

vain. Today Anacapa is rat-free.

Puddicombe explained his actions to the reporter. “To me, the idea of species is just an abstract concept. Species go extinct all the time,” he said. “These animals are here and alive now. Their lives have value.”

Boyle uses the conundrum of killing individuals to save species as the central conflict of his novel. He counterpoises a fictionalized version of Puddicombe, David LaJoy, with a fictional National Park Service employee in charge of eradications, Alma Boyd Takesue. Add mother–daughter relationships, shipwreck, deaths and Boyle’s trademark detailed descriptions of characters deciding to have a drink, and you have the book.

The philosophical questions are not explored in the depth that some might hope for. The protagonists only briefly reflect on their opposing positions, and the reasons they came to their beliefs are not fleshed out. LaJoy and Takesue are presented as equally intransigent, equally misanthropic, equally angry and, for me, equally unlikeable.

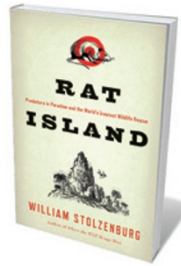
These two remain more or less ideologically static throughout the book, but plenty happens. There’s science, crime, pig-hunting, sheep-farming and accidents — lots of accidents. Boyle’s characters run afoul of the forces of nature nearly as often as they decide to crack open one more cold beer. “People fall from cliffs, people drown, people get drunk and do violence to one another, bones break, hearts give out, and it’s all in a day’s work for the Park Service,” muses Takasue as she watches tourists clomp all over Santa Cruz.

Some accidents bring people to the islands; others end in death, just as nature’s accidents and extinctions determine what species we consider “native” to particular islands. Near the novel’s end, Boyle brings a new species to Santa Cruz, raising intriguing hypothetical questions. If a new creature appeared on the island, would scientists assume that humans had imported it and summarily remove it? Or would they leave it alone? And does it matter how it got there? Is there any sense in which ecologists can not meddle with the islands they take care of?

The characters in *When the Killing’s Done* are in mourning for a simpler past. “How much better would it be if nobody ever came out here and the islands could exist in the way they always had. Or should have,” thinks Takasue. But, as always, we showed up. Island biogeography may be a matter of accident, but humanity is the inevitable mishap. ■

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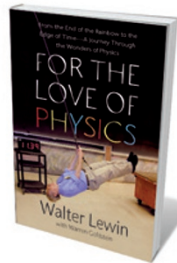
## Books in brief



### **Rat Island: Predators in Paradise and the World’s Greatest Wildlife Rescue**

William Stolzenburg BLOOMSBURY 288 pp. \$26 (2011)

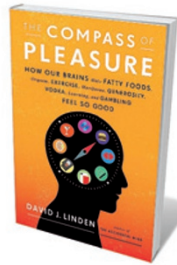
Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. So say conservationists who eradicate invasive species in order to protect more established ones. Focusing on one island in the Bering Sea where nesting birds are being savaged by marauding rats, journalist William Stolzenburg explains why ecologists have become poisoners to reduce the rodent population. He highlights the fine line between wildlife protection and poaching.



### **For the Love of Physics: From the End of the Rainbow to the Edge Of Time — A Journey Through the Wonders of Physics**

Walter Lewin with Warren Goldstein SIMON & SCHUSTER 320 pp. \$26 (2011)

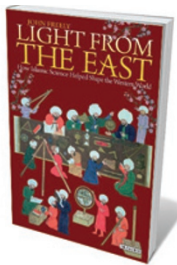
Having topped the online video charts with his daredevil YouTube lectures, physicist Walter Lewin has become a celebrity teacher. In this book, he brings his trademark hands-on approach to explaining the wonder of physics. By asking simple questions that we can all identify with, such as why we are shorter standing than lying down, he explains complicated subjects such as gravity.



### **The Compass of Pleasure: How Our Brains Make Fatty Foods, Orgasm, Exercise, Marijuana, Generosity, Vodka, Learning, and Gambling Feel So Good**

David J. Linden VIKING 240 pp. \$26.95 (2011)

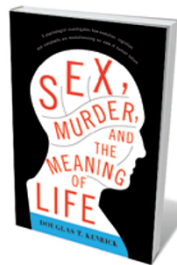
The pursuit of desire explains much of human history. Neuroscientist David Linden explains how aspects of our brain lead us to crave food, sex, drugs and rock’n’roll. He also notes the evolutionary reasons why we gain pleasure from virtues as well as vices. Knowledge of the biological basis of pleasure forces us to rethink the moral and legal ramifications of addictions, he says.



### **Light From the East: How the Science of Medieval Islam Helped to Shape the Western World**

John Freely I. B. TAURIS 256 pp. \$28 (2011)

In his account of the rich history of idea-swapping among medieval civilizations, travel writer John Freely celebrates the golden age of Arabic science. By describing the astrologers, physicians, philosophers, mathematicians and alchemists of the Muslim world, he reveals how knowledge spread from Central Asia and the Middle East to Spain and Europe, where it influenced Western thinkers.



### **Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life: A Psychologist Investigates How Evolution, Cognition, and Complexity are Revolutionizing Our View of Human Nature**

Douglas Kenrick BASIC BOOKS 256 pp. \$26.99 (2011)

With heads full of sexual — and sometimes homicidal — fantasies, we humans still carry much evolutionary baggage from our wild ancestors. In his idiosyncratic account, social psychologist Douglas Kenrick shows how these roots are more beneficial than troubling. Apparently, irrational and selfish behaviours — such as one-night stands, prejudices and greed — are ultimately rational, he says, and presage positive urges such as love and generosity.