

attempts to discredit him. Nader blended scientific evidence with political nous to argue that carmakers' disregard for safety was unjust as well as unwise. And under presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, the government began to assert itself on both car safety and environmental pollution. Manufacturers would no longer be able to add safety features just as a luxury. They were forced to develop technologies such as crumple zones to absorb impacts, and catalytic converters to meet tough laws imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1970s. Vinsel points out that the 2015 scandal in which Volkswagen admitted it had cheated on emissions tests has plenty of precedents from this period.

Vinsel's argument is that regulation involves the definition of problems. Scientific knowledge alone will not force action, and engineers need to be told what to focus

**“Road safety started to be acknowledged as a problem but carmakers found it easy to offload responsibility.”**

on. In the history of car safety, problems have mostly been defined by carmakers, who have prioritized comfort over safety. Where they have focused on safety, the trade-offs have been problematic.

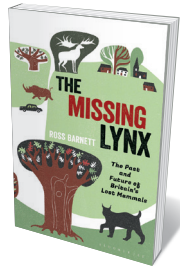
The now-ubiquitous sports utility vehicle (SUV) — safer for drivers, but more likely to kill pedestrians — is a product of this view, and also a cautionary tale of unintended consequences. It was designed to be classed as a truck, and therefore exempt from emissions controls.

Vinsel wants to be optimistic. He sees his story as a case of government regulation steering technologies in a positive direction. His book, however, is entirely US-centric, even though the market for cars is global and technological standards have been exported and imported. His argument could have been more powerful with some international comparisons.

The US record on road safety remains woeful; the death rates per kilometre in Sweden and Britain are less than half those in the United States. Self-driving cars look like a poor technological fix for this problem. At a time when tech companies including Facebook, Uber and Google are given a free rein by US regulators and the specious promises of self-driving cars are used to justify further deregulation, a defence of government's role in technological development is much needed. ■

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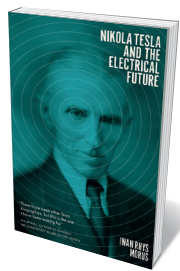
## Books in brief



### The Missing Lynx

Ross Barnett BLOOMSBURY (2019)

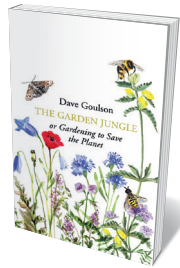
The story of life on Earth is a saga of extinction, declares palaeontologist Ross Barnett in this fresh and assured natural history of departed megafauna. Arguing that human 'overkill' was (with climate change) a major driver long before our population exploded in the Holocene epoch, Barnett uses Britain as a microcosm of the planetary record. Here are long-gone species such as the cave hyena (*Crocota crocuta spelaeon*), the fearsome scimitar-toothed cat (*Homotherium latidens*) and the northern lynx (*Lynx lynx lynx*); thrilling tales of discovery; and the vagaries of reintroduction. An often moving tribute to lost marvels.



### Nikola Tesla and the Electrical Future

Iwan Rhys Morus ICON (2019)

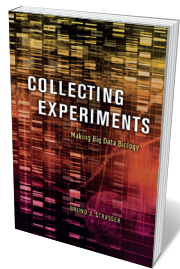
The Serbian inventor and electrical engineer Nikola Tesla seems to many uncannily prescient. Yet the scientist — by turns reclusive and flamboyant — was very much a product of the late nineteenth century. Historian Iwan Rhys Morus examines the man through that lens: a time of rampant entrepreneurialism, bravura innovations, grandiose visions of techno-utopia and futuristic science fiction. His crisply succinct, beautifully synthesized study brings to life Tesla, his achievements and failures (such as interplanetary communication), and the hopeful thrum of an era before world wars.



### The Garden Jungle

Dave Goulson JONATHAN CAPE (2019)

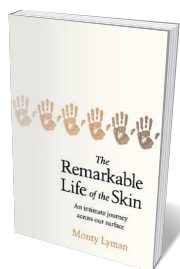
Woodlice, earthworms, earwigs: a seething Serengeti lurks in many a back garden. Apiologist Dave Goulson's wonderful book encourages such richness by delivering solid science on garden wilding. Calling out today's cocktail of industrial pesticides as extreme in residential settings, he shows how robust plants and natural predators such as lacewings do the job sustainably. He extols the delights of eating roadkill, shows how to craft hoverfly habitats and advocates growing heritage crop varieties. Above all, Goulson demonstrates that the domestic nature reserve is the first step towards saving the planet.



### Collecting Experiments

Bruno Strasser UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS (2019)

We often think of big data as an explosive departure from the past. Science historian Bruno Strasser reveals it as part of a historic continuum. The sense of 'information overload' has existed since the Renaissance, and today's data tsunami emerged from two traditions in biology: natural-history collecting and the lab. Hybridized, they led to vast accumulations of knowledge. Strasser's case studies compel, from geneticists' 'museums' of maize (corn) varieties to a groundbreaking mine of digital data, the 1965 *Atlas of Protein Structure and Sequence*, coproduced by bioinformatics pioneer Margaret Dayhoff.



### The Remarkable Life of the Skin

Monty Lyman BANTAM (2019)

Physician Monty Lyman peels back the science on human skin in this absorbing, fact-packed study. Dubbing it the "Swiss Army knife" of organs, Lyman examines skin as a barrier against trauma, a carrier of microbes, a matrix for nerve endings and a screen for the emotions. He reveals that structurally it is an "ideal foam", explores skin-gut communication, looks at medicinal tattooing and muses over ritual cleansing. Skin, he shows, is a thing of both surface and depth, a very visible yet personal part of ourselves that can become a target, too, of egregious attacks against difference. [Barbara Kiser](#)