



Wicked Bugs: The Louse That Conquered Napoleon's Army and Other Diabolical Insects

Amy Stewart, Briony Morrow-Cribbs (Illustrator)

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In this darkly comical look at the sinister side of our relationship with the natural world, Stewart has tracked down over one hundred of our worst entomological foes—creatures that infest, infect, and generally wreak havoc on human affairs. From the world's most painful hornet, to the flies that transmit deadly diseases, to millipedes that stop traffic, to the “bookworms” that devour libraries, to the Japanese beetles munching on your roses, *Wicked Bugs* delves into the extraordinary powers of many-legged creatures. With wit, style, and exacting research, Stewart has uncovered the most terrifying and titillating stories of bugs gone wild. It's an A to Z of insect enemies, interspersed with sections that explore bugs with kinky sex lives (“She's Just Not That Into You”), creatures lurking in the cupboard (“Fear No Weevil”), insects eating your tomatoes (“Gardener's Dirty Dozen”), and phobias that feed our (sometimes) irrational responses to bugs (“Have No Fear”). Intricate and strangely beautiful etchings and drawings by Briony Morrow-Cribbs capture diabolical bugs of all shapes and sizes in this mixture of history, science, murder, and intrigue that begins—but doesn't end—in your own backyard.

Wicked Bugs: The Louse That Conquered Napoleon's Army and Other Diabolical Insects Details

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From Reader Review Wicked Bugs: The Louse That Conquered Napoleon's Army and Other Diabolical Insects for online ebook

Stewart Tame says

This book made me itch.

As the jacket promises, this book is about bugs (no, it's not about what happens when a certain famous rabbit gets his hands on a copy of 50 Shades of Gray.) Stewart apologizes for her lack of scientific rigor in using the term. Ants, spiders, centipedes, lice, fleas, snails, scorpions, beetles, worms, and more lurk within these pages, so I think she can be pardoned for the catchall term.

Honestly, this book is pretty review-proof. Just by looking at the cover and the description, you pretty much know whether you want to read it or not. Stewart has done her homework, and presents everything in readable, factual prose. She may not go into enough detail for hardcore entomologists, but for everyone else: recommended!

Kirsti says

ENTHRALLING and DISGUSTING! Lots of stuff you shouldn't discuss over dinner, such as: Recently a medical examiner had difficulty estimating a time of death because some of the maggots in the body looked like they were two days old and others looked like they were three weeks old. The woman had snorted cocaine shortly before she died, and the maggots near her nose and mouth ingested some of the cocaine and grew huge from overeating.

GoldGato says

Do not read this book while using public transportation...I missed my train stop because the subject matter kept me completely engrossed.

Needless to say, I will never eat pork again and I am slathering myself in mosquito repellent nightly. I have a whole new respect for these mighty bugs and the mayhem they produce. Certainly the chapter on the Brazilian Wandering Spider brought me to rapid attention when the author explains that a passenger almost boarded an international flight with hundreds of these aggressive creatures in his carry on bags. No more aisle seats for me.

Book Season = Spring

Kaethe says

The publisher assumes this book is for adults, but if you know a plague or bug fan of tender years, they would probably love you for hooking them up. Lots of the diseases and infestations are described in

gruesome detail, but Stewart is writing for a broad audience, so the text isn't dull, even though she provides the proper Latin names for everything. If anything, I would say Stewart uses a snarky tone that would particularly appeal to the young. The teen who wants to read this would have been just as eager in fifth grade, when she became fascinated by the CSI kind of science. Certainly she tolerated me reading short passages aloud with good grace.

Two hours ago I was still reading this, stretched out on the sofa with a couple of cats, whilst the other teen is screening sci fi flicks for a friend at the other end of the house. Lots of explosions down there, with no noise but the whir of computer fans and purrs down here. Outside it's 88 and sunny with 35% humidity. I prefer to read in the coolth, unless I can actually be in a pool. So, a funny compendium of horrible pests is just the perfect thing to be in here reading.

I'm having a good summer vacation so far.

