

creative impulse,” a disaster he compares to those foreshadowed by global warming and other apocalypses. Once he’s clucked over his Chicken Little scenario, Wilson, an English professor at Wake Forest University, lays out the case for allowing a little rain to fall into our lives.

In the pursuit of happiness, Americans pop pills and read step-by-step guides as never before, cheered on by the popular new field of “positive psychology.” In a 2006 Pew Research Center poll, nearly 85 percent of Americans said they were at least moderately happy, a finding that dismays Wilson, given the world’s woes (see global warming et al.) and life’s irritations (see this morning’s spousal spat at breakfast). Might these inane “happy types,” with their taste for McMansions, televangelists, and Cool Whip desserts, lure the holdouts to the bright side?

What most alarms Wilson is the specter of a “police state of Pollyannas” that could deprive us of the creative frisson we experience when we careen between agony and ecstasy. He fears the birth of a nation “denuded of gorgeous lonely roads and the grandeur of desolate hotels, of half-cracked geniuses and their frantic poems.” Or, put more epigrammatically (he has a weakness for variations on his refrain): “The blues are clues to the sublime.”

There’s a powerful argument to be made that the brave new world of psychiatry could extinguish a certain creative genius that shows up in people we label depressed. Wilson is at no loss for historical examples of writers, painters, musicians, and others who complained of symptoms that would get them a clinical diagnosis today. (In a letter to a friend at the tender age of 16, Ludwig van Beethoven revealed that, in addition to asthma, he suffered from “melancholy which for me is almost as great an evil as my illness itself.”) As for the rest of us, Wilson argues that a healthy helping of “pervasive gloom” will heighten our appreciation of life and of who we are.

The best retort to Wilson’s thesis is Peter Kramer’s book *Against Depression* (2005), which Wilson’s title clearly references (though only in

*Against Happiness’s* bibliographical notes, a useful digest of the literature on happiness and depression, does Kramer’s book merit a mention). Kramer argues that Western society has romanticized a condition that ought to be treated aggressively, like any other debilitating disease. Depression itself, he holds, bestows no special generative magic. His is an extreme stance, but important to remember when we wax poetic about tortured poets.

Wilson says he is not questioning therapy for “lost souls” who might harm themselves or others or who simply find existence unbearable. But that leaves a lot of pain to be celebrated rather than medicated. Though he wrings his hands at our tendency to treat everyday sadness as if it were a disease, Wilson makes the opposite mistake of failing to engage with the dark side of darkness. After a few pages cataloging the devastation many of his creative heroes wrought in their own lives and others’, he blithely concludes that “out of their suffering emerge things rich and strange.”

Perhaps Wilson’s bigger mistake is that he underestimates the resilience many “happy types” display in the face of life’s miseries, large and small. In that Pew poll he cites as evidence of Americans’ shallow bliss, only a third of those surveyed claimed to be “very happy.” Another 50 percent characterized themselves as only “pretty happy,” which could easily describe folks who, despite the recent death of Fido, yesterday’s parking ticket, and a fraught relationship with Mom, just grin and bear it.

SARAH L. COURTEAU is literary editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

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## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### Peddling Metal

Reviewed by Daniel Akst

PEOPLE ARE FOREVER DEBATING which inventions have had the greatest impact on the world, but it’s safe to say that few make much of a case for corrugated metal. Now this humble yet versatile material

**CORRUGATED IRON:**

Building on the Frontier.

By Adam Mornement and Simon Holloway. Norton. 224 pp. \$60



Japanese architect Shuhei Endo's innovative use of corrugated steel strips makes even a public toilet an arresting work of art.

has found its advocates in architecture writer Adam Mornement and engineer Simon Holloway.

To judge by its cover, *Corrugated Iron* is just another oversized, design-fetish coffee-table book, and in fact it is packed with full-color images that will make it catnip to architecturally minded modernists. Yet from the outset it's clear that the authors mean to present not just the accidental visual glories of shantytowns (or the premeditated ones designed by pros) but the biography of a building material that crops up everywhere. Corrugated steel, mostly, as well as other wavy metals (the authors intend "corrugated iron" generically), can be found on hillside shacks in South Africa and South America as well as in iconic, industrial-chic homes in Southern California and Sydney. Cheap, light, and sublimely reflective, corrugated iron shimmers sexily when new, burns only in slow motion as it ages (by rusting), and is even biodegradable.

