Vacation reading

Recent reviewers suggest good books to refresh your mind this summer — from a cultural history of piracy to a scientific tour of the boulevards of Paris.

STEVEN SHAPIN
Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates
by Adrian Johns
Scientific and technological pirates are villains. They steal property rights from legitimate authors or inventors, drain the forces of innovation from society and prevent people from benefitting from new ideas and products. Yet from another point of view, pirates are heroes — freeing ideas and artefacts from the strangleholds of monopolies and restrictive regimes, ensuring their spread and nourishing creativity. If we want innovation, we should have more piracy, not less.

Adrian Johns’s learned and witty book Piracy is much more valuable than yet another polemic about modern property rights in science and technology. It is a compelling cultural history of the paired ideas of piracy and property from the seventeenth century to the present, showing how the notion of piracy lies right at the heart of what we think science and technology are. The best history takes readers from a familiar present to a strange past, and delivers them back to a present that can be seen in new ways. Piracy is that sort of history.

Steven Shapin is professor of the history of science at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

W. F. BYNUM
The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play
by James C. Whorton

James Whorton’s book is the latest of several paens to arsenic. The 33rd element in the periodic table surrounded our forebears in the nineteenth century. Its compounds were used in making wallpaper and paint; formed active ingredients in popular medical remedies; were beloved by ladies wanting a pale complexion and men seeking potency; and had many industrial and agricultural uses, including sheep dipping.

Arsenic trioxide — which the Victorians called arsenuous acid or white arsenic — was also a cheap and readily available rat poison. Unsurprisingly, it was commonly used in suicide and murder. Whorton’s entertaining monograph recounts these and many other aspects of arsenic’s Victorian history. He has an eye for gory detail and describes many famous trials, looking at the rise of forensic toxicology and the expert scientific witness. Victorian concern with arsenic’s dangers resulted in legislation, which played a part in early environmental awareness. As well as opening up vistas of Victorian science, medicine and society, The Arsenic Century is a good read.

W. F. Bynum is emeritus professor of the history of medicine at University College London.
that the errors that we make are surprisingly systematic. We don’t plan how to be happy; we stumble on it, thanks to a bit of enthusiastic serendipity. Nicky Clayton is professor of comparative cognition at the University of Cambridge, UK.

Serge Daan
Elegance in Science: The Beauty of Simplicity
by Ian Glynn

Elegance in Science is an erudite book. Physiologist Ian Glynn — who has charmed us before with his lucid writing in An Anatomy of Thought (Oxford University Press, 2000) — steps beyond his field to share his interest in the broad enterprise of science. He describes elegant theories, proofs, explanations and experiments that have marked important breakthroughs, from Pythagoras’s theorem through Faraday’s demonstration of electromagnetic induction to the unravelling of the genetic code. Elegance, he argues, is easily recognized but it is no guide to truth. Well illustrated and full of historical anecdote and background, this is an elegant volume indeed. Serge Daan is professor of behavioural biology at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands.

Nicky Clayton
Stumbling on Happiness
by Daniel Gilbert

It is often argued that the human ability to imagine our personal future is what distinguishes us from other animals. We also spend a lot of time agonizing over our plans, as conveyed by Mark Twain: “I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.” Yet humans are remarkably bad at looking forward. In Stumbling on Happiness, psychologist Daniel Gilbert explains why this is so, drawing on a range of disciplines from cognitive neuroscience and psychology to philosophy and behavioural economics. He describes how our brain imagines its future, how its predictions of which scenarios we shall enjoy are poor, and thus why we are so unreliable at forecasting our future selves. He also reveals

Michael Shermer
The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves
by Matt Ridley

Take a break from economic woes by reading The Rational Optimist. We’ve never had it so good, according to Matt Ridley, who sees the current financial crisis as just a blip in human evolutionary history. In the long run, he argues, trade has ensured that our lives keep getting better. And there is no inevitable end to those improvements. “Exchange is to cultural evolution as sex is to biological evolution,” he writes.

The more we have diversified as consumers and specialized as producers, the better off we’ve become; and the more people who are engaged in trading, the wealthier we will all be. In the teeth of the recession and with millions of impoverished people in developing countries today, his thesis sounds ripe for scepticism. But Ridley builds a solid case against disease and more likely to live to old age than our ancestors. We have greater access to “calories, watts, lumen-hours, square feet, gigabytes … and of course dollars” than any that went before.