Library copy

Sarah says

This book is very pretty and nice to hold in your hands. My students were VERY impressed with how cool and ominous looking this book and its title are. I was sharing my current reading life with them and this was one of the books I was reading (to myself--not them) at the time. I used it to try to explain that animals that are harmful and predatorial aren't evil or mean-spirited but rather just made that way as a means of survival. That cute, fuzzy bunnies have their own means of survival--such as camouflage and the ability to stay still like the world. This type of conversation never works. When will I learn? I'm sure when I was their age, I thought wolves were mean and bunnies were nice and I would be angry at the lion and aching-hearted for the gazelle when I was accosted with a nature program against my will. Cartoons don't help, with their animal personification. Still I try, foolishly. I want to free them to be able to love the Bullet Ant, whose name comes from the pain its bite induces, and who I learned about in this book. It needs to give that painful of a bite so it and its family can continue to survive and keep its colony safe. It's like the U.S.A. and its tremendous arsenal of nuclear weapons. But I didn't get into that analogy with my students. They're not even ready to accept that a buzzard circling a dying, suffering creature in anticipation of its expiration isn't evil but rather living on instinct. And they're definitely not ready to accept the bugs, Stewart reports, that are living inside of us and on our eyelashes. So while I suggest you read it, (it's great for road trips!) I don't suggest that you read it to kids, unless they're the type who can handle it. I suppose Mike Reynolds' kid would like this book.

And, a word of warning, goodreaders, from the section on bookworms, "Books, to be saved from the worms, must be used."

Sarah Montambo Powell

Melki says

As long as they're not crawling on me, or glued to my bedroom ceiling eying me with evil intent, I am fairly tolerant of bugs. After all, we would be drowning in our own waste without them. They eat other bugs. And there's that whole pollination thing to consider.

But....

Insects cause billions of dollars worth of structural and agricultural damage each year. They spread disease and have caused the deaths of untold numbers. Basically, they are the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, crawling and winging their way in your direction. And many of them have a taste for **blood**.

The bug profiles in this little volume read like the stuff of science fiction and nightmares. Frightening tales of **giant centipedes** catching and eating bats in midair! **Swarms of millipedes** that brought Tokyo's express trains to a halt! Six types of bugs that **eat books!** Horrors!!!

When you're not busy cringing and slapping at the tickling sensations on your extremities, you'll find all sorts of nifty facts and info that will surely make you the know-it-all Cliff Clavin of your next cocktail party.

They may be smaller than us, but we are vastly, **vastly** outnumbered. I am now fully convinced that bugs will one day **rule** this planet.

Which reminds me of the final lines from a poem I liked when I was a kid -

Metropolitan Nightmare by Stephen Vincent Benet:

*"Say, buddy," he said,
"You better look out for those ants. They eat wood, you know,
They'll have your shack down in no time."*

The watchman spat.

*"Oh, they've quit eating wood," he said, in a casual voice,
"I thought everybody knew that."*

*-And, reaching down,
He pried from the insect jaws the bright crumb of steel.*

Sam says

This is another beautiful little book from Stewart that is packed with a devious collection of bugs, beetles, spiders and other crawlies that have made a name for themselves as a scourge to local humans (again mostly

in the US but there are still some examples from elsewhere, not to mention a shout out to the Old World inverts taking on the New World) through poisons, toxins and good ol' fashioned destructive behaviour. Once again the short entries and chapters make this a great book to dip into as well as to read outright and the etchings and illustrations are as beautiful as ever, again adding a sense of Victoriana. Not a comprehensive guide by any means (nor does it set out to be) but it does cover the most common/famous species and even has a few surprises that will have you keeping a suspicious eye on every 'bug' that comes near you for days (possibly weeks) after. A great little read!

Woodge says

After reading *Wicked Plants* a couple years ago and gobbling it up, when this book appeared it was a foregone conclusion that it would be mine. This is a handsome book with many cool illustrations (if you're interested in bugs). I found it to be endlessly interesting and a little bit horrifying (screw-worm flies that burrow into you; foot-long centipedes with painful bites, a swarm of locusts bigger than the state of California, etc.) Also, I think the French must be a little weird. Their term for pubic lice is *papillons d'amour* (butterflies of love.) Ah, love.

