

book reviews

Consciousness: a user's guide.

By Adam Zeman. Yale University Press, New Haven 2003. 336pp. £18.95.

Do not be put off by the subtitle to this book, 'a user's guide'. A more suitable choice would have been the one used by the American William James, a professor of (successively) physiology, psychology and philosophy at Harvard a century ago, who subtitled his classic *The varieties of religious experience*, 'a study in human nature'. I start the review like this because I am sure that Zeman's book is destined for a similar fate to that of James's.

Zeman, a neurologist working in Edinburgh, has written a brilliant synthesis of neuroscience, biology and philosophy that runs from the big bang which started everything, through the celestial regions via the nematode *C. elegans*, to men and women. The final ending is not as yet revealed, but the question remains, 'Why are we here and what is it all for?' The style is more popular than specialist, more editorial than research paper; and all the better for it. Antecedents include the books of Macdonald Critchley, author of *The Divine banquet of the brain*; Francis Crick's *Astonishing hypothesis*; and all of Oliver Sacks although I cannot quite see *The man who mistook his wife for a hat* behind Zeman.

The book has many virtues. These include a quite unusual clarity in the presentation of a difficult subject, as well as a broad vision that extends from concepts of space and time to the synapse, from the atom to the brain and the mind. The main focus is on the paradox of the mind: how can it see itself? A question like this presents a challenge higher than Everest. Answering it, the problem at the centre of one of the main growth areas in mental science, will deserve more than a Nobel Prize. Everyone has looked at it through different eyes. Psychologists from St Andrews, geneticists from the two Cambridges, and even theologians from Tübingen have tried to solve the conundrum, but most of their endeavours have involved a slight fudge in the defining of consciousness that satisfies the searchers, but can leave others critical. Zeman avoids this pitfall, and realizes that however hard he tries any answer can never be given by science alone. So science in this book – from the old 'reticular formation' of Morruzzi and Magoun, now replaced with Mignot's 'hypercretin system', to the complications of blind sight – is mixed with an explosion of art. The art is that of living.

I have read two religious books this Lent. One was Helen Waddell's study of the wandering monk-scholars and the mind of the Middle Ages. The other was Zeman's study of consciousness, a phenomenon that for some has now come to replace deity. Medieval philosophy and religion rested on a belief in the simplicity of God. The modern biology of DNA, the soul and God now lies in the rules of complexity and the mechanism of how we know what goes on in our own centre. The heart of the first book lies in medieval Latin poetry, and of the second in Sylvia Plath and TS Eliot, WH Auden and WB Yeats.

A special note of praise is due to Yale's production team for the book's general excellence, affordable cost and revealing index. Indeed, this matches that of a famed old work on music, Tovey's *Essays in musical analysis* – although instead of 'Beethoven, music of, importance of toffee making in'; we have, as well as 'microconsciousness' and 'monkeys', 'Sellars, Peter' and 'St John's Gospel'.

I can sum up this wonderful book about our childhood, our destiny, the slippery streets of Edinburgh and high science, with a poem by Ruth Pitter:

*See what a charming smile I bring,
Which no one can resist;
For I have a wondrous thing –
The Fact that I exist.

And I have found another, which
I now proceed to tell.
The world is so sublimely rich
That you exist as well.

Fact One is lovely, so is Two,
But O the best is Three:
The fact that I can smile at you,
And you can smile at me.¹*

Reference

- 1 'The plain facts by a PLAIN but AMIABLE cat', by Ruth Pitter, quoted in 'The National Gallery. Heaven and art. London: The National Gallery, 1998'.

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In the land of pain.

By Alphonse Daudet. Edited and translated by Julian Barnes. Jonathan Cape, London 2002. 116pp. £10.

Alphonse Daudet (1840–1897) was one of the most popular French novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century. His books were often translated into English. But neither French nor English readers saw *In the land of pain* during Daudet's lifetime. It was published in 1930 by his widow and is now translated into English for the first time by Julian Barnes. It is a remarkable work.

Daudet contracted syphilis in his youth and after a latent period of about twenty years he developed tabes dorsalis. For the last dozen years of his life he made notes about his symptoms, the treatments he suffered and his reactions to both. The fact that he did not transform the notes into a literary work gives them an immediacy which conveys vividly his changing state of mind.

The pain was often excruciating:

Crucifixion. That's what it was like the other night. The torment of the Cross: violent wrenching of the hands, feet, knees; nerves stretched and pulled to breaking point. The coarse rope whipping blood from the