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Insects revealed. Monsters or marvels?

Author: Frank, J. H.

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TONNANCOUR, J. DE 2002. Insects revealed. Monsters or marvels? Comstock Associates (of Cornell University Press), Ithaca, NY, 160 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4023-8. Hardback. $35.00

The text of this book was written in French and was translated to English. This English edition published by Cornell University Press is mirrored by a version published simultaneously in French by Editions Hurtubise of Montreal (not seen by this reviewer). Its large size (9 × 12 inches) and glossy paper display its superb color photographs to great advantage.

Of course the photographs are the pride of the book. Their rendition is clear and the colors are true. The insects photographed are from most continents, and many of them appear to have been photographed in the field. If they were taken in staged settings, then the stage arrangement was done skillfully. As the text says (p. 13) "the result is an anthology of some of the world's most beautiful, most peculiar, and most fascinating insects." With a subject as diverse as insects, very many others (if as well photographed) could have served as examples.

Now you want to hear about the contents of the text? You expect to hear that it is a mishmash of disconnected facts, some of them perhaps erroneous, perhaps poorly translated from French, without any theme that might appeal to you? What I found is that the text is well thought out and is well translated. There are very few spelling errors (those I noticed were just in names of three insect families), but there is an unfortunate tendency to write about insect "varieties" when meaning species, and *Nepenthes* pitcher plants are wrong attributed to the Sarraceniaceae. The chapter titles are: 1, Insects and the human imagination; 2, Fascination: an expanded concept of beauty; 3, The classification of living things: an intellectual need; 4, The origins of insects; 5, Up close: insect morphology; 6. Insects and temperature; 7, Continental drift and the spread of insects throughout the world; 8, The evolution of insects in tropical regions; 9, Ecological niches; 10, Insects and plants; 11, Insects and their coloration; 12, Insects' defense strategies; and 13, The strange need to collect. This is not the arrangement of themes that you would find in a standard entomology textbook, but they make interesting introductions to those subjects. The ultimate challenge to a photographer is to illustrate a textbook of entomology or at least a general guide. Two authors, J. L. Castner (reviewed in Florida Entomologist 85: 298-299) and G. McGavin (reviewed in Florida Entomologist 83: 386-387) have done this, and their reason for a less spectacular presentation almost certainly is their perceived need to keep the sale price of their books low, which they accomplished; is there a need for upscale editions of works such as theirs to try to match the book reviewed?

Of course it is likely that the author/photographer wrote the text to accompany the photographs that he had already taken (rather than setting out to search for and photograph insects that would illustrate themes he had already thought out—a harder task). He has written in a way that shows he understands what he photographed, and which may very well appeal to a general audience: forget the obtuse bureaucratese writing of too many entomologists; forget the fascination of entomologists with the insect digestive system or insect toxicology or insect chromosomes. I define a general audience as one that does not much care about insect classification, but which is willing to look at a beautifully illustrated book and absorb the accounts that accompany it. Such an approach may help to convert the general public from an apprehension of insects to the glimmerings of an understanding, and maybe even enthusiasm. The author, who in earlier years was an artist, has studied those parts of entomology that appeal to him.

Where do we go from here? It is hard to see how a good photographer could surpass this book as an introduction to insects for a general audience at a reasonable price, so it sets a benchmark. I suppose that if the general public has become enthused by this book, there may be a need for books (equally well photographed, please!) to focus on aspects of the life of insects that might appeal to the same audience. But where is the inspiration for such books? Some of the author's ideas on that subject may be the single page of references (p. 160) that he gives. Among them, note *Amazon Insects* (by J. L. Castner) and *Tiger Beetles* (by D. L. Pearson and A. P. Vogler), reviews of which have appeared in the pages of Florida Entomologist and whose authors have already tried the next step.

J. H. Frank
Entomology & Nematology Dept.
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611-0630

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