
BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY MILBRY C. POLK



SAILING THE SEAS

BY DAYYAN ARMSTRONG AND ROSS BEANE

256 PP • BERLIN: GESTALTEN & SAILING COLLECTIVE, 2020 • ISBN-13: 978-3899559972 • \$60 •
REVIEWED BY ANGELA M.H. SCHUSTER

For the nautically inclined, the current Covid-19 crisis has left many of us yearning for the seas—not just the posh ports of call around the globe, but those in-between places off the beaten path where much awaits discovery.

And for those of us dreaming of the next destination, *Sailing the Seas* offers plenty of inspiration. Far more than your typical coffee table book, this lavishly illustrated compendium is replete with information on the history of

lesser-known destinations with welcoming harbors and deep-time cultural traditions—in Greece, Croatia, Thailand, and Madagascar. Sailors will appreciate the book's copious “Captain's Notes,” which provide tips on best anchorages, prevailing winds, and what culinary delights to look for at local watering holes.



THE AMAZON

BY MARK J. PLOTKIN

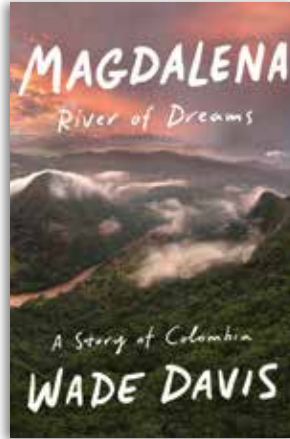
248 PP • OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020 • ISBN-10: 0190668296 • ISBN-13: 978-0190668297 • \$74

Mark Plotkin, an ethnobotanist and president of the Amazon Conservation

Team, has spent more than 40 years in the Amazon Rainforest, which has often been called the “lungs of the Earth” for its ability to sequester some 10 percent of the planet’s carbon and produce oxygen. It is the largest and most biodiverse rainforest in the world, encompassing some 39 billion trees, representing 16,000 species, with an additional 10 percent of which that remains unknown. It is an area under increasing threat having lost as much as 17 percent of its former cover, due to cattle ranching, slash-and-burn agriculture, and the exploitation of gas, oil, gold, and other resources.

In his latest book, *The Amazon: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Plotkin writes that life exists in layers with the canopies considered “green oceans.” And what we know of Amazonia as a whole is far more than just the rainforest. It includes the vast river systems, swamps, savannahs, and tabletop mountains, “a biological wonderland brimming with mindbendingly bizarre, creepy, weird, and wonderful creatures,” not to mention the vast plant pharmacopeia, the benefits of which remain largely unknown.

Time is of the essence he says. “In the age of accelerating climate change, the fate of Amazonia will affect everyone.”



**MAGDALENA:
RIVER OF DREAMS**

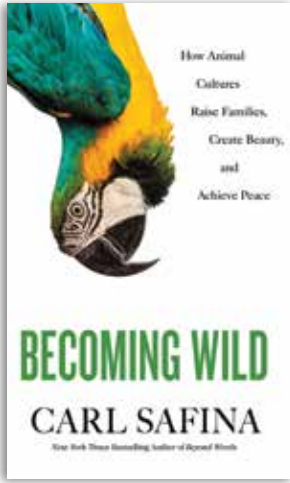
BY WADE DAVIS

432 PP • NEW YORK: KNOFF, 2020 • ISBN-10: 0375410996 • ISBN-13: 978-0375410994 • \$30

In *Magdalena: River of Dreams*, Wade Davis tells the story of Colombia, and the common thread throughout his narrative is the river that unites the country. Davis writes that upon his arrival in Colombia as a young graduate student he felt as if he had found “home.” He would return there often in the years that followed. It was there that he met his mentor, botanical explorer Richard Evans Schultes. Davis wrote of Schultes in *One River*, which became a classic in Colombia at a time when the world over due to cocaine trafficking—a tragedy that has cost countless lives.

Emerging out of this terrible time, Davis says, Colombia is on its way to a better future, blessed with a large rainforest that has been spared the exploitation that has befallen its neighbors, and a returning population of highly trained young people. Davis writes of the country’s extraordinary natural beauty, noting that “no place in Colombia is more than a day removed from every natural habitat to be found on Earth.” *Magdalena* is a celebration of this diversity, “the [river being a] vital artery of commerce and culture that runs a thousand miles south to north, traversing the entire length of the nation.” Davis paints a portrait of its vitality, history, ecology, culture, and humanity. He also delves into the fraught relationship between the Spanish and the native peoples, which was further complicated with the arrival of enslaved Africans, whose descendants continue to live along the river today.

This fascinating book reveals the lives of those who have called the river home—revolutionaries and historians, fishermen and priests, botanists and explorers, businessmen and drug lords, storytellers and conservationists—in the context of the societal circumstances and natural disasters that have shaped an extraordinary land.



