

powder, had medicinal properties; and the hides could be transformed into either fine shoes or “whips for beating slaves”.

After his return to London in 1689, Sloane married the widow of one of Jamaica’s foremost slave owners and bought property in on-the-up Chelsea. In spite of his reliance on treatments such as “superpurgations”, he seems to have killed fewer patients than other doctors of his day, bringing him a huge income and the presidency of the Royal College of Physicians in 1719.

As the editor of the Royal Society’s journal *Philosophical Transactions*, he became “one of the pivotal information brokers in the Republic of Letters”. Not everything he published was palatable to learned society — including a second-hand report of a 68-year-old woman who had breastfed her grandchildren. Such “vulgar wondermongering”, notes Delbourgo, led some to view him as gullible and guilty of distasteful self-promotion: Isaac Newton is said to have described Sloane as “a villain and rascal” and “a very tricking fellow”. This didn’t stop Sloane from succeeding Newton as president of the Royal Society in 1727. “With exemplary sociability, redoubtable shrewdness and unflappable patience, he had installed himself at the centre of British society,” writes Delbourgo.

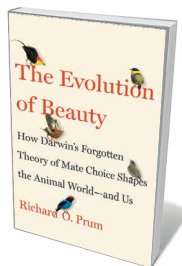
As Sloane’s star rose, he found it easier to access objects and anecdotes for his personal museum. With immense skill, Delbourgo mines Sloane’s vast correspondence to uncover the global networks on which he relied to accumulate miscellanea. The number, variety and curious nature of these objects is enthralling; they include blocks of rock from the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland, an arrow-shooter from Indonesia and that silver penis protector, from Panama. Sloane catalogued these and thousands of other books, coins, precious stones, animals and oddities.

In his will, he drew up a guest list for his own funeral, and offered his collection to the nation, presumably as part of his “personal desire for immortality”, as Delbourgo puts it. In this mission, he seems to have failed: his name is today rarely linked to the British Museum, the British Library or the Natural History Museum, although all were founded from his collections. “Sloane is nowhere because he was everywhere,” suggests Delbourgo.

Sloane’s character doesn’t lend itself to modern fame: his purging medicine and “hopelessly eclectic” brand of natural history are hard to fathom, and his collections have been buried in later acquisitions. In *Collecting the World*, Delbourgo brings brilliant resolution to the life and extraordinary times of a fascinating enigma. ■

**Henry Nicholls** is a science journalist based in London.  
e-mail: [henry@henrynicholls.com](mailto:henry@henrynicholls.com)

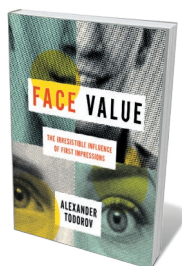
## Books in brief



### The Evolution of Beauty

Richard O. Prum DOUBLEDAY (2017)

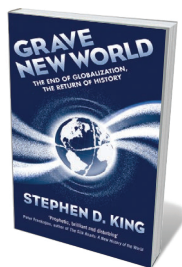
Charles Darwin called it “the taste for the beautiful”. But the theory of sexual selection (reproductive competition pivoting on, say, iridescent plumage) is fiercely debated. In this study, ornithologist Richard Prum seeks to reintegrate it into Darwin’s great legacy. Prum, whose research has taken him from Suriname’s ‘moonwalking’ golden-headed manakin (*Ceratopira erythrocephala*) to the “shockingly violent” sex lives of ducks, posits that beauty and desire coevolved, and that because individuals can make maladaptive mating choices, evolution is odder than adaptation can explain.



### Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions

Alexander Todorov PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS (2017)

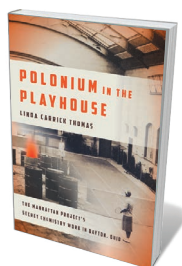
First impressions and snap judgements are not trivial: they can overturn elections and make or break careers. Drawing on cognitive and computer science, this weighty, well-illustrated study by psychologist Alexander Todorov journeys under the skin to reveal how ‘face-reading’ — as in the old pseudoscience of physiognomy — has given way to a scientific understanding of perceptual bias vis-à-vis the visage. Todorov unpeels the responses of newborns to “faceness”, the hunt for face-selective neurons, the chameleonic self-portraiture of artist Cindy Sherman and more.



### Grave New World: The End of Globalization, the Return of History

Stephen D. King YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS (2017)

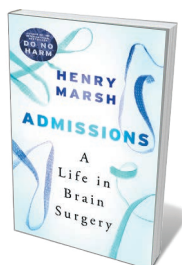
As cooperative relationships between nation states shift, seven decades of modern globalization could run aground. So argues economist Stephen King in this in-depth survey examining the new world order in light of the old, from the Ottoman Empire to German unification. He analyses the economic impacts of issues such as migration and the teetering reputations of international institutions, looks critically at technocratic trends — and asserts that with China on the rise and an increasingly fragmented geopolitical landscape, “globalization is up for grabs”.



### Polonium in the Playhouse

Linda Carrick Thomas TRILLIUM (2017)

How did an indoor tennis court in Dayton, Ohio, become central to the building of the first atomic bomb? Journalist Linda Carrick Thomas chronicles how in the 1940s, chemist Charles Allen Thomas (her grandfather) co-opted the court as a secret polonium-processing facility for the Manhattan Project, while choreographing plutonium operations across its many sites. Rich in scientific detail and sidelights, such as the chemist’s eye-witness account of the 1945 Trinity test and the story of scientist-spy George Koval, whose Dayton intel enabled the Soviets to build their own bomb postwar.



### Admissions: A Life in Brain Surgery

Henry Marsh WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON (2017)

The horde of physicians now penning memoirs suggests an insatiable demand for expert gut-spilling. And that is no bad thing, given how articulate so many of them are. Henry Marsh, a neurosurgeon for 30 years, is in the front ranks. This thoughtful account (his second, after *Do No Harm*; W&N, 2014) charting retirement and surgical work in Nepal and Ukraine brims with insights — not only on the fraught nexus of scalpel and brain, but on the complexities of ageing and the pleasures of beekeeping, tree-planting and carpentry. [Barbara Kiser](#)