

facilitates an unbiased appreciation of what the world has to offer. In such a manner, Philip Ball — not a materials scientist but an associate editor of *Nature* — presents a guide to materials for the twenty-first century. The book opens, though, in eighth-century Samarkand with the extraction, from the Chinese, of the secrets of paper-making. Ball points out that, in the post-medieval information revolution, the role of the material paper tends to be underestimated.

Such spicing with historical background is a hallmark of this book. It is refreshing to find a book on ‘new’ materials that sets them in their context, recognizing that they have a pedigree, and exploiting a description of predecessors to set off the distinguishing features of the new.

The range of materials and applications considered is vast — from artificial blood to artificial legs, light-emitting silicon to holographic memories, photostrictive titanates to microporous clays, hydrogels for drug delivery to designed bacterial polymers, fuel cells to artificial diamonds. Occasionally, Ball may stray too far — few would treat gene therapy within the range of new materials.

Omissions are mostly intended. High-temperature superconductors are avoided for the good reasons that they have had extensive publicity already and are now the subject, not of breakthroughs but of hard grind to make their use practicable. Ball is aware that new, expensive materials are destined for specialized uses; justifiably, he chooses not to focus on structural materials. All the same, within his theme of materials ‘made to measure’, it is a shame not to recount the story of modern steels designed in the virtual mill of the computer. The coverage, strong on history, is also well up to date. It is good to find, for example, a thorough treatment of the new blue light-emitting diodes.

The book is far from being just a list of diverse materials. It also offers analysis of trends. Ball’s picking out of themes in biomimetics, for example, is masterly. In this way the book should have much more than ephemeral interest. Ball is ready to acknowledge the wider factors influencing the adoption or rejection of a new material — industrial realities, wider economics, ecological concerns. Many books on new materials have more hyperbole than substance; this is not one of them. Ball writes of his materials with enthusiasm, but tempered by realism. He recognizes that most (but far from all) new materials will be passing wonders.

For a book on this subject, it is ironic that its material presentation — paper, binding, printing, illustrations — is old-fashioned. This may make it less immediately attractive to buy than its accessible writing deserves. The background science (band structure of semiconductors, architecture of cells) necessary to appreciate the main message is

Mathematics of the natural world



As Philip Ball explains in *Made to Measure*, reviewed left, mollusc shells not only are sophisticated composite materials but can be ornately decorated with coloured pigments produced by cells in the proten outer mantle. The patterns are frozen ‘chemical waves’ generated by complex, nonlinear interactions between cells during shell growth, which modulate the production of pigment. The images here are taken from the enlarged version of Hans Meinhardt’s *The Algorithmic Beauty of Sea Shells* (Springer, DM89, \$54.95, £34), the first edition of which was reviewed in *Nature* 375, 745 (1995).

described with a fluency and accuracy that puts most practising scientists to shame.

Inevitably there are small errors. Some may be distressed by Ball’s sometimes uncertain distinction between strength and stiffness, others by his description of the Mancunian James Joule as a Scot. Yet the treatment overall is authoritative, and is supported by a good bibliography.

There are some 160 references to individuals or institutions involved with current developments. Of these, 61% are from the United States, 11% from the United Kingdom (equal to all of continental Europe combined), and 10% from Japan. Does this reflect the true distribution of progress, or rather national variations in countries’ ability and willingness to promote their wares? Whatever the answer, Ball’s selected case of materials is worth having. □

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When language doesn’t add up

Twice As Less: Black English and the Performance of Black Students in Mathematics and Science

by Eleanor Wilson Orr

Norton: 1997. Pp. 242. \$12.95, £9.95 (pbk)

Geoffrey K. Pullum

In 1972, Washington DC’s Board of Education drew lots to pick 41 students from the city’s public schools for free enrolment at the private, coeducational Hawthorne School. Nearly all were native speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The teachers were at first baffled by the new students’ curious though systematic conceptual errors in mathematics, but ultimately developed strategies that improved results dramatically.

Fifteen years later, Eleanor Wilson Orr published this book about Hawthorne's experiment. The 1997 reissue has a new introduction commenting on the Oakland 'Ebonics' furore (see *Nature* 386, 321; 1997). Orr's thesis is that black children's mathematical misapprehensions are often due to contrasts between AAVE and standard English, particularly regarding grammatical function words (prepositions, comparative 'than', equative 'as').

