

REVIEW

Constant craving

◆ *Ian Stewart described e: The Story of a Number by Eli Maor as "gently paced, elegantly composed" in New Scientist, 18 June 1994, p 43. So what's this e then? Well, it's not a friend-to-the-Universe drug, it's a number, a constant as deeply embedded in the world around us as is π . It describes the shapes of spirals, volumes shaped by curves and turns up in logarithms, the interest on your bank account. Try it. Published by Princeton, £11.95, ISBN 0691058547.*

Flutterby

◆ *Want to tell a marbled fritillary from a lesser marbled fritillary, or an Eros blue from a false Eros blue? Butterflies of Britain & Europe is the book to turn to. Almost all of Europe's 400 butterflies are shown in an impressive collection of 900 photographs, while Michael Chinnery's text helps the observer to separate similar species in the field. Published by HarperCollins, £14.99, ISBN 0002200597.*

Where d'you get those eyes?

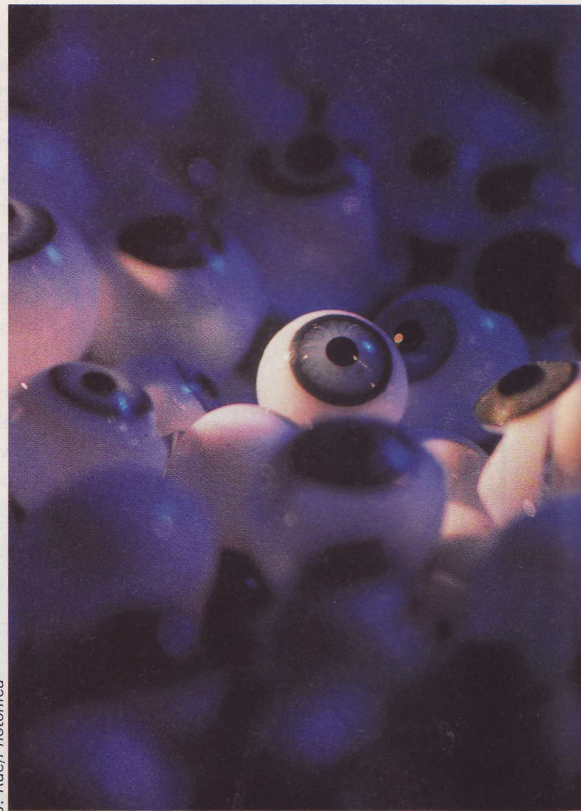
A Natural History of Vision by Nicholas Wade, MIT Press, £34.95/\$55, ISBN 0262231948

FOR thousands of years, we have been fascinated by how we see. But the study of vision, and indeed the psychology of experiences in general, is not like other sciences. Somehow, since we're the people doing the seeing, it seems reasonable that we should be able to understand a lot about vision by reflecting carefully on what we see and when we see it.

And *A Natural History of Vision* gives us just that: a scholarly account of the observational study of vision rather than a history of experimental vision science. It spans 2500 years, stopping at 1840, about the time that the study of vision began to depend on instruments rather than observations, and moved into labs.

Nicholas Wade has selected more than 800 short passages by authors from Hippocrates to Helmholtz, describing their observations of visual phenomena with the explanations of vision and perception they suggested. For the specialist, it's a fabulous source if you like a historical flavour to start you thinking and writing. Here is, for example, Avicenna from about 1020 AD: "They are wrong who think that the act of seeing arises from something that goes out from the eye to the perceived object and collides with it. For if this something be material the difficulty would be that in the eye would have to be a body big enough to spread over half the vault of the heaven."

Clear summaries introduce the issues in each collection of readings; original illustrations, portraits of many of the authors and a fine index add to the reader's pleasure. It is not narrative—enjoying it does not lie in being told a story, but in reading the original sources, in putting the pieces together yourself, in wondering whether

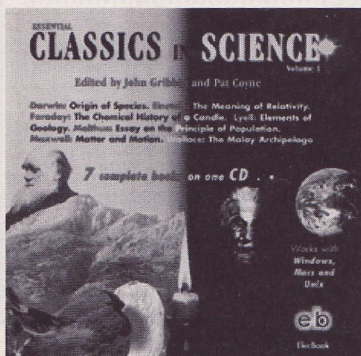


J. Rael/Photonica

the same thoughts would have struck you. The book is not a light read—I don't recommend it for the beach. It is, nevertheless, full of fascination. □

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