

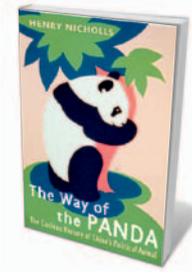
The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth: Popularity, Quirk Theory, and Why Outsiders Thrive After High School

ALEXANDRA ROBBINS
Hyperion: 2011.

What do Bill Gates, Lady Gaga and J. K. Rowling have in common? They were all outsiders in high school. In this moving chronicle of US teens, journalist Alexandra Robbins proposes that the traits that mark students as different help them to succeed later in life. She followed seven students for a year, including a boy from Hawaii preoccupied with gaming, a Georgia girl concerned with her sexual orientation and a Virginia boy fascinated with IQ challenges. The students' courage and commitment to their own distinctiveness help them to turn their talents into academic and social achievement.

Writing from the perspective of social psychology, Robbins says little about conditions such as autism spectrum disorders. But her assertion that diversity is more than race or ethnicity puts her in line with the neurodiversity movements. It is increasingly 'cool' to be smart or to have scattered skills in high school.

Roy Richard Grinker is professor of anthropology, international affairs and human sciences at George Washington University, Washington DC, USA.



The Way of the Panda: The Curious History of China's Political Animal

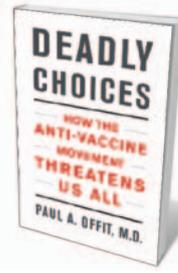
HENRY NICHOLLS
Pegasus/Profile Books: 2011.

There are now vastly more giant-panda products — including films, toys, blogs and books — than there are living giant pandas. Estimates put the number of wild and captive animals at around 3,000. Even with international efforts to save it, the giant panda is an iconic animal for all endangered species on the planet.

To learn more about this captivating animal, three books stand out for veracity, clarity and history. The most recent is *The Way of the Panda*, by science writer Henry Nicholls, who splendidly updates the way giant pandas have taken hold of human hearts and politics (*Nature* 468, 503–504; 2010).

Nicholls generously cites the importance of two books by other naturalists: George B. Schaller's *The Last Panda* (University of Chicago Press, 1993) and *Men and Pandas* by Desmond and Ramona Morris (McGraw-Hill, 1967). Coming soon is *The Giant Book of the Giant Panda* (Smithsonian) by Pan Wenshi, the world's foremost giant-panda expert.

Nancy Lee Nash was a WWF consultant 1979–84 and wrote the successful proposal for China–WWF contact in 1979.



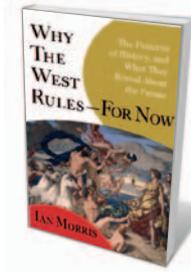
Deadly Choices: How the Anti-Vaccine Movement Threatens Us All

PAUL OFFIT
Basic Books: 2011.

I've been teaching a seminar on pseudoscience that deals with the anti-vaccine movement. We've been looking at Paul Offit's book, which discusses the parents and others whose lack of understanding of or belief in science leads to the growth of this movement. It points out the often serious and sometimes deadly consequences of not vaccinating your child. Offit discusses the herd immunity that we have counted on in the past, and how it diminishes as the anti-vaccine movement grows.

My own daughter, living in California, has been affected. Because of the whooping-cough epidemic that killed several babies in the state in the past year, she had to limit her baby's travel for several months until the infant could be vaccinated. When your granddaughter is endangered, it concentrates the mind on the foolish and unnecessary hazard that some have created by not vaccinating their children and recommending the same for others. By the end of the course, my students had a better appreciation of the downside of superstition and pseudoscience. If read with an open mind, Offit's book should convince the rest of the world as well.

Jay Pasachoff is director of the Hopkins Observatory, Williams College, Massachusetts, USA.



Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future

IAN MORRIS
Farrar Straus Giroux: 2010.

Are the Western civilizations that spread from Egypt, Sumeria, Greece and Rome predestined to get ahead of those in the East? Yes and no, according to historian Ian Morris. The society with the edge is the one that can best organize and direct people, technology and finance into systems that work for the time. This now favours the West, but that hasn't always been true and needn't be so in the future.

Morris answers the question quantitatively. He begins with the DNA-dispersion patterns laid down when people moved out of Africa. Incorporating evidence of worship, urbanization, centralized authority, tools and the harnessing of energy, he analyses many societies, over 100- and 1,000-year intervals. The West usually scores higher than the East, but not always.

He sees the next 40 years as the most crucial in human history: will we be able to manage what has been unleashed by consumption and energy use? Morris portends that less liberal, more centralized approaches will pull ahead. This is a thought-provoking book for science and history buffs alike.

Margaret Catley-Carlson is chair of the Crop Diversity Trust, Rome, Italy.