

Gratzer, an emeritus professor at Kings College, London, loves human folly. His other books, *The Undergrowth of Science: Delusion, Self-Deception, and Human Frailty* (2000) and *The Oxford Book of Scientific Anecdotes* (2002), lead naturally to this volume, which follows the trail of mostly wrong ideas from the 18th century to the present, with a nod to the Greeks and Romans. Gratzer is justifiably fascinated by the cranks and crackpots who profited wildly from poisonous or useless elixirs, and by the earnest scientists who sacrificed their health and sanity—and the health and sanity of others—to better understand our nutritional needs. Take the 18th-century Italian abbot Lazzaro Spallanzani, who, for three days at a stretch, would hold tubes of minced meat and animals' gastric juices under his armpits, to simulate digestion.

My favorite crackpot—American, naturally—was Horace Fletcher, the Great Masticator, who launched a fad that swept the United States and Europe at the turn of the 20th century: Chew each bite 32 times, he proclaimed, and you will enjoy perfect health. “Chewing parties became popular in fashionable circles,” writes Gratzer. “These ‘muncheons,’ in which the participants were enjoined to chew with their heads low over the plate so that the tongue could hang down, were often coordinated by a conductor, who timed the mastication of each mouthful and rang a bell or struck a gong when the moment came to swallow.”

Among Fletcher's followers was Henry James—no wonder he chewed over everything so endlessly in his prose.

Though Gratzer appears more interested in anecdotes than in theory, you can't read this book without spotting a theme: We blame psychology and environment for everything, until science comes up with the real cause. Scurvy, blight of the 18th-century sailor, was attributed to low morale, bad air, and all kinds of other folderol, until it was finally proved to be a vitamin C deficiency. Gratzer's chapter on scurvy is especially painful to read, because doctors came so close, so many times, to understanding the disease, only to be thrown off the trail by making one false move, such as boiling lemon juice so it would keep better on long voyages, which sapped it of vitamin C.

Though our scientific knowledge has grown, the human body remains a vastly complex machine, making us prey to all kinds of dietary come-ons, along with what Gratzer calls “the higher quackery” of the pharmaceutical industry. Do we need anti-cholesterol drugs? Are we getting fatter because of what we eat, or are we eating more because we're getting fat from some other cause? Is too much salt bad? “People have such fear of food,” I heard Julia Child exclaim in a radio interview in 1992. Warning: This entertainingly scary book, especially the chapters on additives then and now, should make us all afraid.

—A. J. LOFTIN

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

**CHASING THE RODEO:
*On Wild Rides and Big Dreams,
Broken Hearts and Broken Bones,
and One Man's Search for the West.***

By W. K. Stratton. Harcourt.
326 pp. \$25

Decades after his parents met at a rodeo in Guthrie, Oklahoma, and had a brief fling, W. K. Stratton sets out to explore the world of his father, whom he never laid eyes on. All he knows is that Cowboy Don, as his father was known, was a “rodeo bum,” the sort of man who wrangles stock and pitches hay and then blows his cash to enter rodeo events he never wins.

The quest to comprehend his father is awkwardly saddled to the book's feature attraction: the rodeos Stratton himself attends, from the mega-sized Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming, to an event in tiny Leakey, Texas, where kids ride sheep in a “mutton bustin'” competition. As he tours the country's arenas, he struggles to define the authentic spirit of the rodeo and to reconcile its hardscrabble past with its glitzy future, at least as envisioned by corporate sponsors and PR spinmeisters. In Cheyenne, bulls and riders are nearly upstaged by pyrotechnic explosions and throbbing techno—yes, techno—music.



A bareback bronc competitor takes a short, violent ride at the Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo.

Stratton scorns the dentists and insurance agents who “cowboy up,” tool around in four-wheel-drive pickups, and two-step at country-lite nightclubs. Yet he’s uneasily aware that, though raised in boots and a western hat, he’s now a cubicle dweller, a writer (not a *rider*, as he repeatedly clarifies during his travels), and very much a spectator. He gets the icons—country singer Willie Nelson keeps popping up like a mascot. He gets the red-state patriotism that brings crowds to their feet for Toby Keith’s song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American).” He even gets his butt squeezed by a “cowboy bunny” groupie. But he doesn’t ever convey the texture of the rodeo life. *Chasing the Rodeo* is written from the stands.

My own father, for four years starting when he was 18, rode bulls and saddle broncs on the rodeo circuit; he managed to make a living during lucky stretches, and sometimes he still wears the first-place silver belt buckle he won for saddle bronc riding in 1953. He describes lean times, long miles, cantankerous companions, too much drinking, and a passionate obsession with the next ride, tempered with enough quiet dread to

produce “the leak of fear”—cowboys often have to relieve themselves three or four times shortly before their numbers are called. When Bill Lawrence, a stoic saddle-bronc star at the time, rested his boot on the corral fence before a ride, his foot jumped so nervously that his spur rowel jingled a continuous tune. My dad left rodeoing after a bronc bucked him off and jumped on him, badly injuring his head and back, and we attended only a handful of rodeos when I was a kid. He says he never has liked to watch other folks dance.

Times have changed enough that now rodeo competitors can earn big purses and sign up for health insurance. But sweat smells the same. Cowboys don’t talk much about the fear they have every time they lower themselves into the chute and give the nod, or what exactly enables them to overcome it. For a portrait of their life, though, I’m waiting for a book with jittery rowels and bull riders with mangled front teeth, in which a cowboy passes up a seductive woman outside Bartlesville, Oklahoma, so he can make Waxahachie, Texas, in time for tomorrow’s rodeo.

—SARAH L. COURTEAU