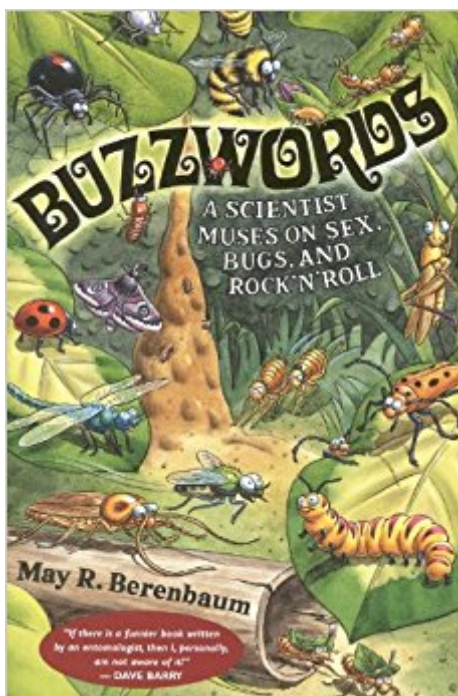


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Buzzwords: A Scientist Muses On Sex, Bugs, And Rock 'n' Roll



Synopsis

What sort of person devotes their life to the study of bugs? How do you picture your average, every-day entomologist? "I've been photographed on several occasions," writes author May Berenbaum, "and it seems that every time, photographers ask me to pose in one of three ways: seated in front of a microscope, with an insect (usually a cockroach) on my face, or with an insect net clutched in my hand." In *Buzzwords*, Berenbaum expertly blows away these stereotypes with short takes on all things entomological--from the story of a pet ant kept for 14 years to major motion pictures featuring cockroaches. *Buzzwords* showcases the Best of Berenbaum, a selection from her humor column in the *American Entomologist* professional journal, accompanied by a number of original pieces written for this book. "I know people are reading these columns," she notes, "because they write me letters that point out all the mistakes I've made!" The book comes in four parts: How entomologists see insects, including their view of a U.S. government plan to eradicate illicit coca fields by dropping caterpillars from airplanes. How the rest of the world sees insects, with Berenbaum's proposed classificatory scheme for placing Spider Man, Firefly, and other cartoon superheroes into well-defined taxa. How entomologists view themselves--featuring Bambi Berenbaum, a gorgeous entomologist created for an episode of TV's popular "The X-Files," whose character was inspired when the scriptwriter consulted Berenbaum's books. How entomologists see their colleagues, with various views on scholarly citation, motion sickness, and more. Along the way are some thought-provoking observations--for example, about the impact of television on public knowledge of science. In one poll, Berenbaum writes, 35% of adults said they believed that prehistoric humans coexisted with dinosaurs, a la the Flintstones. Berenbaum even takes on the controversy over alternative medicine, fearlessly purchasing Chinese medicinal insects during a professional trip to Vancouver, which also happened to be her honeymoon. "Okay, so maybe giving two talks at an International Congress of Entomology is not everybody's idea of a romantic honeymoon venue, but it seemed like a good idea at the time." Berenbaum is a noted scientist in a field that doesn't always get the respect it deserves, but she shows us that there's a fun and even freaky side of life with insects. While working on the University of Illinois' annual Insect Fear Film Festival she received a letter from a "crush freak" who waxed lyrical about a young, sexy babe with a size 9 or 10 shoe. Berenbaum writes, "On the one hand, it's almost gratifying to think that insect pest management can arouse people's interest to such an extreme extent. On the other hand, it has convinced me not to list my shoe size in the biographical sketch of my next book." Readers will appreciate learning how the word "shloop" was introduced to the medical literature when physicians used a metal suction tip to remove a cockroach from a patient's ear canal, and how one investigator

named a series of subspecies bobana, cocana, dodana, and so forth, "anticipating by 60 years the song, 'The Name Game,' by Shirley Ellis." Although you'll chuckle all the way, Berenbaum has the last laugh, giving powerful lessons in the spectacular diversity of the insect world and the nature of scientific discovery, cleverly packaged as witty observations on subjects far and wide. If you're a scientist or you like reading about science--better yet, if you've ever found a fly in your soup (or worried that you might have unknowingly just slurped one down with your tomato bisque--this book is for you.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This fourth collection of essays from University of Illinois professor Berenbaum (Bugs in the System, etc.) offers 42 informal, informative and often amusing pieces about insects and the people who study them. (Most of the essays originated as columns in *American Entomologist*.) Berenbaum treats the bugs, ants and beetles themselves; their images in society; the folkways of entomologists; and the place of science in American culture. One piece considers whether the methane in cockroach farts contributes to global warming. The next jumps from high school sex-ed films to dragonfly species whose females eat males as they mate, and thence to the (human) fetishists called "crush freaks," who find bug squashing erotically exciting. A column on comic books explains that "arthropod-based superheroes are easily placed in well-defined taxa.... Running a close second to the arachnids [like Spiderman] are hymenopterans: Ant Boy, Ant Man, the Green Hornet.... " And then there is the mysterious frequency with which cockroaches appear in supermarket tabloids; the

best way to get a roach out of a child's ear; the insects in the songs of Weird Al Yankovic; correct usage for the technical term "humbug

