

saw as its drift into Western decadence. In the end, he sacrificed his life for the cause. On November 25, 1970, after a botched attack on a Japanese defense base, he committed seppuku—ritual suicide with a sword.

In the eyes of many, Yukio Mishima (the pseudonym adopted by Kimitake Hiraoka, b. 1925) was a right-wing fanatic and a national embarrassment. But he was also a phenomenally talented and prolific writer, three times nominated for the Nobel Prize, whose novels and plays still fascinate Western audiences. The very day he committed suicide, Mishima mailed his publisher the final pages of the fourth book in his epic tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, a work of historical fiction that blends the brutal drive for self-destruction with the beauty of reincarnation.

The history that has intervened since Mishima's death makes him ripe for a re-evaluation, but such is not the project of Christopher Ross, an adventurer whose previous book narrated his experience working as a London tube station assistant. Instead, he has written an entertaining mash-up of a biography that blends elements of travelogue, memoir, and martial arts manual, illuminating some of the mysteries of Yukio Mishima, Japan, and, of course, Christopher Ross.

Mishima admired the traditional values he saw embodied in the samurai, who disappeared along with Japan's feudal system, and he strove to imitate these warriors. But if Mishima styled himself a samurai, he was a strange one: a sickly and effete child who eventually developed a well-muscled physique, a preening celebrity who courted the spotlight, a homosexual who lived with a wife and children. Above all, he desired to become famous and to die heroically.

His death—whether heroic or not—is what inspired Ross's search for Mishima's legacy. But though Ross comes across as clever and worldly, he lacks the requisite nihilism. And he can't keep from inserting himself into Mishima's story, as when he disrobes and

descends into a torture chamber to meet someone whom he believes to have been one of Mishima's lovers. (He discovers that the man had instead been conscripted to witness Mishima pretend to commit ritual suicide, a variety of role-playing Mishima found immensely arousing.)

Because Ross is such a charming rogue, we don't mind that he never decides if the book is about Mishima or himself. Or that he can't refrain from digressions into the comically obscure—metallurgical arcana, say, or the ways a human body can be dismembered. The book gains traction when Ross focuses on his search for the antique sword that Mishima used to kill himself.

At last, a mysterious phone call reveals its whereabouts. But succeeding in his quest leaves Ross cold. When he sees the sword, he writes, "I am no longer thinking of death." And this is where he and Mishima part ways. For a short time, however, Ross grew very close to his protagonist. We know because he tells us that while he was writing this book, he was stricken with severe pains in his abdomen, pains he eventually realized were the pangs of a phantom seppuku.

—Andrew Starner

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Still on the Radio

KRISTEN HARING HAS WRITTEN a valentine to the ham radio community. This largely invisible sphere of two-way radio communication among technical enthusiasts blossomed in

the early 20th century, as amateurs built radio sets with tubes, wires, and switches, and launched Morse-coded messages on the newly discovered airwaves. In the decades since, changes in technology and shifts in the culture have diminished the romance of radio amateurs, but not their numbers. Today, they

HAM RADIO'S TECHNICAL CULTURE.

By Kristen Haring. MIT
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can still be found in basements and garages, logging distant contacts and keeping up with regulars on the frequencies that remain available to them.

Haring, a historian of science and technology, takes an anthropological approach to ham radio culture that reflects the concerns and values of its denizens while acknowledging the realities of its male-dominated culture, in which female hams have been disparaged on the air and discouraged from joining the fraternity. Her emphasis, however, is on respectful description rather than critical analysis. The ham radio community will likely receive this book with accolades (part of it that was previously published won a prize from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers). For the rest of us, though, the experience of reading it may sometimes feel like an encounter with Uncle Alvin, the ham radio enthusiast, at a family get-together. Our eyes glaze as we nod tolerantly, hoping that we don't have to trek yet again to the radio shack and pretend an interest in circuits, call signs, and wall charts.

Those seeking an account of ham radio enthusiasts' contributions to American broadcasting, an analysis of *why* technical pursuits are so frequently gendered, or an exploration of how ham radio operators' marginalization may have inspired other technological countercultures, such as pirate radio or computer hacking, won't find what they're looking for here. Instead, Haring has given voice to the hams themselves, trolling patiently through journals well known within the ham community such as *CQ* and *QST* along with texts as specialized as *Jobber News and Electronic Wholesaling* and *RCA Ham Tips* (not a cookbook). She also dusted off books with titles only a hobbyist could love (e.g., *Vacuum Tube Circuits for the Electronic Experimenter*).

Haring situates radio hobbyists not only in the technological realm but within the worlds of work and home, as consumers and as contributors to civil defense. A thread of domestic

tension runs throughout this history, as reflected in one ham's query soliciting "anyone [who has] managed to build a ham rig into a modern home and keep it unobtrusive." During the first half of the century, hams often faced government suspicion that they might be using their instruments to communicate with "foreign" agents, though in the World War II years they dubbed themselves the minutemen of radio and some joined the (tightly supervised) War Emergency Radio Service. By the 1960s, anxiety about what those tinkerers were up to in their backyard shacks had eased, just as the emergence of integrated circuits posed another threat to ham radio: If anyone could buy a prepackaged set and be on the air within hours, what made the hobby distinctive?

Yet ham radio remains popular in this era of cellular phones, CB radios, and the Internet. Why? Haring argues that in ham radio's heyday, men found fraternity, indulged a fascination with gadgetry, and gained the respect of employers through this community. Though today's advanced technologies have rendered much of their expertise obsolete and undermined the "powerful, skilled, precise, and manly" ham image, says Haring, an "emotionally charged technological nostalgia" lingers. This sounds like the same motive that drives others to collect records or attend *Star Trek* conventions. The technical side of ham culture, then, may be less relevant to its endurance than its hobbyist aspect—but that's a subject for another book.

—Michele Hilmes

The Skinny on Skin

IF PLEASURE IS THE ABSENCE of pain, as Epicurus proposed, I might add that it is also the absence of itch. Such was my frame of mind as I approached Nina G.

Jablonski's treatise on skin while in the midst of a flare-up of seborrheic dermatitis. Dermatolo-

SKIN:
A Natural History.
By Nina G. Jablonski.
Univ. of California Press.
266 pp. \$24.95