

ing profiles are interesting, readable, and insightful. Along the way, the reader gets some of the actual mathematics, but the most important message is really about the people: how brilliant they were, how passionate about mathematics, and sometimes how strange and eccentric, as well.

Near the beginning of his book, Yandell offers the reader some advice on how to read it. He explains that mathematicians develop a very high tolerance for not understanding everything they read. They learn to keep going in the hope (often, in fact, fulfilled) that what comes later can help shed light on what came before, or at least that what comes later might be understandable and interesting. "Skip a bit if you want," he says, "the biographical narrative will pick up again." That is good advice. Readers who follow it will find that *The Honors Class* is a pleasant way to learn more about mathematicians and what they do.

References

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2. B. Engquist, W. Schmid, Eds., *Mathematics Unlimited: 2001 and Beyond* (Springer, Berlin, 2001).
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BOOKS: HUMAN BIOLOGY

Habeas Corpus

Steven Vogel

Developed as a project of the Physiological Society, *The Oxford Companion to the Body* fills an area around whose borders one might find a medical dictionary and textbooks of human anatomy, physiology, anthropology, and mythology. The title's "Body" refers to the human corpus, but the volume's million or so words provide an eclectic mix of biology, medicine, history, and culture. The book duplicates—or even resembles—no other. What might be its mission?

Alphabetical arrangement of entries, arbitrary but usefully familiar, declares a book as a source for reference: else why give up narrative or other logical organization? So what do we ask of a reference book? Its information should be accurate, accessible, and comprehensive; its coverage should be predictable. Accuracy matters most, and *Body* passes muster. Not that one can't find errors. The book dis-

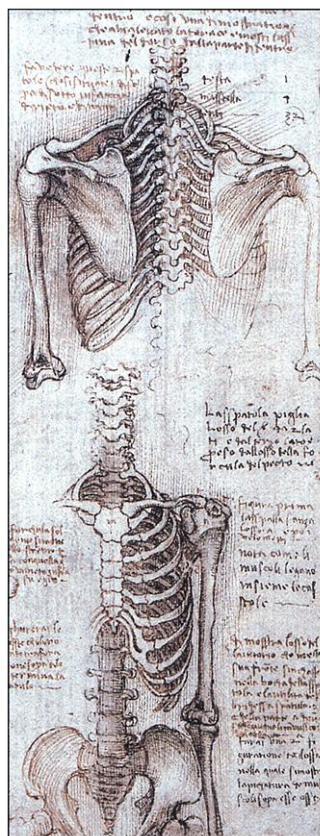
seminates examples of "Diffusion" that are, in reality, overwhelmingly convective instead; and, on "Gaits," it runs in entirely the wrong direction. But such howlers remain blessedly infrequent.

Accessibility, likewise, gets good-but-not-great marks. The writing is clear; the level of explanation is suitable for a first-year college science student or, for that matter, any regular reader of *Science*. The index works well, and most articles provide ample cross-references. Still, the figures, while engaging, only occasionally help to explain things. Most articles appear deliberately contrived not to need such assistance, although we're expected (for instance) to envision the way myosin and actin contribute to muscle action with no diagram of a sarcomere. Tables and graphs are all too few.

Comprehensiveness and predictability of what is covered are problematic. What's here and what's not follow no contemporary convention. One user might find nothing but frustration; another might find the book a model of effective interdisciplinarity, a marvelous integration of the human and the humanistic. A sequence of entries, omitting the conventionally biological, gives some sense of its coverage. We find Spontaneous human combustion, Stunts, Suicide, Taboos, Tattooing, Theatre, Third eye, Thumb sucking, Tickling, and Toilet practices. And there are also Baldness, Ballet, Baptism, Bathing, Beauty contests, Belly button, Body politic, Body snatchers, Brassière, and Bride burning. A column on the mythology behind the term "Achilles heel" precedes a page with an admirable account of Acid-base homeostasis.

The focus, although human, is non-medical (pathologies are parenthetical), and the tone is nondidactic. Still, one gets useful advice on diet and exercise, on managing migraines and aging. The articles provide an excellent (by which I mean informed but skeptical) perspective on the various aspects of alternative medicine.

Many of the entries supply suggestions for further reading. To the credit of the



Leonardo da Vinci's *Orthogonal views of the skeleton* (circa 1510).

contributors, these avoid excessively technical accounts—they truly are the suggestions they claim to be. Conversely, the works that are mentioned rarely supply documentation for the articles' content. And the short lists are uneven at best. Thus "Evolution" could be augmented by better material than Dennett (1995) and Darwin's origin(al). For "Extrasensory perception" we find nothing later than J. B. Rhine's statement of 1934. For a general account, "Cannibalism" refers the reader only to Arens (1979), a book that's nothing if not controversial among anthropologists.

But perhaps judgment by the usual standards misses what makes this book engaging in ways quite unanticipated among carefully compiled, accurate, and accessible sources of specific factual information. A few refer-

ence books transcend the normal bounds of the genre—Fowler's *Modern English Usage* has invited browsing through its three editions and 75 years. I think the *Companion to the Body* should gain admission to this select company. Its style of writing invites browsing, and its content does so even more. Where else would one find a notable integration of the biological basis and the social history of farting? And where else would one find a tidy paragraph on the word "bobbity," referred to as a specific kind of social penicide—not, as might be better, penectomy? (Conversely, would one think to turn to this book after finding no mention of the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*?) Still, as with Fowler's, attractiveness to the browser entails at least a minimal compromise of the volume's function as reference work for quick provision of specific information or resolution of a specific question.

What's best here are those "aha!"s of erratic edification about everyday items: why one can't tickle oneself, why gargoyles are grotesque. Only the dullest of readers will fail to find on any randomly chosen page some bit of information whose acquisition gives pleasure. However memorable, most books I review never regain my attention. This one will not share that fate. "Companion" it will remain.

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