

Current Books

helix was the water screw developed in the third century B.C., probably by Archimedes: “Only a mathematical genius like Archimedes could have described the geometry of the helix in the first place, and only a mechanical genius like him could have conceived a practical application for this unusual shape.”

The innovation most of us take for granted, the cruciform-shaped, socket-headed screw, was patented and marketed by Henry F. Phillips in the 1930s but essentially invented in 1907 by a Canadian, Peter L. Robertson. By enabling machines to drive screws, the socket-headed screw dramatically improved assembly line efficiency, especially at Ford Motor Company, and opened the way for the robotic-driven assembly of machines.

“Mechanical genius is less well understood and studied than artistic genius,” Rybczynski observes, “yet it surely is analogous.” The kitchen-drawer screwdriver has a lineage going back to Archimedes and perhaps beyond, one every bit as grand as any tradition taught in fine arts classrooms. Though it slights the role of screws in cultures other than European, *One Good Turn* is a wonderfully researched, written, and illustrated book, a pocket model of superb material-culture research.

—JOHN R. STILGOE

THE DRAMA OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

By Karl E. Scheibe. Harvard Univ. Press. 281 pp. \$24.95

LAW IN BRIEF ENCOUNTERS.

By W. Michael Reisman. Yale Univ. Press. 225 pp. \$27.50

University of Pennsylvania sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-82) fashioned a career out of the minutiae of human conduct. In such books as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), he meticulously analyzed the rhythms of conversation, comportment in elevators and libraries, the postures of models in advertisements, and other matters once deemed too meager for scholarly attention. The field he pioneered is now flourishing, with studies of wafer-thin behavior—

”The Effects of Staring and Pew Invasion in Church Settings”—multiplying faster than clones of the Goffmanesque sitcom *Seinfeld*. From different angles, these two books by Goffman disciples cleverly summarize and analyze the sociology of the commonplace.

Scheibe, a psychology professor at Wesleyan University, sees daily life as drama. “Insofar as we truly live,” he writes, “we cannot keep from acting.” He considers the transformative nature of human interactions, the shifting roles of actor and audience, and the players’ tendency to adhere to the appropriate script—shouting at football games but not at golf matches, for instance. He also ponders why we undertake some performances sans audience. Whereas eating is “always and everywhere an occasion for social gatherings,” he observes, “the act of defecation is almost always solitary,” for, in Scheibe’s lofty formulation, “bowel movements remind us of our finitude, our inexorable ties to the soil, even though as philosophers we may pretend to eat only clouds.”

The drama of the mundane is a capacious concept, and it makes for a meandering but entertaining book. In one chapter, Scheibe asks what ever happened to schizophrenia, a relatively common psychiatric diagnosis through the 1970s that is now much rarer. He believes that patients who once would have been labeled schizophrenic now are given other diagnoses, especially multiple personality disorder and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Schizophrenics traditionally required years of treatment in state-supported mental hospitals, an impractical prescription in an era of deinstitutionalization, whereas the newer diagnoses generally require only outpatient treatment. Psychiatrists, it seems, avoid diagnosing what they cannot treat. “Now that the stage settings have been struck,” he writes, “the actors who populated the wards are no longer controlled by the settings’ mythical constraints and are now walking on other boards.”

Where Scheibe sees drama, Reisman, a professor at Yale Law School, sees “microlaw”: an informal system that prescribes proper behavior and punishes violations. He considers, for example, the conventions for

standing in line. When someone cuts in, self-appointed “line stewards” are likely to protest, at least by grumbling and perhaps by confrontation. If the interloper won’t back down, “there will be an uneasy interim during which many queuers will be watching carefully to determine whether the queue is disintegrating. The moment they sense that it is, they will stampede.”

Although some of Reisman’s observations don’t quite fit his microlaw model, with its sanctions for misbehavior, they’re still compelling. People generally prefer eye contact while conversing, he notes, but not when making embarrassing disclosures—hence the traditional psychiatrist’s office, with doctor seated behind patient. Reisman, who dedicates his book to Goffman, nicely describes the delicate dance of striking up a conversation with a seatmate on a long

flight, where a miscalculation can sentence you to hours of tedium: “Initially, the parties may move with extraordinary indirection and caution precisely because of the costs and even risks in getting involved in a rap session with the ‘wrong’ sort of person.”

Only connect, counseled E. M. Forster, but, as these books remind us, we are capable of connecting only so far. In strange interludes and ordinary ones, we can’t always see behind the masks. Reisman at times seems defensive—one suspects that his Yale Law colleagues don’t take microlaw quite as seriously as he would like—whereas Scheibe, who boasts that his students “often express surprise at the rapidity with which the three-hour period has been consumed,” comes across as a tad full of himself. But maybe it’s just me.

—STEPHEN BATES

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

BRAND.NEW.

Edited by Jane Pavitt.

Princeton Univ. Press. 224 pp. \$49.50

I have grown up with Cheerios, and Cheerios has grown up with me. When I was young, the cereal promised me muscle and “go power.” Now that I am middle aged, it is, I am assured, good for my heart. There are other ring-shaped oat cereals, but Cheerios is a tradition, and I am willing to pay more for it than for generic brands. General Mills charges almost \$4 a pound for the cereal, when even grain-fed beef is selling for less.

Cheerios, then, is a brand—part mythology, part relationship, part image, and, oh yes, part oats. A brand can offer satisfactions greater than the sum of the product’s parts. All of us spend much of our lives consuming things. Brands offer a way to organize this consumption and give it meaning.

Branded products have existed for centuries, but the late 1990s was a period of brand mania. The value of brands was thought to greatly increase stock prices. Established brands stretched into new

areas—it seemed that Nike’s swoosh and Coca-Cola’s dynamic ribbon would soon appear on everything. And individuals were urged to develop not simply a personal identity but a brand identity.

Brand.New is a product of this enthusiasm, a coffee-table book sprinkled with substantive essays by academics and others, prepared in conjunction with an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. There may seem to be something odd, decadent even, about so lavish a book filled largely with the commercial imagery that many of us see every day. Still, there are images you may not have seen before. The pink room filled with Hello Kitty paraphernalia—including wallpaper, appliances, countless toys and games, and a chair—and the rather solemn mother and daughter who collected all this sweetness make for a scene I won’t soon forget.

In writing that ranges from abstruse to zingy, the essays summarize current thinking about the mechanics and meaning of consumption. More complex conceptions have replaced the Veblenesque notion of the con-

