


Book Reviews

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PLANTS & APHRODISIACS

Plants of Love: The History of Aphrodisiacs and a Guide to Their Identification and Use. By Christian Rutsch. 1997. Ten Speed Press (PO Box 7123, Berkeley, CA 94707). 206 pp. Paper \$19.95.

 Christian Rutsch provides a cultural history on the use of aphrodisiacs with a primary focus on plants used in this manner. The book begins with an overview of the topic including chapters on the distribution and use of these substances (current and historical), and a lexicon of plants used as aphrodisiacs. This lexicon lists and provides brief descriptions of 113 plants, including beautiful photographs or illustrations of each species. Chapters on what the author describes as the most important aphrodisiacs make up the bulk of the book. These consist of discussions of hemp, poppy, wine, ginseng, various spices, mandrake, henbane, coca, and a few others. The chapters on the individual plants include some material (in the form of boxed essays) on the chemistry and chemical basis of the aphrodisiac effect of the plant and a presentation of ethnobotanical issues.

The major strength of this book is the illustrative material which includes photographs and diagrams of plants and reproductions of many paintings and sculptures. Mr. Rutsch provides

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a colorful (and sometimes graphic) history of these plants in both Western and non-Western cultures. However, the text is very weak in many parts of the book, and it appears as if the expectation is that the illustrations will carry the weight of the presentation. For instance, the chapters on individual aphrodisiacs begin with a digressive and unfocused discussion of the use of the plant throughout history, and the boxed essays on the chemistry of the plants are difficult to follow. In addition, the continuity between and among the chapters could have been better developed.

I would recommend this book more for the general reader rather than for the serious student (or teacher) of botany and/or history. The nice quality illustrations coupled with the reasonable price make this appropriate as a coffee table book that can be enjoyed as light reading.

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GREAT SCIENCE WRITINGS

Galileo's Commandment: An Anthology of Great Science Writing, Edited by Edmund Blair Bolles. 1997. W.H. Freeman (New York, NY). 485 pp. Hardback \$26.95.

 This anthology collects works by scientists and writers on science ranging from Herodotus on the creation of Egypt in 444 BC to George Smoot looking for the Big Bang (1994). The writings are organized into themes on The Scientific Imagination. Each chapter, with from three to eleven entries, begins with a quotation to set the mood. The first, "Every Real Problem Can and Will Be Solved" (Ernst Mach), starts with an entry by Isaac Asimov on the research-related deaths of chemists—a nice beginning! Other well known writers in this collection include Galileo (of course), on looking through the telescope; de Vinci, reasoning out how seashells could have come to be embedded in mountains; Isaac Newton on the nature of light;

Charles Darwin, describing the birds of the Galapagos Islands; Alfred Wallace describing variations within species; Marie Curie on discovering radium; and Bertrand Russell explaining Einstein. At 62 entries, there truly are too many to mention here.

Bolles offers three tables of contents: a traditional consecutive listing, showing his thematic arrangement, plus a listing in chronological order and a grouping by discipline (including astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, physics and psychology). In his introduction, Bolles explains his reasons for putting these works together: the excitement of direct contact with an active, probing mind and the living imagination that keeps great science writing alive. He defends science writing as great literature and exhorts us to be inspired to think in new ways. He prefaces each unit, each chapter, and each selection with background information explaining why he grouped the selections together and what is needed to keep a proper perspective while reading. He then offers us some fine writing, to see for ourselves that he's right. Since I teach human anatomy and physiology, I found Ernst Mach's examination of the function of semicircular canals in the ears of vertebrates illuminating. Further, this selection deepened my historical perspective, as I had previously only associated Mach with measuring the speed of sound. Other selections similarly impacted my appreciation of both the history of science and the way in which understanding develops.

Whether you are just looking for writing by specific authors or trying to beef up your background in science history, this anthology is a satisfying choice. While I found it somewhat arduous to read straight through, I expect that reading it one piece at a time now and then will be more interesting and easier to absorb. There really is no substitute for reading original writing. While Bolles had to cut out parts (either to save space, remove references to text not included, or simply to delete what he found tedious or repetitive), the ideas presented are the authors' own, not the interpretation of some expert with a more mod-