

actly the right time. Under her regime, the theater has undergone a major and much-needed renovation. As I write, the Westport Country Playhouse is about to open for its 75th season. May it have as exciting a future as it has a rich historical past.

The story begins with the redoubtable Langner, who founded the theater in 1931. The relationship between Langner and the Theatre Guild, the organization he started in 1919 with his wife, Armina Marshall, has been fairly well chronicled elsewhere. But Richard Somerset-Ward, the former head of music and arts programming for the BBC, establishes Langner as a truly memorable figure in both patent law and theater. Who knew that Langner was responsible for the National Inventors Council, which was run by Charles F. Kettering, a prolific inventor whose name is now most commonly associated with the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research? Or that Langner was behind the Connecticut Stratford Shakespeare Theatre? All this is well documented here, and it's fascinating.

Somerset-Ward tells wonderful stories about the Westport theater's early years: skunks in the venting system, housewives aggressively recruiting subscribers without

knowing what the shows would be, a mid-western intern mistaking the J. C. Penney in the Westport phone book (the man himself) for the store where she could buy tires, productions that provided the inspiration for not one but two of America's great musicals (*Oklahoma!* and *My Fair Lady*). You feel the ups and downs of summer theater, especially on a stage that started life in the countryside but became more and more easily commutable from Broadway. It's a marvel that the place is not only still standing but is poised for a whole new life.

While this book is loaded with facts and photographs, it's a pretty clunky read. Somerset-Ward seems determined to recount what he considers the most important factoids of each season at the playhouse, leaving the reader to slog through some not-very-interesting stories to get to the wonderful ones. There are also sidebars, biographical sketches, and other asides, some of which run on for pages.

But despite my reservations, I'm glad *An American Theatre* is with us. Institutions such as the Westport Country Playhouse are rare these days, and it's good to have a comprehensive history of this very important one.

—THEODORE S. CHAPIN

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

IN THE COMPANY OF CROWS AND RAVENS.

By John M. Marzluff and Tony Angell.
Yale Univ. Press. 384 pp. \$30

Sociable, brash, noisy, curious, deceitful, intelligent, garrulous, territorial, thieving, technologically advanced—does this description remind you of anyone? Crows and humans share large brains, complex socialization schemes, impressive vocabularies, and other attributes. They also share something else, according to John M. Marzluff, a professor of wildlife science at the University of Washington, and writer-artist Tony Angell: a long history of interconnection and mutual benefit. The authors' systematic exploration of this history is handsomely complemented by dozens of Angell's pen-and-ink drawings.

When prehistoric humans first learned to hunt, crows and other members of the corvid

family (including ravens, magpies, and jack-daws) probably began sticking close by, hopping and flopping around the kills, ready to carry off scraps. Other scavenger birds, nature's sanitation department, also congregate around humans, but none so attentively as crows. Seagulls and pigeons don't come as close, for instance, or observe our behavior as intently as do crows.

While crows have watched us, we've watched them too. Their funereal plumage, merciless gaze, and ghoulish habits have often suggested macabre connections, and they were once widely believed to transport souls to the afterworld. Yet corvids are also folk heroes, the artful tricksters in both Native American stories and *Aesop's Fables*. In 15th- and 16th-century England, crows were considered intelligent, resourceful, and responsible citizens, "legally protected from destruction because of the janitor-



The Hawaiian Crow is an endangered species.

ial services they performed on city streets.” But attitudes changed with the Great Fire of London in 1666, when crows and ravens feasted on charred bodies. King Charles II authorized the birds’ extermination, and the one-time model citizens became despised enemies.

Europeans brought this contempt to the New World, and it persists to this day. Crows are the sort of vermin we can freely slaughter. They’re never out of season; there *is* no season. As Marzluff and Angell point out, a crow hunt entails no respect or admiration—hunters don’t eat their corvid prey, or stuff and display the trophies. In the 1930s and ’40s, “fearful of disease, convinced of [crows’] negative effects on game and grain, and annoyed by their noise,” government workers in many states dynamited roosts, killing 26,000 crows in a single night in Oklahoma and 328,000 in a winter in Illinois.

Certainly the crow diet—including garbage, corn, and baby birds—strikes us as uncongenial. Marzluff and Angell, however, remind us that scavengers help reduce the spread of disease, claim that raccoons and snakes devour far more songbirds than crows do, and point out that crows eat insect pests too. (Crows also eat sparrows’ eggs and young, to the delight of some people and the dismay of others.)

Despite our best efforts, the American crow population is on the increase. Marzluff and Angell suggest that we’re ultimately responsible, through our alterations of the landscape. Crows thrive on cleared agricultural land, in suburbs, and in cities. (Ravens, which need wilderness, are in decline.) The more trash we create, the more crows have to pick over. They’re thus both effect and symbol of our crowded, noisy, wasteful urban habitats, speckled with landfills and Dumpsters.

But Marzluff and Angell explain that it’s relatively easy to evict backyard crows and usher in songbirds instead, just by careful planting. Crows love to socialize on open lawns, whereas songbirds prefer rustling around in dense shrubbery. “Our studies suggest that small lawns, less than about a quarter of an acre . . . , surrounded by trees and shrubs, though still used by robins, towhees, juncos, sparrows, and small children, are rarely used by crows.” And, of course, native shrubs and smaller lawns also reduce the need for pesticides, herbicides, and watering.

What a pleasure to learn that the tools for change are as close as the gardening trug. Maybe we can transform our small portions of the natural world into habitats not just for songbirds but for the selves we wish to be: intelligent, resourceful, responsible citizens.

—ROXANA ROBINSON

TERRORS OF THE TABLE:

The Curious History of Nutrition.

By Walter Gratzer. Oxford Univ. Press. 304 pp. \$30

We are what we eat.

Right?

As readers of this exhaustive (and exhausting) historical survey must conclude, the science behind that simple proposition remains speculative and incomplete. Over the past two centuries, so many fine researchers were showered with honors and titles and awards for getting the science totally wrong. One hundred years from now, people will look back on our nutritional pieties and marvel: They thought red meat was bad for you? They forced themselves to drink soymilk?