

tell whether a floating corpse had drowned or been tossed dead into the water, and how to use soil stains or thread fragments to tie a criminal to a crime. A fellow expert opined that Gettler “sent more criminals to the electric chair through his tests than any police detective”.

The AIDS chapter astonishes more grimly. New York, with a high incidence of intravenous drug use and promiscuous unprotected sex in the late 1970s, was hit hard by HIV. One of the first people to be recognized as having AIDS presented himself in 1980 to Fred Valentine, an infectious-disease specialist at Bellevue, with the rare pneumocystis pneumonia. A second case came days later. Both men soon died, as did eventually hundreds who followed them into Bellevue and nearby New York University Hospital. By 1985, one-fifth of Bellevue’s patients had HIV. At first, these hospitals, with others in San Francisco, California, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, fought a seemingly futile effort to contain this accelerating epidemic, even as cases began to be recognized in Africa and on other continents (T. Tansey *Nature* 533, 468; 2016).

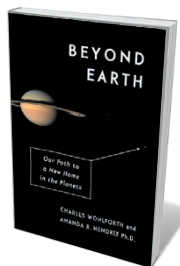
Oshinsky makes vivid the piteous condition of early patients, and caretakers’ struggles with fear of contagion. Bellevue staff’s sense of “therapeutic impotence”, he shows, finally gave way to exhausted relief in the mid-1990s. Teams led by Valentine and fellow medic David Ho separately developed similar antiretroviral (or ART) drug cocktails that inhibited the virus’s replication and made AIDS manageable.

Bellevue’s record shines bright amid the shameful behaviour of many in the US medical system around HIV and AIDS. In 1986, with more than 20,000 dead and tens of thousands more infected, the American Medical Association informed its members that it was legitimate to ignore these patients. The United States, Oshinsky notes, continues to ration care according to status and wealth — an ailment that the Obamacare medical-insurance statute salves but does not cure. This year, for instance, conservatives in the US Congress repeatedly sabotaged bills meant to fund the fight against the expanding Zika epidemic which, up to that point in the country, had affected mainly the US territory of Puerto Rico. The funding, requested by President Barack Obama’s administration in February, finally passed on 28 September.

*Bellevue* is rich in anecdote, history, personality and narrative. It is also an indictment of a society’s failure, almost 300 years on, to extend medical benefits to all, despite the efforts of this extraordinary hospital. ■

**David Dobbs** writes on science, medicine and culture. His books include *Reef Madness* and the short memoir *My Mother’s Lover*. e-mail: david.a.dobbs@gmail.com

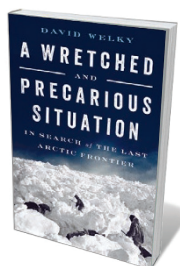
## Books in brief



### Beyond Earth: Our Path to a New Home in the Planets

Charles Wohlforth and Amanda R. Hendrix PANTHEON (2016)

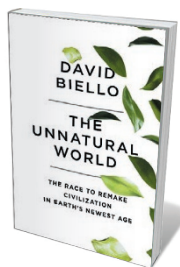
“They will go boating on lakes of liquid methane and fly like birds in the cold, dense atmosphere.” Life on Saturn’s moon Titan could prove exhilarating, suggest writer Charles Wohlforth and planetary scientist Amanda Hendrix in this synthesis of space-colonization science. Their thought experiment balances possible futures with a raft of facts on advances in spacecraft technology, robotics and space medicine. Crucially, they parse the push and pull between cautious governments and gung-ho entrepreneurs, concluding that the two may ultimately add up to a propulsive combination.



### A Wretched and Precarious Situation

David Welky W. W. NORTON (2016)

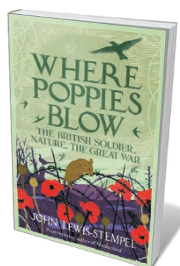
In 1906, polar explorer Robert Peary sighted a mysterious region northwest of Canada’s Arctic Archipelago. Dubbing it Crocker Land, he enlisted anthropologist Donald MacMillan and geologist Elmer Ekblaw as part of a US–Inuit team to explore the landmass under the aegis of New York’s American Museum of Natural History. What happened next, historian David Welky reveals in this engrossing account of the five-year effort (1913–17), involved not only the classic litany of illness, privation and howling blizzards, but a singularly bizarre finding about Peary’s original sighting.



### The Unnatural World

David Biello SCRIBNER (2016)

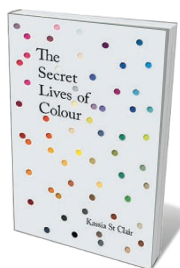
Forget the Anthropocene epoch, argues journalist David Biello. What we need is a broader “Anthropozoic” era, a lasting future anchored in inspired planetary stewardship and intelligent optimism. His lucid survey of researchers straining to contain today’s global environmental shifts (from climate change to dwindling marine biodiversity) mixes their personal scientific journeys with contextualizing discoveries. Among them are marine biologist Victor Smetacek, experimenting with iron fertilization to draw carbon dioxide into the oceans, and ecologist Erle Ellis, monitoring forestation with drones.



### Where Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, the Great War

John Lewis-Stempel W&N (2016)

For traumatized, trench-bound British soldiers caught up in the carnage of the First World War, birdwatching and botany offered solace. So reveals John Lewis-Stempel in this riveting study drawing on verse, letters and field notes by men who served, from zoologist Dene Fry to poet Edward Thomas. He shows how observing the nesting larks that twittered above ‘no man’s land’ and natural cycles such as the seasons gave a sense of renewal, and how animal ‘troops’ were inspirationally loyal. A remarkable picture of a human bloodbath that took place amid phenomenally rich biodiversity.



### The Secret Lives of Colour

Kassia St Clair JOHN MURRAY (2016)

Heliotrope, gamboge, umber: the names of colours are as luscious as the hues themselves. Kassia St Clair serves up a chromatic buffet of the chemistry, history and cultural associations of 75 dyes, pigments and shades, including encapsulations of optics and colour theory. The gorgeous, malodorous Turkey red, for instance, was made in a “tortuous process involving rancid castor oil, ox blood and dung”, and the Roman emperor Nero used a large emerald as “proto-sunglasses” while watching gladiatorial combat. [Barbara Kiser](#)