



lected in this volume. Both Cronon, an historian at the University of Wisconsin, and his contributors assert that our ideas about nature are “culturally constructed.”

Several essays are illuminating forays into what might be called “construction sites”—the Amazon rain forest, Sea World, Central Park—where popular ideas about nature are formed. Cronon, Candace Slater, and other contributors point out that the notion of an Edenic natural world, unsullied by human presence, is a myth that fosters unrealistic environmental policies.

Yet these strong points are undermined by the tendency of many contributors to treat *nature* as a mere linguistic bauble whose meaning can be constructed—and deconstructed—at will. More useful than some of these essays would have been a serious discussion of the new, and presumably more accurate, “constructions” of nature now being developed by science.

—Steven Lagerfeld

#### **AN UNQUIET MIND:**

##### *A Memoir of Moods and Madness.*

By Kay Redfield Jamison.

Knopf. 224 pp. \$22

Memoir is deceptive. On the surface, it appears to be the easiest of genres. No research, no footnotes, no argument. Just write down what happened. But in the depths, where the motley ingredients of a life bubble together, memoir becomes a witch’s brew difficult to stir.

In this memoir, Jamison, a distinguished psychiatrist specializing in manic-depressive illness, peers into the cauldron of her own prolonged struggle with the disease. “It has been a fascinating, albeit deadly, enemy and companion,” she writes. “I have found it to be seductively complicated, a distillation both of what is finest in our natures, and of what is most dangerous.”

Jamison confesses to the difficulty of speaking as both patient and doctor. Unfortunately, this does not prevent her from interrupting the flow of her narrative to engage in professional shoptalk or (worse) to share the details of her curriculum vitae. Nevertheless, this is a brave book. At its best, it makes vivid not only the pain of manic-depressive illness but also—most strikingly—its pleasure:

“How could one, should one, recapture . . . the gliding through starfields and dancing along the rings of Saturn, the zany manic enthusiasms? How can one ever bring back the long summer days of passion, the remembrance of lilacs, ecstasy, and gin fizzes that spilled down over a garden wall, and the peals of riotous laughter that lasted until the sun came up or the police arrived?”

—Martha Bayles

#### **AGING AND OLD AGE.**

By Richard A. Posner. Univ. of Chicago Press. 363 pp. \$29.95

Francis Bacon once wrote: “Age is best in four things—old wood best to burn, old wine to drink, old friends to trust, and old authors to read.” What about our understanding of age itself? Should we rely on old ideas—or new? Posner, a federal judge, legal scholar, and economist, evaluates the contentious issues surrounding age through the (relatively) new discipline of rational-choice theory. Though his wide-ranging study draws upon such diverse fields as medicine, psychology, and philosophy, Posner admits that “economics wields the baton of my multidisciplinary orchestra.”

As an overture, Posner asserts that aging is real—not, as some activists propose, a social construct that gathers otherwise unrelated mental and physical illnesses under an unnecessarily demeaning rubric. He also speculates, in an armchair evolutionary argument, on why human beings are built to break down: eventually our resource consumption becomes a drag on the reproductive capacities of the young.

Yet while aging is real, people often behave as though it were not. Among the many topics addressed by this book is social security. Posner admits that most mandatory retirement savings systems are justified by the fact that young people tend not to save for retirement, even though they have every reasonable expectation of living long past

their working years. One might think that people don't plan for old age simply because they don't like to think about it. Yet Posner finds this explanation unacceptable. Invoking rational-choice theory, he probes for the logic behind the fact that young people act like grasshoppers when they should be acting like ants.

What he comes up with is an ingenious theory of "multiple selves," in which the economist's rational self-interested individual is replaced by a *series* of rational self-interested individuals—overlapping with each other and capable, to some degree, of assuming responsibility for each other. In Posner's view, this theory explains why social security is not a form of "paternalism," based on the notion that "government knows best." Instead, it construes the young working

"self" as a trustee, occupying a body that will later be occupied by the older retired "self." Since the interests of both "selves" must be respected, the law imposes a limited fiduciary obligation on the younger.

However ingenious, such a theory has too little explanatory power to justify its bizarre disassembling of the person. This is model building for its own sake, and it becomes even less satisfying as Posner tackles such vexing issues as age discrimination and euthanasia. Despite the occasional quotation from Aristotle or Mill, Posner's approach does little to illuminate the moral dilemmas involved. Indeed, superficial borrowings from philosophy only serve as reminders that, for examining some areas of life, the older disciplines are best.

—Joseph Brinley

## History

### *GOD'S CHINESE SON: The Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan.*

By Jonathan D. Spence.  
Norton. 400 pp. \$27.50

Spence's many admirers will be delighted with his newest work, a history of the Taiping Rebellion that, characteristically, reveals a whole new way of seeing a familiar story. Spence, a professor of history at Yale University, has always displayed a knack for lively detail. Minutiae and epic scope are brilliantly blended in this tragic portrait of Hong Xiuquan (1814–64), the religious visionary whose popular rebellion almost toppled the Qing dynasty in the mid-19th century.

The rich ground of China's greatest revolt has been worked before, but Spence brings both new material and a new approach. The material consists of two texts published in the 1860s by the Taipings themselves, recently rediscovered in the British Museum. The approach is to get inside the Taiping movement, not just analyzing the social, political, and economic causes but evoking its religious and psychological dimensions.



The immediacy of Spence's writing, including his bold use of the present tense, may seem a bit shocking at first. But it enlivens the story without sacrificing scholarly precision. The "you are there" quality adds vividness to the book's account of the lives of Western missionaries living in China, its sketch of Chinese religious traditions, and its recreation of the cosmological conflicts faced by Hong Xiuquan and his compatriots.

Spence concentrates on Hong, the man who believed himself to be "God's Chinese son." We follow him as he assiduously studies the Confucian classics for the all-important examinations. We learn how his repeated failures almost destroy him and how a fever dream carries him up to heaven to meet his father and elder brother. With time, that dream becomes a revelation: Hong believes that his father is the Christian God, and his elder brother Jesus. Convinced of his own divinity, and of his mission to save the world from "demon-devils," he builds the fierce, puritanical movement that will shake traditional China to its foundations.