

Both eras show that science and evidence-based thinking do not necessarily triumph over irrationality and ideology. Shared social norms and ethics are the framework that allows reason to prevail. Moreover, progress in science and society is a tapestry that cannot be unpicked through simple periodization. That said, comparing historical eras can be instructive. Although history does not repeat itself, it may rhyme; it can offer insights into predicaments and solutions, as I have found helpful, for instance, in conceptualizing the future of work. Many of the Enlightenment's philosophical, social and scientific advances offer lessons for our reason-starved times, as Pinker ably argues; but context is key.

Although it is framed as a historically informed template for a new age of reason, *Enlightenment Now* ultimately becomes something else: an extended dismissal of the arguments of despair that Pinker fears are defining politics and crowding out an alternative approach rooted in rationality and global cooperation. He does not frame the thesis in economic terms. Yet he essentially defends globalization and the growth of market economies by claiming that it has brought more progress than any force in history. As an economist, I agree.

But globalization has also led to an escalation of risks. What is rational for individuals is increasingly irrational for society. The drivers of progress are rising incomes and connectivity; these also lead to greater negative spillovers and systemic risk. Managing globalization's underbelly is essential, and the gulf between what needs to be done and what is being done is widening. Economic growth has come at the expense of ecosystems. Because nature does not respond to price signals (rhinos do not reproduce more when their horns are more valuable), increasing freedom of choice has led to overexploitation of a growing number of natural systems. Pinker does cite climate change, but as a worrying exception to a relentlessly positive narrative, rather than as the most glaring example of a wider failure of global commons management.

Pinker devotes a chapter to inequality. Drawing on the encyclopaedic website Our World in Data by economist Max Roser of the Oxford Martin School, UK, he shows that global inequality (between richer and poorer countries) is decreasing, whereas inequality within countries is rising. He concludes that much current anxiety around inequality — spurred by the idea that the top 1% is absorbing the lion's share of economic growth — is misplaced. I don't agree. First, the data he presents do not reflect recent sharp economic reversals in many places. These are likely to become more significant in some regions. For instance, in the United States, cuts to health-care subsidies and corporate tax rates over the past few months will reduce redistribution ▶

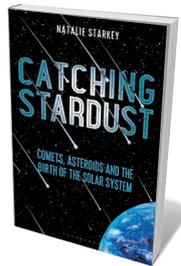
## Books in brief



### First in Fly: *Drosophila* Research and Biological Discovery

Stephanie Elizabeth Mohr HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS (2018)

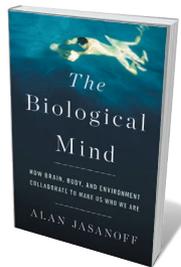
How did an inconspicuous fly, *Drosophila melanogaster*, become the laboratory “model of models”? Since the early twentieth century, when pioneering geneticist Thomas Hunt Morgan created the Fly Room at Columbia University in New York City, the insect's brief life, vast broods, obvious mutant phenotypes and genetic similarities to humans have made it a boon for the field. In this admirable study, *Drosophila* researcher Stephanie Elizabeth Mohr reveals a raft of breakthroughs discovered “first in fly”, such as the molecular mechanisms of circadian rhythm. Serious science, elegantly described.



### Catching Stardust

Natalie Starkey BLOOMSBURY SIGMA (2018)

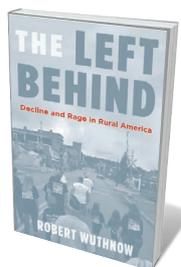
As the runts of our rock-ridden cosmic neighbourhood, comets and asteroids might seem predictable. Not so, proves space geologist Natalie Starkey in this pop-science dash through findings on the denizens of the Kuiper belt and beyond. Starkey is perhaps most eloquent on comets, those icy scoops of early solar-nebula cloud. The European Space Agency's audacious Rosetta mission, for instance, revealed comet 67P to be dark, dusty, rubber-duck-shaped and redolent with an unusual bouquet of compounds. Space mining and strategies for tackling an asteroid hit get a look-in, too.



### The Biological Mind

Alan Jasanoff BASIC (2018)

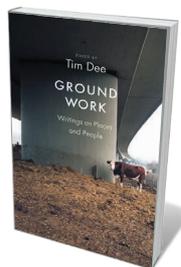
In this powerful treatise, neurological engineer Alan Jasanoff issues a corrective to the “cerebral mystique” — the idea that the human brain is a machine-like outlier in the body. As he reminds, the brain is deeply interconnected, and functions using chemicals, electricity, neurons, glia, passive diffusion and active signalling. This integrated view of brain, body and mind could, he asserts, revolutionize discourse on mental illness: the “broken-brain” model could give way to one that meshes genetic, environmental and cultural factors, thereby adding needed nuance to our understanding of causes and treatment.



### The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America

Robert Wuthnow PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS (2018)

Ever since 62% of the rural vote went to Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential race, rage in the heartlands has become a media trope. In this thoughtful study — distilling a decade of research and more than 1,000 interviews — social scientist Robert Wuthnow digs beyond the “grievance-and-resentment” stereotype of this 50-million-strong, overwhelmingly white population. He concludes that the rural population should be seen as “moral communities”: united by mutual obligation and cultural norms, but threatened by the alien, whether local drug abuse or the culture of Washington DC.



### Ground Work

Edited by Tim Dee JONATHAN CAPE (2018)

This superb anthology is a paean to spirit of place in dislocated times. With UK eco-charity Common Ground, Tim Dee has gathered personal geographies from 31 poets and writers. And it is a trove. Sean Borodale likens Somerset honeycomb to a “microfiche” storing local data on flora and weather; Julia Blackburn sees Suffolk shells on a table looking “like music, or a story without the need of words”; and Hugh Brody recalls how, through mapping, he discovered the intimate relationship of the Inuit with the Arctic. [Barbara Kiser](#)