

wholesale extermination by those who wished to exterminate the Indians as well. Though Meriwether Lewis had recalled seeing “innumerable herds” less than a century earlier, by the late 1880s the American buffalo was almost extinct.

More than 250,000 buffalo exist in the United States today, but only an estimated 15,000 of them live in the wild. The largest wild herd, of about 4,000, is in Yellowstone National Park, but even these animals are routinely killed by state and federal authorities, most frequently because they wander out of the park and onto grazing lands designated for cattle.

A Buffalo in the House provides an engaging history of the species and alerts readers to their current precarious existence in the wild. But the central story of Charlie and his family isn’t captivating enough to sustain a book-length narrative. Much about the daily interactions between Charlie and his keepers was passed on to Rosen secondhand, and some of the drama that he saw in this story “about the outer limits of human friendship with a wild animal” is lost in his retelling.

Nevertheless, Charlie’s short life highlights the fraught relationship between humans and wildlife. Roger Brooks allowed a wild buffalo to live in his house because he loved it, an arrangement that ultimately contributed to Charlie’s untimely death. Yet such passion—balanced with careful attention to the needs of wild creatures—is necessary if the animals that have come to depend on us are to survive.

—Brian Spak

Gesundheit!

ALLERGIES ARE NOTHING new, but in recent decades the number of Americans whose immune systems overreact to various inhaled, ingested, and merely brushed-against allergens

has burgeoned. A huge amount of research now focuses on allergies—including the extreme respiratory response known as asthma—which today afflict more than 50 million Americans. But while improved drugs deliver relief, a clear explanation for the epidemic remains elusive.

Breathing Space, by science and medical historian Gregg Mitman of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, belongs to a curious class of books, natural histories of disease. In tracing the birth and vigorous growth of hay fever in the United States, he charts a common cycle: Humans settle somewhere, environmental degradation results, then they pick up and move somewhere new.

Hay fever was first described in 1819 by a doctor in the United Kingdom who noticed a link between the haying season and his own watery eyes and chest congestion. But the disease was soon common in North America, where the rest of Mitman’s history unfolds.

That history is largely a series of flights. From eastern cities where ragweed thrived in empty lots and beside expanding roadways, wealthy Americans fled to mountain resorts. From Chicago they hied to northern Michigan. And from the plains they ascended to Denver, or turned south to the desert town of Tucson. Hay fever resorts catered to the refugees, offering not just clean air but also fine food and recreation.

The food was a problem. It was locally grown, on plants that produced pollen. The recreation was problematic, too: These playgrounds attracted thousands of people. More humans meant more housing, and more housing meant fewer air-cleansing forests. In the North, cleared lots invited weeds; in the desert, sprawling development spawned traffic, and the traffic stirred up dust. Sometimes allergy refugees relocated permanently to these breath-saving climes, killing, by increments, the thing they loved. Migrants to Denver brought cars, and smog was born. Migrants to Tucson couldn’t live without

BREATHING SPACE:

How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes.

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lawns and shade trees. Pollen counts soared.

The first half of *Breathing Space* makes a persuasive case that humans, when sickened by the environment they create, will move on. But as a species, we're so high-maintenance that we unavoidably transform the new environment into the old one. Mitman has gathered some delightful artifacts to illustrate his narrative—period brochures from hay fever resorts, cartoons tweaking upper-crusty sneezers, and a quaint photograph of an herbicide truck saturating the roadside to kill ragweed (and very likely many other living things). Other asides—on the history of train transport in Michigan, for instance—contribute to an uneven tone and a wobbly narrative line.

Absent—and oddly so, given Mitman's thesis that disease and environment evolve together—is the mention of two relatively recent developments in allergy and asthma. One is the hygiene hypothesis: A robust body of research shows that infants benefit from gut microbes (filth, in other words), which inoculate the immune system and prevent the overreaction that is allergy. The other is the impact of climate change. Ragweed, the poster child for allergenic plants, is expected to produce more pollen per plant as carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere rise.

Halfway through *Breathing Space*, Mitman abandons the subject of hay fever and human migration. After a brief treatment of inner-city allergy (cockroaches and industrial pollution replace ragweed as the culprit), he turns to criticizing our cultural tendency to treat symptoms. The ensuing history of air conditioners, vacuum cleaners, air-tight housing that traps allergens indoors, and pharmaceutical marketing is not uninteresting. But it's not exactly news. What's provocative is Mitman's notion that the way humans break ground can so profoundly transform an ecosystem that we can't live in it anymore.

—Hannah Holmes

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Platonic Thoughts

RALPH WALDO EMERSON remarked admiringly of Plato, "An Englishman reads and says, 'how English!' a German—'how Teutonic!' an Italian—'how Roman and how Greek!' . . . Plato seems,

to a reader in New England, an American genius. His broad humanity transcends all sectional lines." Simon Blackburn thinks Emerson was essentially, but not entirely, right, and in this volume of the Atlantic Monthly Press's Books That Changed the World series, he traces the vexing appeal of Plato's mighty *Republic*.

Plato (c. 428 BC–c. 347 BC) wrote the *Republic* in Athens around 375 BC. By then he had come to loathe the city, which he regarded as little more than an ignorant rabble ruled by corrupt demagogues. The *Republic* seeks to demonstrate what a truly just city looks like and, in the process, to expose Athens—which had executed Plato's teacher, Socrates, some two decades earlier—as a sham.

The *Republic's* central claim, spelled out in a dialogue between Socrates and several interlocutors, is that justice and happiness stand and fall together. Not because good consequences—a fine reputation, say—follow from being just, but because justice itself is so great that nothing gained by injustice could be greater. By "justice," Plato means more than honoring agreements or obeying the law. A just person does these things, but only because his soul is rightly ordered: Reason rules over desire. The same goes for a just city. The wise rule, the rest obey, and justice is the result.

Blackburn, a philosopher at the University of Cambridge, isn't buying it. What about Machiavellians who coolly check their passions so that they can practice even greater injustice—and who seem happy to boot? He has in mind those enfants terribles, American neoconservatives, but his more intriguing example is from the Peloponnesian War. In 416 BC, Athens sent 10,000 men

PLATO'S REPUBLIC: A Biography.

By Simon Blackburn.
Atlantic Monthly Press.
181 pp. \$19.95