WWW.LUNETIERVINTAGE.COM

Plastic butterfly sunglasses from the 1960s.

exhibition David Bowie Is, including PVC boots and a skirt-like structure stiffened with polyurethane foam.

Are there any V&A pieces that are ticking time bombs?

I wouldn't say we have anything that dramatic. Much of our 3D-printed furniture is white nylon, which can yellow. We have a little cellulose acetate box by early-twentieth-century French glassware designer René Lalique that is definitely warping. The problem is worse for modern-art museums, because they have many contemporary artworks that incorporate plastics. From the 1980s, the number of plastics available exploded, and people largely stopped using the least stable ones. But plastics do not last forever, because — unlike wood, metal or stone — they can be damaged by adhesives used for repair. So even something made of Perspex might last only a century, although we don't really know because the material hasn't been around for that long.

What brought you to the V&A?

I have always been interested in collecting old objects, but mainly plastic items that you would pick up in junk shops, such as Bakelite cigarette boxes. My first degree is in chemistry and my PhD in materials science, focusing on polymers; so when this job came up, it was nice to marry the science with art and design.

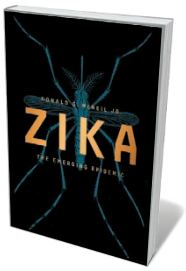
Do artists and manufacturers factor plastics degradation into their work?

No. A lot of modern art is made of plastic, and often artists, aiming for a particular effect, ignore the manufacturer's instructions on how to mix it. So the plastic might degrade even more quickly. We also now have bioplastics, which are made to degrade. With these, you'll definitely be fighting against the tide. ■ SEE NEWS FEATURE P.266

INTERVIEW BY ELIZABETH GIBNEY

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Books in brief



Zika: The Emerging Epidemic

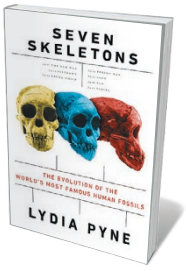
Donald G. McNeil Jr W. W. NORTON *(2016)*

Zika is strangely anomalous. In 99% of cases, the symptoms of this mosquito-borne or sexually transmitted flavivirus are mild, but it can wreak havoc in fetuses, crossing the placenta to trigger brain defects such as microcephaly. In this agile account, science reporter Donald McNeil covers Zika's discovery in 1940s Uganda, early cases, the Brazilian outbreaks of 2015 and the implications of the virus's spread. McNeil's mapping of official responses to the epidemic, from early statements that Zika was benign to recognition of its virulence and the race towards a vaccine, underlines the burning need for viral vigilance.

Sleep in Early Modern England

Sasha Handley YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS *(2016)*

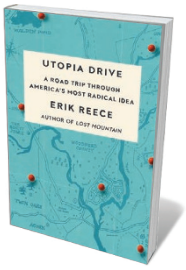
Sleep became a hotbed of speculation and science in early-modern England, reveals historian Sasha Handley in this absorbing study. A complex cultural phenomenon viewed as a fluid midpoint "on the path of transformation between life and death", it also became a proving ground for advances in physiology. So Thomas Willis — who mapped blood flow between brain and body — identified the nervous system as central to sleep regulation. Such findings fed into technologies such as nightcaps to 'protect' the brain, as well as elaborate dream theories linking blood stagnation and nightmares.



Seven Skeletons

Lydia Pyne VIKING *(2016)*

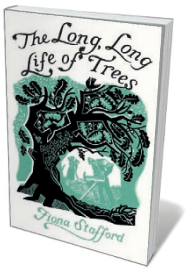
Why do certain scientific discoveries gain celebrity? Lydia Pyne teases apart the histories of seven hominin fossils to find out. She reveals how a virtuosic 1911 description by palaeontologist Marcellin Boule helped to make the Old Man of La Chapelle, a nearly complete Neanderthal fossil, a species archetype and cultural icon for decades. She shows how 3.5-million-year-old australopith Lucy became a research benchmark and a world-touring superstar. And she reminds us how these nodes in our storied past grip our collective imagination even as they add immeasurably to evolutionary science.



Utopia Drive: A Road Trip Through America's Most Radical Idea

Erik Reece FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX *(2016)*

From 1820 to the 1850s, the US east coast heaved with social experiments, as citizens disaffected by socio-economic turmoil "plotted paradise" in nearly 200 utopian communities, only to disperse with the Civil War. Erik Reece's meander through a number of sites takes in the philosophical roots of the Shakers' sublimely ingenious designs; the lab-like confines of Walden, where Henry David Thoreau conducted his microeconomics trial; and the potential, in our globalized, hyper-consuming era, for communal economies, land trusts and other utopian solutions to re-root.



The Long, Long Life of Trees

Fiona Stafford YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS *(2016)*

In this paean to the "arboreal impulse", Fiona Stafford gets under the bark of the terrestrial giants whose natural history is interlaced with our own. Interspersed with crisp black-and-white illustrations, Stafford's low-down on species from ash to yew mesh dendrology with cultural biography and pack in the facts — from 40,000-year-old evidence of olives on the Greek island of Santorini to how willows are "naturally flirtatious, cross-pollinating compulsively" and why pine forests create their own cloud cover. **Barbara Kiser**