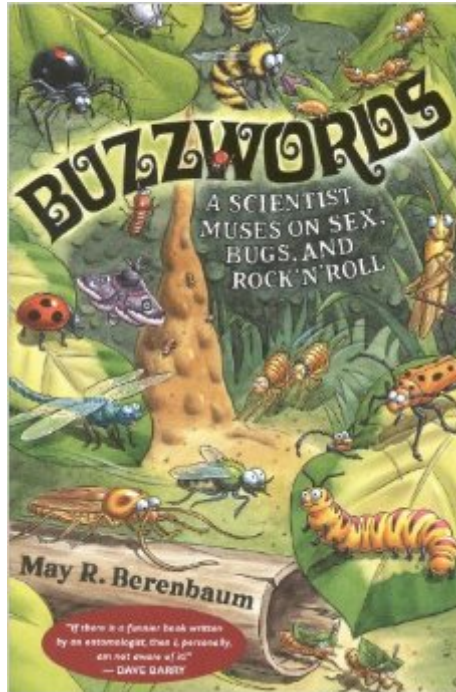


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Buzzwords: A Scientist Muses On Sex, Bugs, And Rock 'n' Roll



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

It is clear from the prologue of May Berenbaum's *Buzzwords* that readers of the book are in for a good time. The author's breezy, conversational description of the bug-related essays to follow--most of them written in the 1990s and reprinted, with minor revisions, from the author's column in *American Entomologist*--culminates in her apologia for including in her otherwise user-friendly prose the scientific names of the critters under discussion: "But before you proceed, here's a word of warning. In these essays, you'll encounter scientific names. For reasons I'm not entirely clear on, these seem to alarm people, even some biologists, unnecessarily. These names, which are written in Latin and consist of two parts, the genus followed by the species, are used not to impress people with dazzling displays of arcane knowledge; I don't know that I've ever won anyone's heart or stopped a fight or brought the world one step closer to peace and tranquility by reeling off a scientific name at a critical juncture. They're used simply because they're really very useful." And we

readers are hooked. There follow 42 brief, amusingly-titled essays divided into four broad categories: how entomologists see insects, how the world sees insects, how entomologists see themselves, and how an entomologist sees science. While written initially for the amusement of entomologists, Berenbaum's essays are accessible to the general public, both those who are enamored of, or at least tolerant of, the beasties with whom she works and those more squeamish readers who believe that in a perfect world all bugs would perish from the face of the earth. (Not that I'm choosing sides here.)

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