

terminally obscure (I've done two) answers questions. Obama was a natural, typing his own answers and signing off with a Reddit catchphrase: "NOT BAD!". The crowd went wild. Four years later, it was all very different.

Reddit, as *We Are the Nerds* shows, was always a venue for the edgy and degenerate, fostered in part by its anonymity. But by 2016, some of this was going mainstream. The forum (or 'subreddit') r/The_Donald had become an important cheerleader for a divisive US presidential campaign. The volunteer moderators kept just inside the rules. It became a prolific disseminator of misleading memes — with consequences that everyone now knows but no one yet fully comprehends. If Obama was the presidential incarnation of change-the-world techno-optimism, Trump now personified a revenge of the trolls.

In August 2017, white supremacists and opposition demonstrators went head-to-head in Charlottesville. Huffman was furious, and the incident triggered a clampdown on certain far-right groups across Reddit. This was a major milestone on the journey from the site's freewheeling origins to a dawning realization that online communities, like societies, need rules. An obvious question is why unaccountable individuals such as Huffman (or Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, or Twitter's Jack Dorsey) should be the ones setting them.

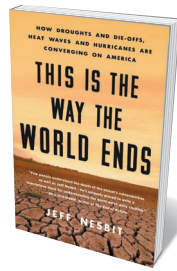
The story of social media is ironic. The most powerful decentralizing technologies in history — the Internet and the web — have led to the greatest concentrations of power. Friction-free information and the death of distance have not ushered in a new Enlightenment, but enabled every crackpot belief and bile-drenched enmity to gain adherents. Technologists, anxious to avoid any 'single point of failure' in their systems (the reason everything from disk drives to data centres is duplicated) have built single points of failure for society. A well-aimed post or algorithmic tweak can mislead, enrage and divide on a national or global scale. At its all-too-common worst, this is not so much social software as social malware.

The main story of the book ends on a high. Huffman is the boss of a major website valued at well over US\$1 billion. Ohanian, Reddit's first promoter and now its executive chair, is a celebrity (and married to tennis phenomenon Serena Williams). To paraphrase Jobs, both have helped to put a dent in the Universe.

But this is no happily-ever-after fairy tale. *We Are the Nerds* describes how Reddit began. The real story is how the site and its ilk will change the world. On that, we're still in Act One — and the story is being written by us all, one thoughtful blogpost or belligerent tweet at a time. ■

Timo Hannay is the founder of education technology company *SchoolDash.com*, based in London.
e-mail: timo@hannay.net

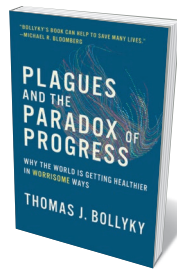
Books in brief



This Is the Way the World Ends

Jeff Nesbit THOMAS DUNNE (2018)

Environmental expert Jeff Nesbit delivers a scientifically rich overview of how the impacts of climate change are affecting natural resources in the here and now. He reveals how oceanic and atmospheric shifts are triggering losses in species from pollinating insects to phytoplankton, fatal heatwaves are becoming regional norms and water stress could spark new waves of mass migration. Nesbit's blueprint for surviving these systemic issues — centring on efficient resource use, innovation and infrastructure — is arguably sketchy, but overall this is a cogent analysis of a creeping crisis.



Plagues and the Paradox of Progress

Thomas J. Bollyky MIT PRESS (2018)

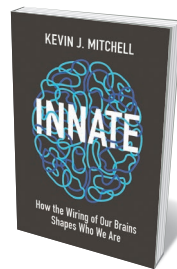
From polio to tuberculosis, infectious diseases are no longer the leading cause of death in any region. Yet this triumph is paradoxical, argues Thomas Bollyky in this rich, incisive study. Bollyky, director of the Global Health Program at US think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, shows that in too many lower-income countries, any gains in public health are counterbalanced by poor health-care systems, illiberal governance, low employment, rampant urbanization and booming populations. A thoughtful reminder of the social, economic and political complexities inherent in sustainable public health.



Wally Funk's Race for Space

Sue Nelson WESTBOURNE (2018)

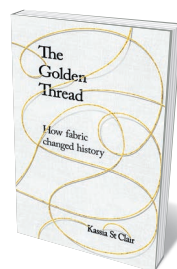
In 1961, as NASA made superstars of astronauts such as John Glenn, their medical supervisor, William Randolph Lovelace II, was secretly training 13 female flying aces for space. The 'Mercury 13' programme was axed, but the ambitions of trainee Wally Funk never died. In this compelling portrait, space journalist Sue Nelson reveals how Funk (now nearly 80) became the first female US aviation-safety inspector, has hobnobbed with luminaries such as Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, and is in training for the first Virgin Galactic flight. As Nelson notes: "What a life she has had while fighting to right a wrong."



Innate

Kevin J. Mitchell PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS (2018)

The nexus of neuroscience and genetics can be murky. Not so in neuroscientist Kevin Mitchell's study on human diversity, which probes with clarity and balance how variation in our genetic program causes variation in outcome. Mitchell reveals that environmental effects tend to amplify, not counteract, innate differences. He uses that framework to examine psychological domains such as perception, conditions including schizophrenia, and the dubious ethical and social implications of 'designer babies' and other trends. A powerful antidote to genetic determinism.



The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History

Kassia St Clair JOHN MURRAY (2018)

Fabrics are knitted into human history, from the Silk Road to the mechanical looms of the Industrial Revolution. Here, design writer Kassia St Clair explores the connection in 13 beautifully wrought stories. We visit a cave in Georgia's Caucasus Mountains where dyed fibres more than 30,000 years old have been discovered; goggle at the starched intricacy of sixteenth-century lace ruffs; flinch over astronauts' nappies and the sodden sleeping bags of early polar expeditions; and savour the idea of materials spun from spiders' webs. A joyful commingling of text and textiles. [Barbara Kiser](#)