

## Book Review

*The Art of Being a Parasite*. By C. Combes, pp. 291. University of Chicago Press, USA, 2005. ISBN 0 226 11438 4. £17.50 (US\$25.00). doi:10.1017/S0031182005009650

Nothing can be more challenging for an author than trying to write a popular book on a subject that evokes disgust in the public at large. In his latest effort, Claude Combes attempts to sell parasites and their life-style to a lay audience. To readers of this journal, this may seem like a simple task; after all, we know that parasites *are* wonderful creatures. But convincing the average person of this simple fact is a monumental challenge indeed. On the whole, Combes achieves this superbly.

The book was translated from French by the eminent American ecologist Dan Simberloff. But the translation is not heavy-handed, and the distinctive style and charismatic voice of the author, as well as his great erudition and wit, come true loud and clear. His knack for drawing parallels between parasite biology and other phenomena, often smoothly placing parasite strategies in the context of human affairs, transforms even the most difficult concepts into entertaining stories that are easy to grasp. In addition, the text is accompanied by the typically clever illustrations characteristic of Combes' past publications.

Combes revisits some themes from his earlier, massive tome, *Parasitism* (Combes, 2001), but they are now distilled and made accessible to a wider audience. These include some of the author's favourites: encounter and compatibility filters, adaptations to a parasitic life, including the fascinating ways in which parasites ensure their transmission, and the evolution of virulence. Do not be fooled by the title, however: this is not a book just about the art of being a parasite. Combes also discusses host adaptations against parasites, the Red Queen hypothesis and coevolutionary arms races, host specificity and parasite diversity, the origins of mutualistic associations, the impact of parasites on host sexual selection, the distribution of parasites among hosts at all scales, the influence of environmental conditions on parasitism, and the emergence of new diseases. We truly get the whole picture from this modest-sized book.

As the book is intended for a wide readership including non-experts, a glossary of technical terms is provided, and details that would otherwise clutter

the text have been relegated to numbered notes at the end of the book. There are also relatively few references to the scientific literature throughout the text.

This last point may represent a source of irritation for the professional parasitologist that reads this otherwise very enjoyable book. Because of the sparse references, it is often impossible to track down ideas or results to their original sources. I first experienced this frustration in the second chapter, where the stepwise evolution of parasitism in gastropods is beautifully described. I would have liked to learn more about this but no references are provided. I found numerous other instances like this one. There is another aspect of the book that may annoy the parasitology connoisseur. Each chapter ends with a discussion of a scientific controversy related to the topic of the chapter. Informed readers may feel that qualifying these questions as controversial is a bit exaggerated, as current opinion on many of them is approaching a consensus. The controversial nature of Combes' controversies is therefore itself controversial.

But these are minor quibbles that do not affect my overall admiration for what Combes has achieved here. Until now, Carl Zimmer had set the modern standard for a popular book on parasitism with his *Parasite Rex* (Zimmer, 2000). Combes' and Zimmer's books are very different in coverage and genre, but in a way their contrasting styles are somewhat complementary. We now have a new weapon in the fight against the prejudice that reigns out there against our wonderful study subjects. I heartily recommend this book to all of you, and suggest you in turn recommend it to your non-parasitologist friends.

### REFERENCES

- Combes, C.** (2001). *Parasitism: The Ecology and Evolution of Intimate Interactions*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Zimmer, C.** (2000). *Parasite Rex*. Simon and Schuster Inc., New York.

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