

here that the baboons rise and fall. The script then moves on to an improbable love story set in the world of an irradiated rump of humans who survived the war but have forgotten how to make things. They live by scavenging leftovers from the pre-war days, burning books for heat and assigning crews to rob old graves of suits and jewellery. Eunuch priests of the devil-figure Belial squat at the top of the caste system in this stunted world, dominating a society of near-slaves.

*Ape and Essence* parallels Huxley's 1932 *Brave New World* (see P. Ball *Nature* **503**, 338–339; 2013), yet offers an even darker vision. A young botanist, Alfred Poole, has arrived by ship from New Zealand, which survived the atomic war and is now exploring what's left of the world. So, as with *Brave New World's* Savage, a *Candide*-like hero appears from outside society and finds himself appalled. And what appals both heroes is the indiscriminate sexuality that the society's leaders encourage to replace family and human love.

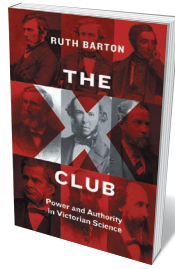
The twist this time, as Huxley wrote to his fellow screenwriter Anita Loos, is that “the chief effect of the gamma radiations [has] been to produce a race of men and women who don't make love all the year round, but have a brief mating season”. This manifests as mass gropings; any progeny deemed too monstrous, the result of radiation-damaged genes, are then slaughtered on Belial Eve. (Huxley probably knew that Hermann Muller had received a Nobel prize in 1946 for the discovery that X-rays can cause mutations.) The ceremony, called the Purification of the Race, mimics the blood sacrifices of the Aztecs. It also alludes to eugenics, the British–American pseudoscience embraced by Adolf Hitler.

What all this sexualized barbarity has to do with nuclear war isn't clear. Born in 1894, Huxley brought a scolding Victorian sensibility to the loosened morals of the war-torn twentieth century, excoriating its hedonism in satires and science fiction. Sun-drenched, beauty-obsessed southern California, where he lived and worked from 1937 until his death in 1963, proved the ideal locale for his dystopias: a seeming paradise that was also the end of the frontier.

Appropriately enough, *Ape and Essence* culminates in a Hollywood happy ending, at least for Poole and Loola, the young woman he falls in love with. The lovers escape to northern California, where a colony of “hots” — hold-outs with conventional sexuality — are cobbling together a new life. However disdainful Huxley might have been of our core boy-gangsters, in the end, he was too humane for a truly relentless apocalypse: his dystopias had escape hatches. Would that the same could be said of a real nuclear war. ■

**Richard Rhodes's** latest book, *Energy: A Human History*, will be published in the United States in late May.  
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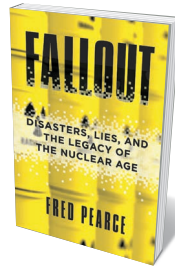
## Books in brief



### The X Club

Ruth Barton UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS (2018)

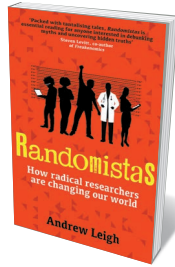
For decades in the late 1800s, nine scientific luminaries (among them biologist Thomas Henry Huxley and botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker) dined together as members of the ‘X Club’. This socio-economically diverse group, formed in part to promote Charles Darwin's achievements, is a telling case study in the dynamics of Victorian class and science. Historian Ruth Barton's magisterial chronicle traces the careers of the “X-men” and their agile promotion of science; Huxley, in particular, emerges vividly as wily, belligerent, and obstructive to women entering science.



### Fallout

Fred Pearce BEACON (2018)

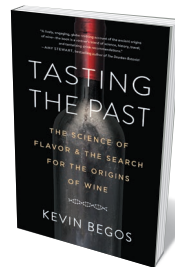
Science writer Fred Pearce casts a cool and measured eye on an explosive legacy: the atomic age. Launched by Winston Churchill's nuclear ambitions (realized by the US Manhattan Project), this era lingers on in plutonium stockpiles, arsenals and ageing power plants. Pearce roams with intent from Sellafield, “Britain's brooding nuclear nightmare”, to radioactive steppes in Kazakhstan, blighted by 619 atomic tests in the 1950s. His nuanced conclusion is that, together, alarmist protestors and a secretive nuclear industry create a different sort of fallout: the spread of disinformation and fear.



### Randomistas

Andrew Leigh YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS (2018)

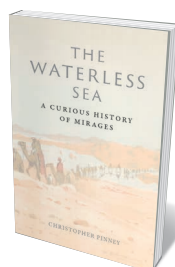
Randomized testing, economist Andrew Leigh reminds us, has vanquished scurvy, improved wildfire response — and proved key to better feedback loops in medicine and crime prevention. The trove of case studies in his insightful study includes the 1960s Perry Preschool Project, which exposed the long-term positive impact of early education among African American children living in poverty. Leigh also explores the work of pioneering ‘randomistas’ such as social-policy expert Judith Gueron, and outlines handy guidelines on aspects of randomized testing, such as sample splitting and ethical oversight.



### Tasting the Past

Kevin Begos ALGONQUIN (2018)

If you can tell Sauvignon blanc from Sémillon, you might feel that you ‘know’ wine. Science journalist Kevin Begos blows that idea to smithereens. He travelled from the Caucasus Mountains to Israel and beyond, and rifled through archives, to unearth ancient ‘founder’ grape varieties. En route, he consults archaeobiologist Patrick McGovern and grape geneticist Shivi Drori; reads papers on the DNA of “wild yeasts that live symbiotically with wasps”; and contemplates the oldest grape fossil found. A book that froths with data on half-forgotten vines, from Hamdani to Gros Manseng.



### The Waterless Sea: A Curious History of Mirages

Christopher Pinney REAKTION (2018)

The illusory seas observed in sere deserts are not the only form of mirage, notes Christopher Pinney in this alluring tour of the phenomenon in science and culture. Created by light refracting as it moves through atmospheric regions with differing temperatures, mirages can also appear as imposing and mysterious ‘castles in the air’. Pinney ranges from the old Japanese belief that these “phantom paradises” were exhaled by clam monsters, to an 1898 *Nature* report detailing mirage effects on flagstone pavements. A paean to a sublime apparition, “real, but not true”. [Barbara Kiser](#)