Michael Shermer is editor of Skeptic magazine.

Serge Dan
Elegance in Science: The Beauty of Simplicity
by Ian Glynn

Elegance in Science is an erudite book. Physiologist Ian Glynn — who has charmed us before with his lucid writing in An Anatomy of Thought (Oxford University Press, 2000) — steps beyond his field to share his interest in the broad enterprise of science. He describes elegant theories, proofs, explanations and experiments that have marked important breakthroughs, from Pythagoras’s theorem through Faraday’s demonstration of electromagnetic induction to the unravelling of the genetic code. Elegance, he argues, is easily recognized but it is no guide to truth. Well illustrated and full of historical anecdote and background, this is an elegant volume indeed. Serge Daan is professor of behavioural biology at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands.

Nicky Clayton
Stumbling on Happiness
by Daniel Gilbert

It is often argued that the human ability to imagine our personal future is what distinguishes us from other animals. We also spend a lot of time agonizing over our plans, as conveyed by Mark Twain: “I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.” Yet humans are remarkably bad at looking forward. In Stumbling on Happiness, psychologist Daniel Gilbert explains why this is so, drawing on a range of disciplines from cognitive neuroscience and psychology to philosophy and behavioural economics. He describes how our brain imagines its future, how its predictions of which scenarios we shall enjoy are poor, and thus why we are so unreliable at forecasting our future selves. He also reveals
Worse than yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theatre that is not ablaze is suppressing warnings if the theatre is indeed burning. Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway’s outstanding book, Merchants of Doubt, is the sorry history of manufactured denial, from defence of the tobacco industry to shrugging off the tsunami of climate destabilization that is about to break over our heads. It is a story of a group of once-capable scientists who were fuelled by corporate money, resentment and ideology to serve the fossil-fuel, chemical and tobacco industries. For decades, these players sowed public doubt and confusion to delay action on important issues facing humankind.

In the case of climate change, their interventions are accrued mainly by artists, agents and media executives. In the past decade, the book reveals, leading media companies have written off more than US$200 billion in assets in this way. The Curse of the Mogul is sober reading for anyone interested in communications and business.

Li Gong is chief executive of Mozilla China.

David Orr is professor of environmental studies and politics at Oberlin College, Ohio.

Rodrigo Quian Quiroga is a professor in bio-engineering at the University of Leicester, UK.

Candis Callison is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Jennifer Rohn
Two on a Tower
by Thomas Hardy
First published by Sampson Low: 1882.

Like many scientists, I vividly recall the first time I saw that my research had been scooped: opening a journal to find my unfinished work published by another group. A similar event

Rather than focusing on measures of Shereshevsky’s capacity for remembering, Luria asks what it is like to live with a boundless memory, giving a fascinating insight into the mechanisms of retention and importance of forgetting. The US psychologist William James argued in the nineteenth century that if we were able to remember everything, we would be as ill as if we remembered nothing. Shereshevsky too made desperate attempts to forget irrelevant information. Luria also writes of how great memory capacity leads to deficits in abstract thinking. More than 40 years later, his book remains a classic.

Daniel Levitin is a professor in the Department of Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

The Mind of a Mnemonist
by Alexander Romanovich Luria

By effortlessly remembering long sequences of numbers and letters, Solomon Shereshevsky immediately made a deep impression on the young psychologist Alexander Luria. The Mind of a Mnemonist is a beautiful testimony to the relationship that built up between them, starting in the 1920s and stretching over three decades. As captivatıng as a novel, the book gives profound insight into the realms of memory.

Daniel Levitin
Composed: A Memoir
by Rosanne Cash

Whether in Nobel prize-winners or top musicians, the origin and development of expertise fascinates scientists and the public alike. Writing with an eye for detail and an open heart, singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash offers insights into success in her eloquent memoir, Composed. After describing her childhood and lifelong quest to know her famous father Johnny Cash better, Rosanne reveals her struggles to create original songs and navigate the collisions of art and commerce that culminated in her gaining 11 number-one hits and a Grammy award.