Jesse Broussard says

I feel like the wine taster at the wedding in Cana: the best was saved for last. The best, in this case, being zombie bugs, bugs that take over an unwilling host (such as a cockroach, grasshopper, snail, etc) and use it for their own nefarious purposes, such as turning its antennae iridescent colours and waving them around to attract the nearby Nazgul, or perhaps causing grasshoppers, drunk with vino del mar, to fall violently in love with a particular passing fish. Alas, leaping to the water like Jean Valjean does not preserve them from perishing in it like Agamemnon: they can't swim, and die in a bliss of ardent, wet-gilled fervour, doubtlessly delivering poignant love poems with their last breaths. Of particular warm and fuzzy feelings for me, who have peeled back ceilings and watched them scurry away, opened ovens to the sight of cockroaches two inches deep, and found the scientific way (trial and error) that a roach's head is entirely unnecessary to the survival of the rest of the roach (for a few days: plenty of time to reproduce) is the delightful insect that stings a roach, then inserts its stinger into the temporarily immobilized roach's brain, and then, steering via the antennae, walks the now docile behemoth back to its own home like it was leading an elephant, where it lays its larvae on the roach's abdomen. They proceed to eat the roach from the inside out, turning it into a disposable incubator, and I applaud them.

Other, more well-adjusted humans will probably loathe this book. But those of us that delight in the misery of others, or at least those who can find admiration for their creative methods of dying--seriously, how many autopsies come back with "caterpillar" filled in under "cause of death?" That's impressive--those humans like me, in other words, will greatly enjoy this book. In fact, we'll probably convince our roommates to bathe in raid and never leave the home (safe save for bedbugs, the lice that killed half of Napoleon's army, the black-widow's kiss of death, and numerous other delights).

As it is a dictionary of types, it's not the smoothest read. But who cares? It's not a novel, it's a catalogue of ants whose bites resemble gunshot wounds, of black flies that kill animals by the tens of thousands, of parasites that through itching inspire suicide, of bugs that shoot acid at the rate of a heavy machine-gun, even of a super-society of Argentine ants stretching from San Diego to Eureka, Ca. And as such it is awesome.

Enough to raise up a new generation of entomologists, who can then write more books like this one, inspiring the Jesse to heights of ecstasy as yet uninspired by aught but bugs.

Terence says

Wicked Bugs follows on Stewart's *Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities* and mirrors its format: short (2-3 page) essays about a variety of subjects - in this case, "bugs." And I don't fault her for defining "bug" loosely. As she writes, "This is by no means a comprehensive field guide or medical reference.... Most of us use the word to describe any number of tiny slithering and crawling creatures." (pp. xiii-xiv)

The only fault I found in this book was the lack of photos. Sure, there are illustrations but when we're discussing *Lactrodectus hesperus* or *xenopsylla cheopis* or *Theraphosa blondi*, one expects and deserves glossy, hi-res, color photos of these "monsters."

I correct that fault - to an extent - with the following list of my five favorites:

#5: Body lice (*Pediculus humanus humanus*)

The titular louse of the book's title. These little fellows have been with us since we started wearing clothes (c. 100,000 years ago), and under the right conditions (overcrowding, unwashed clothing, war) are happy to carry diseases like typhus and trench fever. It's they who stopped Napoleon's Grande Armee and sent it fleeing back to France (whatever Russian patriots might say).

#4: Giant centipede (*Scolopendra gigantea*)

These beauties can reach lengths of 30 cm (c. 10 inches). Centipede venom is rarely fatal and its power is related to size - the bigger the 'pede, the stronger the venom. The bite of the North American species (*Scutigera coleoptera*) is nearly painless, and the insect eats other pests like bed bugs, silverfish, carpet beetles and cockroaches.

#3: Hairworm (*Spinochordodes telinii*)

This parasite zombies grasshoppers. Hairworm larvae hang around in water until an unsuspecting grasshopper takes a drink. Once inside the 'hopper, it grows into an adult. But in order to complete its life-cycle, the adult has to get back to the water so it takes over the insect's brain and forces it to commit suicide by jumping into the nearest waterhole to drown.

