

Genetics and Biotechnology in Crop Improvement. P. K. Gupta (ed.). Rastogi Publications, Meerut, India. 1998. Pp 414. Price Rs. 550 (£8.00), hardback. ISBN 81 7133 319 2.

The first requirement of any book, regardless of subject matter or length is that potential buyers must be enticed into examining the work. Should either the title or the front cover fail to attract attention, then the prospects of profitable sales figures rapidly diminish. My intuitive feeling about this work was that the title is sufficiently wide ranging and the cover (featuring an intriguing FISH spread) adequately attractive to warrant further investigation. Evidence supporting this view arose incidentally during the course of reading its contents. In common with most academics, there is a constant stream of Ph.D. and undergraduate students passing in and out of my office. In recent weeks, this book has been casually laid on my desk (which itself is best described as casual). Several students picked up the book and asked to borrow it. Granted, this quality of evidence is usually reserved for television consumer programmes but it nevertheless helped confirm my belief that potential buyers might at least look at the volume. In this respect then, so far, so good.

On opening the front cover and examining both the preface and the contents, I must confess to an instantaneous feeling of disappointment to discover the book contains a series of contributions that featured in a symposium of the same title. I realized there was a high likelihood that this would be the case. However, much as one hopes to get mail in spite of the higher probability of receiving a bill than a cheque, I had anticipated a skilfully edited work, with invited chapters addressing preconceived aspects of the rather broad subject area indicated by the title. Experience suggests that the title, subject area and quality of contributions presented in a symposium are as likely to be determined by the contributors themselves as they are to be prescribed *a priori* by the editors. Sadly, it is generally true to say that many works of this type are little more than a disparate collection of essays of variable quality variously arranged into vaguely defined topic areas. The temptation at this point might be to replace the work on the shelf and to continue browsing. To do this, though, may run the risk of missing one or more quality pieces that have reference value in their own right. Certainly, the editors have performed an excellent job in ensuring uniformity of references, font, figures and style. The production quality of the book is less impressive: there are numerous typographical errors and the binding, printing and finishing quality (many of the pages had

not been guillotined properly in my copy) are all less than you would hope for in a hardback. For the good chapters, however, these minor irritations do not greatly interfere with the enjoyment.

The text itself is divided into 26 chapters and covers a bewildering array of topics. Given the diversity of offerings, the editors have wisely elected not to attempt to group chapters into themes although it is notable that the 'order of play' does seem to make some sense. Rather encouragingly, the volume starts with an excellent chapter on physical mapping of DNA sequences on plant chromosomes (Schubert, Fuchs, Pich, Kunzel & Korzun), four other strong cytogenetics chapters and a useful contribution on repetitive DNA sequences in plants. Much of what follows (but not all) is less than stimulating and contains information that is rather too specific to be of general interest. There is also a tendency for some chapters to focus their attention fairly directly on the research and agricultural problems faced by the host country of the symposium, India. Both features diminish the value of the work as a general reference or teaching aid.

There are certainly sufficient quality contributions for the book to have some value as a reference (particularly in the area of molecular cytogenetics) and the editors must be applauded in their efforts to unify a diversity of subjects. In the end, however, I rather suspect that it will sell principally to libraries on the basis of its broad title and low cost (around £8) rather than its contents.

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Books received

Genetics and the Extinction of Species — DNA and the Conservation of Biodiversity. Laura F. Landweber and Andrew P. Dobson (eds). Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 1999. Pp. 189. Price £12.50, paperback. ISBN 0 691 00971 6.