

discovered”. Science indicates that Melville may not have been far wrong. In 1999, tests on bowheads indicated that these animals can live for at least 200 years.

Of course, the greatest scientific figure of the age hovers over Melville. Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, eight years after *Moby-Dick* came out. Melville’s sole mention of Darwin is a quote — from *Darwin’s Voyage of a Naturalist* (sic) — in the extracts at the start of *Moby-Dick*. He had read Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) in preparation for his own 1854 work, *The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles* — as the Galapagos were then known. Melville visited the islands in 1841, six years after Darwin’s fateful landing. Darwin’s recorded observation of marine iguanas as “imps of darkness” seemed to set the tone for Melville’s metaphorical view of the Galapagos, which he saw as “five-and-twenty heaps of cinders ... In no world but a fallen one could such lands exist”.

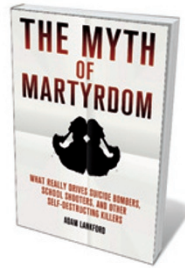
Such dark analogies are in line with a man who declared all human science to be “but a passing fable” — and yet created a fable of his own. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is a perpetually sceptical and questioning figure, a man attuned to science — a stark contrast to the vengeful Ahab and his pursuit of the whale that “dismasted” him. As the critic Eric Wilson, in his essay ‘Melville, Darwin, and the Great Chain of Being’, notes, a “primary subtext of Melville’s novel is the passing of pre-Darwinian, anthropocentric thought, espoused by Ahab, and the inauguration of

“Melville’s masterpiece resonates powerfully with today’s scientific concerns.”

a version of Darwin’s more ecological evolution, proffered by Ishmael”. Melville lived through that process. US Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Nature* (1836), with its declaration of moral law at the heart of the cosmos, was the new philosophy of Melville’s youth. But as biographer Andrew Delbanco points out, Melville read *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), William Dean Howells’s Darwinian-inflected view of society. *Moby-Dick* itself has been seen as a parody of the Transcendentalists’ ‘back-to-nature’ excesses. But Melville does more than lambast philosophy or use science as interior decoration. He achieved a marvellous synthesis of his own poetic and philosophical impulse with the increasingly science-aware ethos of his age. And he did so with a sense of black humour that transcended Transcendentalism to prove that nature — and its science — was much stranger and more wonderful than they had imagined.

Moby-Dick failed to make any impact in Melville’s lifetime, and he died forgotten in 1891. But his spirit of enquiry and experiment stood him in good stead as far as ▶

Books in brief



The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers

Adam Lankford PALGRAVE MACMILLAN 272 pp. £16.99 (2013)

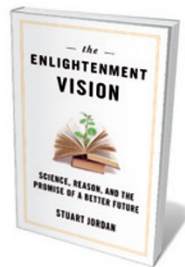
Are suicide bombers psychologically normal? Many psychologists, including experts ‘diagnosing’ the hijackers responsible for the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, view them as just that, albeit exercised by a powerful sense of justice. Adam Lankford begs to differ. Self-destructive killers, he says, are already primed for suicide — so depressed, addicted or brutalized that it is relatively easy to tip them over the edge. A criminal-justice specialist, Lankford presents compelling, well-synthesized evidence for his case.



The White Planet: The Evolution and Future of Our Frozen World

Jean Jouzel, Claude Lorius and Dominique Raynaud. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan PRINCETON UNIV. PRESS 316 pp. \$29.95 (2013)

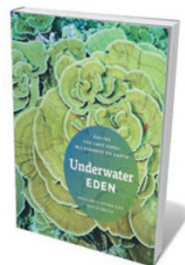
Ice in all its chill Earthly manifestations has drawn thousands of research scientists into the white deserts of the world. Now, three pioneers of ice-core science — Jean Jouzel, Claude Lorius and Dominique Raynaud — reveal key facets of the cryosphere in a new translation of their sweeping overview. Moving from exploration and early science, they delve into the ice ‘archives’ and findings on climate ancient and current, the rise of pollution and more. A nuanced and thorough look at climate change and its implications.



The Enlightenment Vision: Science, Reason, and the Promise of a Better Future

Stuart Jordan PROMETHEUS 295 pp. \$26 (2013)

Physicist Stuart Jordan scrutinizes the afterglow of that scientific big bang, the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Aspects of today’s culture — medicine, scientific outlook, democracy and technological advances — carry traces of the original vision. But Jordan shows too how mixed a legacy we face, from ignorance about science, a bulging population and “juggernaut technology” to degraded ecosystems. Particularly by upholding ethics, he argues, we can collectively turn the tide.



Underwater Eden: Saving the Last Coral Wilderness on Earth

Gregory S. Stone and David Obura UNIV. CHICAGO PRESS 184 pp. \$40 (2012)

Ocean warming and acidification are bad news for corals, and more than one-quarter of fish species. So when Gregory Stone dived around the remote Pacific Phoenix Islands in 2002, he was stunned to see a ‘lost world’ of untouched coral beds. Here Stone, chief ocean scientist of Conservation International, coral researcher David Obura and contributors lay out what happened next: the hard-won creation of the largest World Heritage Site ever sanctioned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.



This Explains Everything: Deep, Beautiful, and Elegant Theories of How the World Works

John Brockman HARPER PERENNIAL 432 pp. \$15.99 (2013)

Agent to the stars of science, John Brockman presents mind-bites from his stable of research heavyweights asked to name their “favourite deep, elegant, or beautiful explanation”. Try theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson speculating on the putative coexistence of quantum and classical world views, or mathematician Samuel Arbesman admiring the reaction–diffusion model that dictates a leopard’s spots.