#2: Asian giant hornet (*Vespa mandarinia japonica*)

These insects are so large (5 cm, c. 2 inches) that they're mistaken for small birds, and their sting feels like "a hot nail through my leg," as one man described it. (p. 9)

Japanese scientists have based an energy drink on a liquid giant hornet larvae produce that has been shown to reduce fatigue and increase fat burning in mice and graduate students. Naoko Takahashi, Olympic gold-medalist marathoner, swears by the stuff.

#1: Brazilian wandering spider

This guy deserves two photos:

I was torn between the wandering spider and the giant hornet but my fascination with arachnids won out to put this dangerous hombre in the #1 spot. This spider reminds me of the facehugger from "Alien" - fast and aggressive. If you don't kill it with the first blow, expect to go mano-a-mano with a seriously pissed off, seriously venomous spider (an unlucky British chef bitten by one hiding in a crate of bananas spent a week in the hospital).

Bonus icky anecdote: There is a case of a woman who went into surgery for a suspected brain tumor. When the surgeon opened up her skull, however, he found that she was infested with tapeworms.

Pork - the other white meat :-)

Bonus lesson about interfering with Mother Nature: The lowly earthworm is generally considered a boon but this was not the case in Minnesota, where before the advent of the European nightcrawler (*Lumbricus terrestris*), the ecosystem had evolved without them. They devoured the layer of leaves that fell every autumn and the native flora began dying out. There's nothing to be done at this point except damage containment and hoping the ecosystem will recover. But it won't be the same environment that hosted Solomon's seal, large-flowered bellwort, wild sarsaparilla, meadow rue, sugar maples and red oak.

Rusty says

Interesting. Full of factoids. A bit gross. But more text book than it had to be. Like a Mary Roach book without the personality.

Jen says

Things you should not do while reading this book:

- sleep in a hotel room
- see a bug
- get touched in the middle of the night in a dark room by something that is obviously going to lay its eggs

beneath your skin...only it was only your cat

This book gives me all new reasons to think bugs are both really really gross--and amazingly cool. Like the chigoe fleas who like to lay their eggs beneath toe nails, where the pain and itching get so bad, some of Columbus's soldiers when first landing in the Caribbean would cut off their toes. Or the giant caterpillar who will hang from the tops of caves and catch bats...mid flight. Or this kind of wasp that will sting a roach's brain, and use the roach as a living incubator for its larvae--until the larvae eats it.

The book is pretty much a dictionary on this sort of thing. My calmness was aided that they didn't include photos, instead there are stunningly beautiful drawings.

It's a fun romp filled with disgusting facts, scary creatures, and the power of nature.

Judy says

This book is a surprisingly fun and engaging read. I will admit to a lot of grimacing and having to cover the drawing on the page a few times so I could concentrate on the text. Some of the drawings were so creepy, I felt like the bugs would crawl off the page and into my lap :) I loved the scary anecdotes and truly interesting historical bits. Amy Stewart really has the knack of conveying factual information in a conversation and engaging way. The descriptions and examples of how insects have been used in war were really amazing. The Japanese developed fleas with bubonic plague as a weapon during WWII and tested them by dropping them on two Chinese cities, Ningbo and Changde. There were outbreaks of plague in both places and approximately 200,000 Chinese people died. There was a plan to release them over California, but thankfully it never happened. Interestingly, the US granted immunity to the Japanese doctors who worked on that project in exchange for their research information. The information wasn't made public until the 1990's. The section on assassin bugs was gruesome also -- pits filled with these bloodsuckers were used as torture in Uzbekistan in the 1800's. There were also some extremely grisly chapters on bugs that lay their eggs inside other bugs, animals, or humans, bugs that kill their mates, bugs that take over another bug's brain... Wow!

Sesana says

So now my head seems strangely itchy and I can't help but jump at the slightest tickle. Too many bugs in one book for me. But morbidly fascinating, anyways.

Carrie says

I no longer fear the brown recluse. However, I learned that everything in the rural south wants to kill me.