Avoiding the constraints of her famous name, Rosanne has emerged as an authentic and distinct artist, her career representing the achievement of willpower and intellect over an industry fuelled by superficialities. Composed is an inspiring literary journey, a testimony to the power of song, love and human resilience. Although her sufferings and triumphs are her own, her insights into life’s challenges are universal.


OPINION

at Columbia Business School in New York. Backed by extensive data, the authors demonstrate that many content-producing companies seek glamour at the expense of shareholder value and maintain growth only through paying unjustifiably high prices for smaller rivals, and that the lion’s share of their profits are accrued mainly by artists, agents and media executives. In the past decade, the book reveals, leading media companies have written off more than US$200 billion in assets in this way. The Curse of the Mogul is sober reading for anyone
Tigers in Red Weather, poet Ruth Padel shares with us a journey of the mind, the heart and the soul. Visiting the Malabar coast of India on impulse, while devastated by the end of a love affair, Padel becomes obsessed with seeing a tiger. A Buddhist friend explains her quest in an unexpected way: "Tiger is the ground you start from," he says. "The tiger is the broken heart … the beginning of change … the beginning of the journey."

Padel travels to Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Laos, Nepal, Russia, Sumatra and Thailand, rarely glimpsing her quarry but learning about the conservation, politics and biology of tigers and exploring their impact on the cultures with which they live. She plods through sweltering jungles, climbs mountains, rides elephants, endures stiflingly decorous banquets, and sleeps in trains, rangers' huts and cheap hotels. Padel reveals the conflicts that make tiger preservation so difficult and the efforts of those who try so heroic.

Pat Shipman is a professor of biological anthropology at Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

Most of the biologists I know were inspired at a young age by the mysteries of nature. I hope that my 3-year-old daughter, too, will dream of fireflies, of walks through fields of wildflowers or of saving the last great places on Earth. Of the children's books that capture the wonders of untamed places, Jerry Pinkney's rendition of the classic Aesop fable, *The Lion and the Mouse*, is special. Set in the African savannah, Pinkney explores the beauty of creatures great and small, and the way that each contributes to the fabric of life. When the meek mouse saves the powerful lion from capture by hunters, every reader cheers the victory of nature over humanity. Even a seasoned scientist will remember the inspirations of childhood.

Jessica Hellmann is an associate professor in conservation biology at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

Pat Shipman
*Tigers in Red Weather: A Journey Through Asia* by Ruth Padel

A good book takes you on an adventure and teaches you something too. In

Abdallah Daar
*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson

Tigers in Red Weather is a modest detective mystery that is solved partly by computer hacking. Stieg Larsson's posthumous international best-seller centres on the search for a girl who has disappeared. Her wealthy great-uncle recruits a journalist to find her, with the help of the girl with the dragon tattoo — a withdrawn character who is a genius at computer hacking and a natural mathematician. The events surrounding the great-niece's disappearance are meticulously and ingeniously pieced together, with plenty of scientific insight. Abdallah Daar is a professor of public-health sciences and of surgery at the University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Jessica Hellmann
*The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney

*Il's on fait Paris: Une balade en 1000 lieux de mémoire* by Denis Lemarié

*Il's on fait Paris* celebrates the French capital as one of the world's great centres of intellectual accomplishment. The guide points out 1,000 memorable sites — streets, houses, statues, plaques and museums — connected with inventors, entrepreneurs, writers, composers and painters. The big scientific names are included, from Louis Pasteur's laboratory in the rue d'Ulm to Marie and Pierre Curie and their discovery of radium in rue Vaucquerin. But there are also traces of those who are now mostly forgotten. In 1817, chemists Pierre-Joseph Pelletier and Joseph Bienaimé Caventou discovered chlorophyll, and later quinine, in a house on the boulevard Saint-Michel. In 1890, in another house on the same boulevard, physiologist Édouard Branly made his coherer, a better detector of electromagnetic waves than Heinrich Hertz's spark-gap transmitter. In 1908, the pioneer aviator Henri Farman, whose eponymous rue is in the 15th arrondissement, flew Gabriel Voisin's biplane around the first one- and two-kilometre circuits. Paris: so many memories, so many accomplishments.

Vaclav Smil
*The International Biplane Race* by Abdallah Daar
Winnipeg, Canada.

Vaclav Smil is a professor in the Faculty of Sciences and of surgery at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.