

clear which is which (it seems that poor Goliath might have suffered from a vision impairment)?

These complications are becoming clear, for example in criminology. Gladwell is very interested in why some crime-prevention strategies work and others do not. But although his 'winning hearts and minds' case studies are surely part of the solution, recent results from behavioural economics and game theory suggest that there are no easy answers beyond the fact that some form of punishment (ideally centralized, not vigilante) is needed for social stability.

Some studies suggest that excessive punishment can be counter-productive; others show that people do not punish simply to guard their own interests, and will impose penalties on others even to their own detriment. Responses to punishment are culturally variable. In other words, punishment is a complex matter that resists simple prescriptions.

Besides, winning is itself a slippery concept. Gladwell's sympathies are for the underdog, the oppressed and the marginalized. But occasionally his stories celebrate a very narrow view of what constitutes success, such as becoming a Hollywood mogul or the

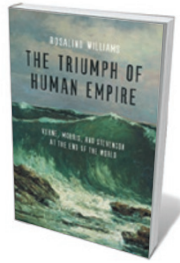
**"Gladwell's sympathies are for the underdog, the oppressed and the marginalized."**

president of an investment-banking firm — David turned Goliath, with little regard for what makes people genuinely inspiring, happy or worthy. None of this is a problem of Gladwell's writing, which is always intelligent and perceptive. It is a problem of form. His books, like those of legions of inferior imitators, present a 'big idea'. But it is an idea that works only selectively, and it is hard for him or anyone else to say why. These human stories are too context-dependent to deliver a take-home message, at least beyond the advice to not always expect the obvious outcome.

Perhaps Gladwell's approach does not lend itself to book-length exposition. In *The Tipping Point* (2000) he pulled it off, but his follow-ups *Blink* (2005), about the reliability of the gut response, and *Outliers* (2008), a previous take on what makes people succeed, similarly had these that unravelled the more you thought about them. What remains in this case are ten examples of Gladwell's true forte: the long-form essay, as engaging, surprising and smooth as a New York latte. ■

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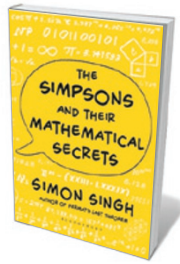
## Books in brief



### The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris, and Stevenson at the End of the World

Rosalind Williams UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS (2013)

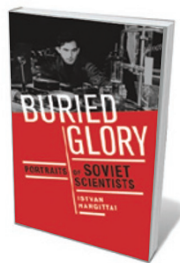
In *Nova Atlantis* (1624), the philosopher Francis Bacon characterized the human urge to dominate the globe as "the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible". By the late nineteenth century, a handful of luminaries recognized the destructive potential of that urge. Through the lives of three — Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson and William Morris — science historian Rosalind Williams reveals how the transcendent power of the romantic impulse ignited environmental consciousness.



### The Simpsons and Their Mathematical Secrets

Simon Singh BLOOMSBURY (2013)

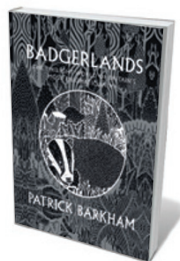
As fans of *The Simpsons* know, the television programme's writing team is peppered with mathematicians. Physicist and writer Simon Singh skips joyously through key episodes of Matt Groening's saga, unpacking the maths embedded in each as he goes. Intoning "Be there or be a regular quadrilateral", Singh disentangles the link between pi and Homer as "Simple Simon, Your Friendly Neighborhood Pie Man"; explores Homer's "doughnut-shaped universe", admired by a cartoon Stephen Hawking in the episode 'They Saved Lisa's Brain'; and more. A chewy treat for maths geeks.



### Buried Glory: Portraits of Soviet Scientists

Istvan Hargittai OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (2013)

Nine of the fourteen Soviet scientists profiled in chemist Istvan Hargittai's tribute are buried in Moscow's Novodevichy Cemetery. But the lifting of the Iron Curtain led to a much grimmer interment, Hargittai argues: a golden era for science dimmed and died. Hargittai has delved into archives and personal recollections to bring its stars to life. A key chapter in twentieth-century research unfolds, embodied by the likes of Petr Kapitzia, the low-temperature physicist who courageously supported persecuted colleagues, and the daringly original crystallographer Aleksandr Kitaigorodskii.



### Badgerlands: The Twilight World of Britain's Most Enigmatic Animal

Patrick Barkham GRANTA (2013)

For a beast that few in Britain have seen alive, badgers have a powerful national presence — whether linked to bovine tuberculosis or place names such as Badgers Mount. Patrick Barkham revels in their ubiquity, ethology and "fright mask: the long white face burnished by two black stripes". As he visits scientists and enthusiasts, Barkham is both acute and engaging, noting, for example, the speculation that Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius inspired Kenneth Grahame's gruff Badger in his 1908 *The Wind in the Willows*.



### The Secret Language of Color: Science, Nature, History, Culture, Beauty of Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue & Violet

Joann Eckstut and Arielle Eckstut BLACK DOG & LEVENTHAL (2013)

The evanescent phenomenon of colour has gripped great minds from Plato to Isaac Newton, all the way through to researchers who now probe the links between blue light and circadian rhythms. In this many-hued tome, Joann and Arielle Eckstut zip through optics and electromagnetism. They then explore colour in art, such as the pointillist work of Georges-Pierre Seurat, and in nature, from minerals to nebulae. Fact-filled and flamboyantly illustrated. **Barbara Kiser**