

Hutner's point. *What America Read* is a legitimate corrective to the English department syllabus, but we don't need a 450-page lecture. We probably just need to read some of these books and judge for ourselves.

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How Sofas Changed the World

Reviewed by Winifred Gallagher

THE HOME AS WE UNDERSTAND it—not just a place to eat and sleep but also one that supports and enhances personal life and well-being—is a remarkably recent invention. The clean, comfortable private residence, which first proliferated in 17th-century republican Holland, was a tangible sign of the dawning Age of Reason and its educated middle class, embrace of progress, and recognition of human rights.

Joan DeJean's claim that the French rather than the Dutch invented the modern home may tweak history. But DeJean, a professor of Romance languages at the University of Pennsylvania and a historian of French culture, makes a strong case that between 1670 and 1765 Paris was the world's capital for designing the stuff of life, from furniture to clothing. In *The Age of Comfort*, she traces this outpouring of creativity to a shift in cultural ideals from magnificence and public display to ease and private delight.

To appreciate France's transition from *la gloire* to *le commodité* (cleanliness and convenience), one might revisit the splendid misery of aristocratic life as wonderfully depicted in Roberto Rossellini's film *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1970). At court, everything was engineered for the public display of royal power and grandeur. Both sexes were uncomfortably dressed to the nines at all times. Rooms—including those used for sleeping—were large, more-or-less public spaces that opened directly

THE AGE OF COMFORT:
When Paris Discovered Casual—and the Modern Home Began.

By Joan DeJean.
Bloomsbury.
295 pp. \$28

onto each other and were sparsely furnished with hard chairs that enforced bolt-upright perching. Regarding hygiene, ooh la la! The malodorous hallways of Versailles were pocked with piles of human excrement.

Fed up, the Sun King's descendants set about changing things. Perhaps in gratitude for the new flushing toilets and bathtubs with hot and cold running water at Versailles, Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress, gave *him* a bidet. The young aristocrats riddled their stately palaces with secret passages that led them to private lives in newly cozy, intimate rooms. They ordered the first padded armchairs and sofas with slanted backs that encouraged lounging, to say nothing of seduction, as well as the early armoires and chests of drawers that conveniently stored their many new possessions. Ladies shed the rigid, boned *grand habit* in favor of loose, kimono-inspired clothes made from the new lightweight, washable Indian cotton, so that they looked to one older noblewoman "as if they were dressed for bed."

Nouveau riche financiers and real estate moguls followed the breezy young royals' lead, and soon tourists flocked to Paris to ogle the chic *goût moderne*. By the turn of the 18th century, the new "interior decorators"—often upholsterers whose shops were the first furniture stores—were advising clients on cutting-edge "French taste," which featured innovations such as large windows, white ceilings, and hardwood floors.

In a major architectural change, the upper-class home turned from the display of status and the past's Classical splendor to an emphasis on the functions of daily life and the pleasures of the present. Smaller rooms meant for specific activities, such as sleeping and bathing, were connected by hallways that allowed privacy. In her boudoir—a feminine version of the male study—even a woman could read, write letters, or indulge in *recueillement*, or gathering her thoughts.

The Age of Comfort is most engaging when De Jean connects changes in design with shifts in what we've come to call "lifestyle." Writing about the bedroom, for example, she suggests a link between the popularity of private sleeping chambers and hy-

gienic plumbing and the increase in aristocratic couples who married for love and shared the same bed. At times, however, she shifts from this conversational, big-picture, cultural approach to highly technical discussions of “architect-designed seating,” say, or flawed heating systems in a way that can jar the general if not the scholarly reader.

By the 18th century, the French had mastered “*l’art de vivre*,” and in many circles their taste in such matters remains the *dernier cri*. On a deeper level, DeJean observes, their advances reinforced the idea of social progress and pose a chicken-or-egg question: “Is it possible that sofas and writing desks actually helped pass on a message of philosophical enlightenment?” But she also wonders if the era’s emphasis on private over public life presaged our own modern obsession with the self and its comforts and accouterments.

Such musings aside, the historical record shows that when Thomas Jefferson, the ambassador of the revolutionary young nation poised to change the world, returned to America from Paris, he brought with him not only new ideas but also furnishings, clothing, and wines. The philosopher Voltaire, showing his compatriot’s characteristic scorn for false modesty, declared the France of the Enlightenment to be the “most civilized nation,” and, like Jefferson, readers of *The Age of Comfort* may find that they couldn’t agree more.

WINIFRED GALLAGHER’S books include *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (2009) and *House Thinking: A Room by Room Look at How We Live* (2006).

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Stalking the Umwelt

Reviewed by Rob Dunn

CHEKHOV OBSERVED THAT if you write a story about a man, a woman, and a beetle, the story is always about the man and the woman. Maybe it was an ashtray instead of a beetle. The point is that any story that involves humans is always about the things we do and don’t do to each other. The rest is, if not quite

landscape, damn close.

We shouldn’t feel bad about caring most about each other. If beetles were writing the stories, they would all be about beetles, perhaps with a giant human foot as threatening landscape. We have evolved senses that are finely tuned to noticing each other and, only secondarily, finding the right fruit and avoiding, for example, venomous snakes. So when it comes to describing the world, we approach the endeavor with a view centered on ourselves, then on animals like us or useful to us. The beetle, even if it lands in our hair, is low on the list.

Nowhere are our biases more consistently problematic than in our struggle to name and categorize life. (Think, for example, of the misguided ladder of progress on which humans are, inevitably, placed on the top rung.) In *Naming Nature*, science writer Carol Kaesuk Yoon describes the long battle to wrest truth from perception in our attempts to categorize life, from Carolus Linnaeus (1707–78), the forefather of modern taxonomy, to the present day.

Taxonomy—the naming and categorizing of life—is one of the oldest human pursuits. It is the necessary endeavor, an urge even, to distinguish and group the kinds of life so that once named and ordered, they might also be understood. In considering the history of taxonomy, Yoon frames her argument around the narratives of several dozen biologists, more often than not male and an eensy bit megalomaniacal. Their stories are rich and interesting and full of jaw-dropping hubris. Take, for example, Robert Sokal, who in 1953 bet a colleague a six-pack that on a particularly insightful morning he had discovered the new and best way to organize life, based on statistics rather than experience and intuition. He won the beer.

Although scientists drive Yoon’s story, the main character is an “*umwelt*.” You would be forgiven for thinking that an *umwelt* was a small bird indigenous to central Europe—the word, though, is ordinarily translated from German as “environment” or “setting,” Yoon’s definition is more nuanced. As she describes it, an *umwelt* is

NAMING NATURE:
The Clash Between
Instinct and
Science.

By Carol Kaesuk Yoon.
Norton. 344 pp. \$27.95