The topic merits attention. Starting out with a different prepositional system might well interfere with acquisition of arithmetical concepts expressed in English through metaphorically extended preposition meanings: a quarter of 16 is obtained by dividing 16 by 4 or dividing 4 into 16 or dividing 16 into quarters, and so on. And there are indeed some prepositional use differences between AAVE and standard English. Orr offers thought-provoking transcriptions of student reasoning; and some of what they reveal might be traceable to translation problems. (This possibility was the grain of truth in the policy of acknowledging AAVE for which the Oakland school board was so mercilessly mocked.)

But Orr fails to establish AAVE's causal role. Superficial and anecdotal examples of AAVE are presented along with data from a different language, Guyanese Creole. No clear linguistic aetiologies for mathematical conceptualization difficulties emerge. For example, the attempt to link AAVE's negative concord rule to confusion of 'half' with 'twice' (equating 'half as small' with 'twice as small') is intriguing, but the proffered speculations about a determinative influence are less than convincing.

Some of the cited misunderstandings seem clearly nonlinguistic. For example,

there is evidence of students thinking that to show why some abstract relationship holds one need only give an example in which it holds. We need not take AAVE to be implicated in such signs of unfamiliarity with abstract thinking. It is common today to find speakers of standard American English, even at college level, who reason similarly. □

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Detecting the undetectable

Cosmic Bullets

by Roger Clay and Bruce Dawson
Addison-Wesley/Allen and Unwin: 1998.
\$22 (hbk), £7.99 (pbk)

Peter L. Biermann

The most energetic particles we measure in the Universe come from outer space and hit the Earth at a rate of only about one particle per square kilometre per century. And yet we have now measured about a dozen such particles, with several detector systems, and their energy is near 10^{21} eV.

Roger Clay and Bruce Dawson have written a small book describing how these particles were discovered, how we became certain that their energy is really that high, and how the search for their origin and nature is heating up. The book nicely provides the setting of the discovery and explains why in theory such particles should not really be detectable: because they interact with the microwave background, there should be only negligible flux beyond about 5×10^{19} eV. The exciting finding is that no cut-off has yet

been seen in the sparse data, with the highest energy events having values near 2×10^{20} eV and 3×10^{20} eV.

The authors trace the excitement of the research community in 1996, even telling the story of the possible correlation of the particles with the supergalactic plane. This plane is the locus in the sky where most cosmologically nearby galaxies and radio galaxies are, so one might expect that the high-energy particles can be traced to at least this distribution. Sadly, the authors just missed the events of May 1997, when the brightest gamma-ray burst so far was seen at gamma, X-ray, optical and radio wavelengths. Gamma-ray bursts may or may not be related to the highest energy particles, but they are surely good candidates to investigate.

As described in the book, the idea with the longest staying power in the whole story would seem to be that these particles arise from acceleration in gigantic shockwaves in powerful radio galaxies. As we have studied radio galaxies for many decades it is surprising that we have not confirmed or refuted such a concept and moved on to the more challenging possibilities such as tracing the high-energy particles to topological defects created in the Big Bang or — perhaps even more exciting — tracing them to supersymmetric partners of normal particles.

A book of this type must, of necessity, make compromises in elucidating the physics. But I think that some of its short-cuts are a little odd. For example, of Max Planck's discovery, the authors write: "he developed a mathematical technique for explaining the spectra of heated bodies". The reader needs to have a good knowledge of the history of science to understand what they are referring to.

Also, although the book conveys well the excitement of some of the steps in the stony path of discovery, it seems that the delight of detecting something new is virtually impossible to capture in mere dry words. (I speak as one of the participants in the story.) On the whole, however, the book is eminently readable for both experts and laypeople, particularly a young readership.

The basic nature of matter is commonly explored in expensive large accelerators such as those at Stanford, Fermilab and the European Laboratory for Particle Physics. The high-energy events now observed through air-showers are far beyond any energy obtainable in these machines on the ground. The book culminates in describing the Auger project, the ambitious plan to erect two gigantic air-shower arrays in Earth's northern and southern hemispheres. These air-shower arrays will be sufficiently large for us to be able to observe many high-energy events, and so eventually do physics at energies of 10^{21} eV and possibly higher. □

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Fell to Earth: the Chicago Air Shower Array is aimed at detecting high-energy cosmic and gamma rays.

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