Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

America Rules the Words

If American writers still look to Europe as the source of style and sophistication, they can think again—that is, if the subject is science. Last week, at a ceremony at the British Science Museum, Yankees garnered top honors for the British Science Book Prize, while British writers were told in blunt terms that they were not up to the standards of their colleagues across the Atlantic.

Wonderful Life, by Harvard evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, was declared the winner in an annual contest organized by the museum and the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science, a body set up by several British science organizations. In the "highly commended" category came *Genome* by *Wall Street Journal* reporters Jerry E. Bishop and Michael Waldholz. Other U.S. authors on the short list were atmospheric scientist Stephen H. Schneider (*Global Warming*) and nanotechnologist K. Eric Drexler (*Engines of Creation*). As for children's science books, whose general quality the committee found lacking, Britain did come in first: Fran Balkwill of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund won for the comic books *Cells Are Us* and *Cell Wars*.

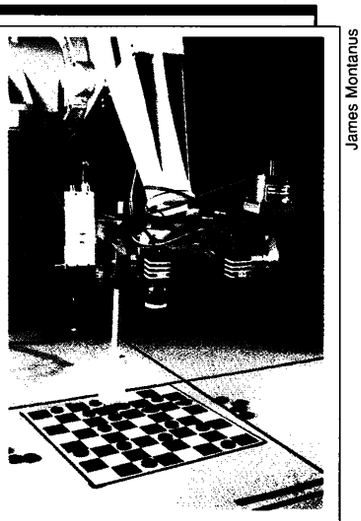
Winners will receive £10,000 ($18,000). And the donor? The UK subsidiary of Rhône-Poulenc, a French drug company. A Science Museum spokesperson said that a British corporate sponsor probably could have been found, but the French "stepped in first."

Checkerbot

Tom LeBlanc's checker-playing robot isn't just killing time. As the University of Rochester computer scientist sees it, a robot that can play checkers is one that could grow up to tackle bigger tasks—cleaning nuclear reactors, for instance.

That's a tall order as engineers attempt to combine an increasing variety of simultaneous functions—including not only seeing and moving objects but "understanding" the rules governing a situation. So, to make their checkerbot, the Rochester scientists created a mediating program language based on the common features of separate programs. "This technology allows you to glue together pieces of parallel programs easily that once upon a time couldn't be run together," says LeBlanc's colleague Michael Scott.

The checkerbot can plan a strategy, move pieces, slide jumped pieces off the board, detect attempts to cheat, and announce victory. It's not a topnotch player, but it's better than average, says LeBlanc. Can it beat its creator? "I don't play checkers," he says.



James Montanus

Checkerbot surveys its position.

NSF Bestows Waterman, Bush Awards

A 33-year-old computer scientist, Herbert Edelsbrunner of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is this year's winner of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) prestigious Alan T. Waterman Award for young investigators.

The award carries with it grants worth up to a half-million dollars for up to 3 years of research. Edelsbrunner, selected over 96 other nominees, is honored for his "remarkable creativity" in combining computer algorithms with geometry, leading to software for complex applications such as airplane design.

NSF has added to the stack of honors accrued by University of Iowa physicist James Van Allen, who received the Vannevar Bush Award at a ceremony at the State Department on 8 May. Van Allen, longtime government adviser and discoverer of the radiation belt bearing his name, was also cited for his "unremitting advocacy" of satellite use for planetary exploration and for his dedication to education.

Pediatrician Kicks Sacred Cow

Since Congress created it in 1972, the supplemental food program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) has been hailed as a uniquely worthwhile investment. By curbing malnutrition among mothers and children, the program is said to prevent prematurity and low birth weights, thereby lowering infant mortality.

But WIC is built on a myth, contends George G. Graham, professor of pediatrics and nutrition at Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health. Writing in the spring issue of *The Public Interest*, he says the program—on which the federal government now spends $2.5 billion a year—"is an unmitigated disaster." Why? WIC is barking up the wrong tree: "Undernutrition plays a very minor role—if any at all—in causing premature...birth" in U.S.-born babies. Graham, whose views are nothing if not controversial, says that in the United States, low birth weight "is primarily a behavioral problem, not a nutritional one." The true culprits are things like drug abuse, smoking, and venereal infections—which WIC does little to address.

USDA

Mississippi mother buys prescribed food with WIC vouchers.

Graham says that none of the claims for WIC has been properly substantiated, and that the latest major evaluation, conducted in 1979 by the Department of Agriculture, revealed no meaningful effects of the program. Furthermore, Graham notes that the rate of low-birth-weight babies among blacks went up slightly, to 13%, between 1979 and 1988 despite widespread participation in WIC. He adds that in many countries where undernutrition *is* a problem, there are fewer low-birth-weight babies than in the United States. In Jamaica, for example, infant mortality is lower than in Washington, D.C., where two-thirds of those who are eligible participate in WIC.

Graham says that WIC is not only worthless, it also contributes to the "alarming prevalence" of obesity among the poor. He concludes that the money would be better spent on a cheaper but more widespread prenatal care program, on identification of those genuinely at risk nutritionally, and on education aimed at the "devastating climate of violence, drugs, and sex" into which many children are born.