

Ant-thropology

A review of *The Life of Insects*, by Victor Pelevin,
and *Empire of the Ants* by Bernard Werber

William Lychack

I have a slightly eccentric cousin, who—like so many of us—is taking notes for the Great American Novel she will one day write. When she gets around to it, this masterpiece of hers will encompass all of her political theories, all her social commentary, and all her venom and pithy humor about the wicked ways in which the world works. She even has a working title for her book: "Well-Dressed Ants." Kind of catchy, I think. Whenever she talks about the project, she is flush with some new vignette to stir into the plot—a dash of Aldous Huxley here, a pinch of Erma Bombeck there, a generous helping of Orwell—and at times, I have to admit I'm quite sold. Caught in a Manhattan rush hour or stranded in the skyways of Minneapolis, watching people bustle past, feeling small and cold in the shadows of midtown anthills, I believe that, yes, she just might have something in her ant allegory. I'll call her out of the blue and tell her so—tell her to get cracking, so to speak—and I'll hear her silently nod on the other end of the phone and then ask me what, exactly, I am talking about.

What I'm talking about—can't you see?—is our lives as insects!

And she'll call me crazy or, depending on how polite she is feeling, eccentric.

But now I have the hard truth of her ant parable demonstrated perfectly in two sensational new novels to bug her with, "The Life of Incents" and "Empire of the Ants." Both ingeniously work her "Well-Dressed Ants" territory, showing us all of the life struggles and lessons our arthropod brethren have to offer, as well as creating parallel insect worlds in which all that is familiar has been recast as alien and strange. Both novels lean toward social satire and science fiction but in the same manner in which Gregor Samsa scuttles toward science fiction and social satire.

Not only are people and insects compared and contrasted in Victor Pelevin's "The Life of Incents," but the young Russian novelist creates a fantastic Soviet-style resort town where humans and insects exist in the same character at more or less the same time. Pelevin, the author of the celebrated "Omon Ra" and "The Yellow Arrow," completely pulls off the impossible, balancing both the light-handed and the

mocking sides of this satire.

Even the seaside setting of "The Life of Incents" takes on a ruinous, conspiratorial feel common to the best children's stories, where the giant pits in town looked "less like a foundation dug for a new building than like a grave for a building that had died, or the excavated remains of an ancient city." Or, as Pelevin writes, "The main building of the old resort hotel, half hidden from view behind a screen of old poplars and cypresses, was an oppressive, gray structure which seemed to have turned its back to the sea at the bidding of some crazed fairy-tale conjurer."

Pelevin the conjurer takes his reader through a romp-filled succession of interconnected chapters in which we follow a trio of mosquitoes as they bumble their misguided way through the resort, feeding, arguing, joking, and involving their fates with the other insects living there. Arthur and Arnold, the two Russians, and Sam Sacker, their American visitor, are variously presented to us as humans and then as insects, back and forth seamlessly, until the humans hold their mosquito traits and the mosquitoes have their human traits.

It's a conceit that not only works to illuminate human nature conspiring with insect nature but also works as a terrifying and clever metaphor for post-Soviet Russia, shaded over in its "miserable hue of gray." As each chapter unveils the new trouble our mosquitoes buzz their way into, we are introduced to different species of insects, each with its own distinct foibles and wisdoms. We watch a father dung beetle initiate his young son into the ever-present ball of dung he must learn to live with each day. We meet a green fly named Marina and her struggles to dig a burrow in the world. We are tempted by the spiderlike Natasha. Along with the moths, we are attracted to the dangers of lights. By the end of this fascinating novel, we are left with a meticulously observed and biting vision of what has been left in wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

If an overly manic Kafka comes to mind as you read Pelevin's cryptic and quirky novel, then surely Bernard Werber's "Empire of the Ants" begs obvious comparison to an insect-ruled "Watership

Down." But unlike the classic story of our favorite rabbit warren, the richest, most enthralling aspects of Werber's novel surround the heroic epic of the Belokan ant colony and ants 327th and 103,683rd.

Among the typical threats to the ant city—the constant battles with woodpeckers, the carnivorous plants, the distant enemy anthills, frogs, and other slave-driving insects—a deadly weapon has been unleashed upon the ant city. The single clue to the mystery is the distinctive smell of rocks. As counterpoint to this ant narrative is the human side of the story, called forth when the Wells family inherits an apartment in Paris. "ABOVE ALL," reads the one warning, "NEVER GO DOWN INTO THE CELLAR!" The family dog, however, disappears into the basement, and so will the rest of the family. The two stories dovetail as the ants are contacted or, if you prefer, as the humans are contacted.

In addition to the gripping action-adventure story about the city of ants, "Empire of the Ants" is also satisfying in its fidelity to the ways of ant life. With countless facts about ant biology and behavior, Werber, a science journalist, will whet and then satisfy your appetite for the inner, scent-driven lives of the family Formicidae. For instance, "With their many-faceted eyes, ants do not see the same image repeated thousands of times but a single latticed image. They find it hard to make out detail but can perceive the slightest movement." Or, "Every ant had a kind of pocket in its abdomen, a second stomach that did not digest food but kept it fresh and intact indefinitely."

I could go all day on details like those. And if you're anything like my cousin or me, you may even find yourself taking notes. These are well-dressed ants with a vengeance. And as I'll tell my cousin, the Great American Ant Novel has yet to be written, but wouldn't you know, its French and Russian counterparts already have been.