This collection of essays, containing some new material, comes from a long-running humor column in the *American Entomologist* written by Berenbaum (entomology, Univ. of Illinois; *Bugs in the System*; *Herbivores*.) The author has become a keen observer of how insects, those who study them, and the rest of the world all interact in the arena of popular culture. Though the writing is clever there's at least one chuckle per essay the material is not enough for an entire book, so Berenbaum is forced to reword and repeat herself. The repetition becomes annoying, though perhaps it would be less apparent if the reader were to dip into the collection, rather like a bee going from flower to flower. Part rumination on the depiction of insects and entomologists in TV, movies, and music and part autobiography, Berenbaum's fluffy essay collection is a marginal purchase for most libraries. Ann Forister, Roseville P.L., CA Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Author May R. Berenbaum is head of the Entomology Dept. at U of Illinois and is a distinguished insect researcher and humorist. She has somewhat of a cartoonist Gary Larson ("The Far Side") sense of humor and this book is a compilation of her short articles that appeared in the "*American Entomologist*" from 1991 to 1999. With such article headings as: "On elderly ants", "Fatal attractions", "Roach clips and other short subjects", "Infield flies and other sporting types", "Subpoenas envy", etc., one will find a hilarious, pun-filled book full of laughs. No wonder then that such a distinguished scientist as sociobiologist E. O. Wilson ("*Diversity of Life*", et al.) gave this nod to Berenbaum's book: "No one in recent years has written on insects with more learning, passion, and disarming humor than May Berenbaum. She is a great friend of the Hexapoda and therefore, ultimately, us" - from the back cover. Indeed!

May Berenbaum is a goddess.

I bought the book according to Ms. Berenbaum reputation, so the disappointment was even greater. Sure there are a lot of interesting facts but they are drowned in the middle of so much blablabla that you forget them as your frustration level increases. It looks like the author was paid by the word.... The illustrations are also a real deterrent...conclusion: I was not even able to finish the book

With Buzzwords, May Berenbaum presents a collection of essays, many previously published, that

show the lighter-and usually humorous side-of entomology. Berenbaum divides her book into four sections: how entomologists see insects, how the world sees insects, how entomologists see themselves and how an entomologist sees science. Topics include insect flatulence, the misrepresentation of insects in comic books, the stereotypical role of entomologists in movies, aged ants, the smoking of insects, naming insects and, as the name suggest, insect sex life. None of this, of course, would ever have been considered a humorous topic to me prior to this book. A few pages into it, however, and I was reading aloud the amazing, bizarre and comical facts about insects and entomologists. I must add, though, that the final section was not nearly as interesting and it took me a lot longer to read it than I did the others; the first two sections were especially droll and I flew through those hundred pages with amazing speed. Of course, this being a collection of humorous essays, each one had to end with a punch line, a pun or a joke. At times they seemed forced and this tended to lessen my enjoyment of the essay somewhat. Another detraction was the occasional incorrect punctuation. There was a tendency for quotation marks and parenthesis to start and never close, causing me to skim frantically down the page to see just when the thought would end. Despite these objections, Buzzwords was an pleasant-and eye-opening-read, fully deserving of four out of five stars.

Buzzwords, a compilation of humor columns written for American Entomologist by May Berenbaum from 1991-1999, combines science and wit with a little bit of everyday life to come up with some pretty funny - and interesting - stuff for entomologists and entomologist wanna-bes. While these essays were written for the scientific community and there are occasional lapses into research methods or Latin syntax, for the most part the essays are in common English and provide some great information on insects in a much lighter format than the average scientific texts. For example, essays like "Putting on Airs," in which Berenbaum documents the years of research scientists have spent calculating exactly how much methane gas termites are responsible for producing (i.e.: how much termites fart), and "Inquiring Minds Want to Know" which details how often cockroaches make the pages of tabloid magazines, there is much for the non-entomologist to enjoy. Of course Berenbaum deals with the more serious side of entomology as well, such as in the essay "Just Say Notoclontid?" that details the former president George Bush's plan to raid coca fields by dropping caterpillars from helicopters as part of his efforts on the "war on drugs," she just does it a little tounge-in-cheek. Overall, Buzzwords is an educational book with a dose of humor, fun to read and, best of all, it won't leave you itchy all over!

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