

**FATHER INDIA:**  
*How Encounters with an Ancient Culture Transformed the Modern West.*  
By Jeffery Paine. HarperCollins. 336 pp.  
\$25

“Desperate souls flee to India,” Paine observes in this engaging book about such desperation and flight, about escape euphemized, disguised, and in some cases realized as quest. *Father India* is a perceptive emotional audit of Western travelers “who quit more comfortable conditions to find somewhere, somehow, in India, an alternative track through modernity” that would help them fathom, if not transform, both themselves and the West.

Paine’s pilgrims—including statesmen, novelists, and psychologists—all shared the conviction that India, “conceived as something simultaneously geographical and intellectual, both an outward and inward location,” might provide powerful understandings of psychological, social, and transcendental realities. The dramatic personae of *Father India* are Lord Curzon, Annie Besant, E. M. Forster, V. S. Naipaul, Christopher Isherwood, and, clustered around Gandhi, other such Westerners as Mirabeau and Martin Luther King, Jr. A supporting cast includes Lord Kitchener, Madame Blavatsky, C. W. Leadbeater, Mirra Richard, Carl Jung, and William Butler Yeats.



There are also cameo appearances by Sri Aurobindo, Cesar Chavez, Krishnamurti, and many more.

These characters represent various modes of confrontation with India: “Forster in his Indian costume or Naipaul with his Indian heritage attempted an Indian-western fusion at the personal level of their own identity; Curzon and Besant attempted such a fusion politically through changing social institutions... [Isherwood and others] melded East-West religious ideas about the universe.” Forster and Naipaul are further typified as “unofficial ambassadors of European civilization on a safari in search of self.” Upon arrival in the distant land of sundry promises, all these seekers “started projecting onto India the unconscious assumptions of their religion, their society, or their own identity.” But if India was, for them, a kind of Rorschach test, it was also shock treatment: “Obstacles were in fact what most travelers encountered in India.”

While religion, politics, and psychology are the explicit themes around which the book is structured, the leitmotif, the unruly power underlying and connecting these thematic realms, is sex. To one degree or another, most of the characters in the book have a problem with pleasure. The essay on Isherwood at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood exposes the two sides of one desperate soul: “the holy monk and the gay libertine.” The Indian endeavors of Forster, Kitchener, Leadbeater, and others are understood in light of their homosexuality. Discussion of the sexual ambivalences of Gandhi, Besant, and practically everyone else uncovers the intimate impulses behind public postures.

Orphaned by their Western heritage and looking to “Father India” for guidance, authority, or even love, most of these travelers struggle with desire. In that tussle, they suffer a transformative ache and loneliness to which Paine is acutely sensitive. His portraits illuminate the folly inherent in the genius of his subjects and, at the same time, the genius that transforms their folly.

—Lee Siegel

## Science & Technology

**FRANKENSTEIN'S FOOTSTEPS:**  
*Science, Genetics and Popular Culture.*  
By Jon Turney. Yale Univ. Press. 276 pp.  
\$30

When 18-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote a horror story for her companions one rainy summer day alongside Lake Geneva, none of them could have imagined what lay

in store for her tale. Western thought had long known Prometheus, Faust, the Golem. Shelley's story, and her expansion of it into a three-volume novel in 1818, warned of poisonous fruits in the garden of new scientific knowledge.

Just as the book *Frankenstein* marked a transition from gothic to science fiction genres, so its protagonist was an intermediate figure, an occultist turned science student putting new concepts in the service of ancient fantasies. As a dropout from the University of Ingolstadt, Victor Frankenstein was not a scientist in the later 19th-century sense but a wealthy gentleman-amateur who apparently had no intention of joint-stock monsterfarming. The historian of science James Secord has noted the period's flourishing country-house hobby of attempting to create living things with electricity. Only a decade after the novel appeared, Justus Liebig's laboratory at the University of Giessen began to show the industrial and agricultural potential of professionalized, organized science.

Shelley's creation might have receded to a paragraph or two in Romantic literature survey texts, like other paleo-thrillers. The daunting original strikes many 20th-century readers as a stretched-out short story adorned with implausibly eloquent declamations by the monster. Yet the same fictional monster, minus soliloquies, has astonished the world. To adapt biologist Richard Dawkins's much later concept, it has become a "memester," one of those cultural constructs spread so widely by word and picture that it has taken on a life of its own. While the story soon became a favorite of the London stage, it was, appropriately, new technology that gave the monster new life: James Whale's 1931 film (based on a modern London theatrical revival), in which Boris Karloff created one of the century's most persistent visual icons. The film also showed the money in monsters, earning the studio \$12 million on an investment of \$250,000.

Turney, who teaches in the University of London science studies program, fears that the pervasive image of the demented scientist or promoter who produces grotesque results (H. G. Wells and his Dr. Moreau, Michael Crichton and his sinister entrepreneur John Hammond) is far from benign alarmism. Turney traces the Frankenstein metaphor through generations of scientific research and imaginative literature on the future of genetics, including Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* 1921 drama (which introduced the word *robot* into non-Slavic dictionaries), and Aldous Huxley's

*Brave New World* (1932).

Turney argues convincingly that the monster metaphor impedes clear thinking and debate on issues of biotechnology. And he cites a study by Michael Mulkay suggesting that science's critics may no longer be the chief culprits. In the finest traditions of unintended consequences, scientists themselves now invoke the monster metaphor to chill discussion of risks by imputing vulgar fears to opponents and critics. The flesh-and-blood Creature is turning into a straw man.

Monsters are notoriously resilient, as viewers of horror film sequels will attest. Putting Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells out of mind is like the famous psychological experiment of not thinking about a white bear for 10 minutes. Only other vivid images can displace the unwanted one. Until they do, Turney's impressively researched, well-argued book will be essential reading.

—Edward Tenner

**ALIEN INVASION:  
*America's Battle with Non-Native  
Animals and Plants.***

By Robert Devine. National Geographic Books. 288 pp. \$24

The nation's least-known environmental problem is becoming one of the more menacing ones. Exotic species are running amok, driving native species to extinction, degrading natural ecosystems, threatening the public health with diseases that even Hollywood hasn't discovered. In a cross-country tour to survey the damage, Devine, a journalist, found plenty of evidence of this ecological crisis. He met embattled farmers, botanists, zoologists, scientists, and gardeners, as well as a Sonoma County vintner whose harvest was eaten by herds of wild pigs.



*Zebra mussels, which came to America in ships' holds, clog filtration systems and kill clams, but they are also a favored food source of some species, including blue crabs.*