, argue that the same forces of natural selection that shape animal behavior mold the lives of fictional characters. "Literature is life written down," they write, so why not analyze it with the same tools with which biologists examine the behavior of birds, bats, spiders, and monkeys? Like all biological beings, humans have evolved to act in ways that enhance their reproductive fitness. So if a nursing female elephant seal bites and sometimes kills an interloper pup that tries to "sneak suckle" her milk, so, too, do parents neglect and abuse stepchildren in stories from "Cinderella" to Dickens's *David Copperfield*. And if Shakespeare's Othello falls prey to lethal fears that his wife Desdemona is unfaithful, well, he is no different from a raging bull elk in rut.

Madame Bovary's Ovaries tends to be somewhat single-minded in its approach, and its authors occasionally offer such daft generalizations as "It is . . . beyond dispute that women typically read books about relationships, while men choose stories of adventure." At the same time, the Barashes interweave a delightfully fresh view of the great Western canon with an entertaining exploration of animal behavior. For, as the authors conclude, what else do good books exemplify but "the breath and beat of living organisms embodied in an organic world of sex, blood, food, fear, anger, love, hopes, trees, animals, air, water, sky, rocks, and dirt?"
—Josie Glausiusz



In thrall to their animal instincts: the heroes of great literature.