BECOMING WILD
BY CARL SAFINA

384 PP • NEW YORK: HENRY HOLT & CO., 2020 • ISBN-10: 1250173337 • ISBN-13: 978-1250173331 • \$29.99

In his latest book, *Becoming Wild: How Animal Cultures Raise Families, Create Beauty, and Achieve Peace*, Macarthur genius grant-winning ecologist and author Carl Safina explores the worlds of sperm whales, scarlet macaws, and chimpanzees, highlighting the vital role of cultural learning in the survival of each species. What is unusual about his approach, explains Safina, is that “until now, culture—knowledge passed down through the generations—has remained a largely hidden, unappreciated layer of wild lives.” Safina selected these three species because they represent “themes of culture: identity

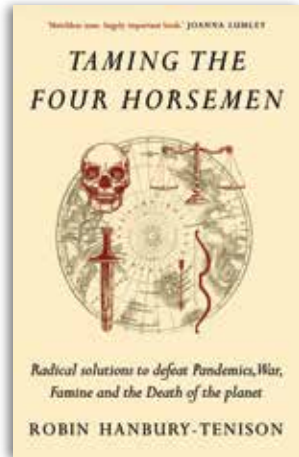
and family, the implications of beauty, and how social living creates tensions that culture must soothe.”

Safina traveled to the Caribbean to join a study of sperm whales. He describes their evolution—from sea to land and back to sea again—and discusses how they communicate, writing that, “the sonar of the sperm whale is the most powerful burst of focused sound made by any living thing.” Their use of sound creates identities for individuals and for families or “clans” and “for sperm whales, family is everything.”

In the second section, Safina journeys to the Peruvian Amazon to delve into the world of the scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*), one of 350 species in the parrot family. Here he focuses on the question: “Do birds see beauty in their plumage, hear it in their songs?” The macaws, too, depend on social learning for their survival and travel in pairs. Singing, he tells us, releases dopamine, which brings a sense of pleasure and happiness. “Singing,” he writes, “must feel rewarding and pleasurable, or else [they] would not keep on singing.”

For his final subjects, Safina calls on our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, in the Budongo Forest Reserve in Uganda. There, he observes, the chimpanzees’ lives are a “pressure

cooker” of politics, with the machinations of males plotting domination, females trying to protect the young, and the group as a whole trying to maintain cohesion. Chim groups, even in the same vicinity, he says, have “differing material and behavioral cultures.” To move through their world, they have developed “empathic concern and altruism (which) confer enormous survival advantages...” keeping ever-present violence at bay.



TAMING THE FOUR HORSEMEN
BY ROBIN HANBURY-TENISON

216 PP • LONDON: UNBOUND DIGITAL, 2020 • ASIN: B082XS5Z56 • \$15 • REVIEWED BY NICK SMITH

The Four Horsemen of the title of Robin Hanbury-Tenison’s latest volume are, of course, those of the “Book of Revelation,” representing the collapse of civilizations

as a result of pestilence, war, famine, and death. With a twenty-first-century twist, Hanbury-Tenison interprets these as the rise in global disease, international tensions over resources such as energy, getting it to rain where it's needed, and coming to terms with ocean pollution. Put simply, *Taming the Four Horsemen* is a wide-ranging thought piece about what humans can do to avoid disaster.

Put less simply, it's a book of hard-won wisdom from an 84-year-old explorer, activist, and campaigner. And while Hanbury-Tenison is persuasive on why civilizations have collapsed in the past, he's at his best when discussing why ours is disintegrating now and the roles free electricity, ocean clean-ups, microbe development, and weather manipulation can play in its prevention. Hanbury-Tenison effortlessly blends his command of history with his explorer's instincts to reach an understanding of how today's science could be harnessed to alleviate global challenges. And while he's not the first modern writer to adopt this biblical framework to organize his ideas, one of the strengths of this book is simply how well he uses the construction. Anyone thinking that a book on global issues is going to be a bit dry and dusty should think

again. Hanbury-Tenison is controversial and entertaining, opinionated and reassuringly rational. You probably won't agree with half of what he suggests, but you will come away from *Taming the Four Horsemen* with a more evolved understanding of your own position on today's global crises.



**JOHN CAGE:
A MYCOLOGICAL FORAY**

EDITED BY ANANDA PELLERIN
TEXT BY KINGSTON TRINDER

224 PP (TWO VOLUMES) • LOS ANGELES:
ATELIER ÉDITIONS, 2020 • ISBN-13: 978-
1733622004 • \$55 • REVIEWED BY
ANGELA M.H. SCHUSTER

One of the more interesting exploratory offerings to roll off the presses in these surreal times is an entertaining two-volume slip-covered compilation of "musings on mushrooms" by avant-garde composer John Cage, who, in addition to being a titan of twentieth-century music,

was a formidable mycologist, having cofounded the New York Mycological Society with a group of friends in September 1962.

In addition to his challenging conceptual compositions, Cage's mushroom knowledge would earn him considerable notoriety. In February 1959, Cage appeared on the popular Italian game show *Lascia o raddoppia?* (Double or Nothing?) on which he was queried intensely on the subject of mushrooms over the course of several episodes. (Depending on whether contestants answered questions correctly, they could either double their money, or lose everything.) Cage would go on to win a five-million-lire prize after naming all 24 white-spored *Agaricus* genera contained in G.F. Atkinson's *Studies of American Fungi*, in alphabetical order no less, a performance that was met by riotous applause from the audience. The prize money allowed for the purchase of a new piano for Stony Point, Cage's country house sited in thickly wooded foraging grounds in New York's Rockland County.

Entertaining and eclectic, the volumes include essays, fungi-foraging diary entries, abundant botanical illustrations and photographs, as well as a suite of mushroom-inspired compositions. ▲ ▽