"Corrugated iron is a material of the frontier,"

the authors write. "It makes life possible in places that would otherwise be uninhabitable, whether due to extreme climate, inhospitable terrain, the scarcity of local building materials, or the sheer scale of demand for shelter."

Invented in England in 1829, corrugated iron proved vastly stronger than its flattened antecedents and thus quickly found use in train stations, shipyards, and factories, which required great expanses of covered space without a lot of expensive and cumbersome support structures. Before long, empire and industrial revolution made it the material of choice for cheap, adaptable buildings that could be shipped in parts and rapidly erected to house gold miners, soldiers, stores, churches, and practically anything else.

The book is replete with fascinating reproductions of posters, catalog copy, and architectural renderings showing buildings such as the charming "East India Villa," a prefabricated house clad in corrugated iron and marketed to emigrants headed for Australia. Colonization

and war made the material ubiquitous, especially in the form of the World War I-era Nissen hut and its famed American descendant, the Quonset hut of World War II. Corrugated metal also permitted “the epic scale of airship hangars.”

Despite its early role in London as a cutting-edge material, corrugated metal has always had a somewhat raffish image, for it lacks the solidity of stone or the natural warmth of wood (though these shortcomings are somehow never held against vinyl siding). Shanties the world over are made from corrugated metal, and humanitarian organizations make extensive use of it to house refugees and people who live in disaster zones. Yet it has also won favor with famous architects, including Jean Prouvé, Frank Gehry, and Norman Foster. Corrugated iron is especially prominent in Australia, where Glenn Murcutt’s lyrical use of it to clad high-design homes no doubt helped him win the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize.

*Corrugated Iron* is a wonderful book, even if the authors are sometimes scarily indefatigable in their fervor for the subject, which is perhaps inevitable given that the book’s back flap says Holloway has a “great passion” for “researching and communicating the history of corrugated iron.” But if the historical text flags occasionally, the stunning color images hold our attention. Especially striking are the ornate chapel built in Scotland by Italian prisoners of war, the shockingly modern Sheerness Boat Store (c. 1860) in England, and the many photos of sinuous structures by Japanese architect Shuhei Endo, which are by themselves worth the price of the book.

I live in a corrugated-steel house and can attest that the stuff has its quirks. It tends to vaporize the geraniums by reflecting the sun’s heat, for example. And whatever you do, don’t forget to install lightning rods. As someone wrote of the British consul’s corrugated-iron house in Panama in 1855, it’s “a great target for all the artillery of heaven.”

DANIEL AKST, a recent public policy scholar at the Wilson Center, is a novelist and essayist living in New York’s Hudson Valley.

## Bad Seeds

Reviewed by Flora Lindsay-Herrera

RECENTLY, I ATTENDED A presentation at Cambridge University by an agricultural economist who sang the praises of biotech crops—genetically modified organisms (GMOs)

engineered for traits ranging from insect resistance to herbicide tolerance. Several audience members recited the familiar objections to GMOs, which make up a majority of corn, soybean, and cotton crops in the United States: consumer health risks, poor crop performance, and the financial burden on farmers who must buy or license patented seed varieties every year. The economist shouted that his questioners were engaging in “subjective scaremongering and ranting.”

Sadly, this was a fairly typical exchange in the GMO wars. Though purportedly about matters of scientific fact—do these crops help or harm us and our environment?—the debate is dominated by the clash of mutually uncomprehending values and cultures. For every agricultural specialist extolling GMOs’ virtues, there is a Claire Hope Cummings, who alleges in *Uncertain Peril* that GMOs were “created by industry, for industry.”

*Uncertain Peril* joins the passel of books denouncing industrial agriculture for its role in “extinguishing agricultural diversity.” The plight of our seed supply was highlighted when the Global Seed Vault opened in Svalbard, Norway, in February. Of all the food crops humans have ever cultivated, more than 75 percent have disappeared, most in the last 100 years. Concern that we are losing seeds—perhaps with strains of resistance or other traits that will be vital in the future—prompted an internationally funded group called the Global Crop Diversity Trust to establish a “doomsday vault,” in which seeds from the world’s food plants can be stored for future retrieval in the event of a global calamity, such as climate change, or when war or natural disasters damage the holdings of regional seed banks (as recently occurred in Iraq).

Seed banks are useful, Cummings contends, but

**UNCERTAIN PERIL:**  
Genetic Engineering  
and the  
Future of Seeds.

Claire Hope Cummings.  
Beacon. 232 pp. \$24.95