How the Brain Science Of Attention Will Transform The Way We Live, Work, And Learn
Cathy N Davidson
Viking, £17.50
(302pp, hbk)
If you want to know how the web is influencing society, there are plenty of authors ready to tell you. Most fall into one of two camps: those who believe that, with the rise of the internet, the decline of intellectual standards, and those who see it as a golden future.
Davidson is one of the latter. Her analysis will be familiar to anyone who has sampled this genre. Our educational systems and workplaces are outdated. For example, students should collaborate on meaningful projects rather than spend time listening to a teacher talk. Davidson argues that such changes are consistent with what’s known about the brain, and that the main obstacle to their adoption is our blindness to new ways of thinking about familiar problems. Davidson is a lively writer and her book is a pleasurable read. But the argument she builds doesn’t survive even mild probing. It’s not at all obvious that “recent advances in brain-science” support her views as she claims. And teachers don’t follow traditional classroom practices with blind adherence to tradition. Actually, teachers say collaborative projects are a good idea. Research on the use of interactive whiteboards in British classrooms is instructive on this point. It shows that for technological innovation to succeed, those using the technology must be given detailed training in how to use it, as well as concrete ideas on how best to exploit it to teach. And that’s why Now You See It disappoints. The argument hangs on the few cases she offers to many other internet enthusiasts but the details necessary to make the dream a reality are missing.

Professor Dan Willingham
is a cognitive scientist.

Now You See It
A familiar argument that lacks supporting evidence.
Nothing new to see here, says Dan Willingham

The God Species
How The Planet Can Survive The Age Of Humans
Mark Lynas
Fourth Estate, £14.99
(303pp, hbk)
The core of Lynas’s book is “We’re in charge, so it’d better not stuff it up”. It examines threats to our environment and suggests ways we can escape them. Lynas thinks we should acknowledge mankind’s scientific potency, and use our brains and markets to get us back on track.
The argument hangs on the nine “planetary boundaries”. These are lines we supposedly shouldn’t cross on key measures of global health: biodiversity loss, climate change, nitrogen cycle, land use, water use, pollution, aerosols, ocean acidification and ozone depletion. We’re approaching, or over, the line on most, yet Lynas never reaches for the traditional remedies of less economic growth or fewer people. His fix is technological. Lynas used to be a more stereotypical “greenie”, and some criticisms of his former colleagues sting the says environmentalists abuse the science on GM crops and nuclear power, just as climate change deniers do with atmospheric science. Meaningful Scents Around the World
Roman Kaiser
(256pp, pbk)
Wiley-VCH, £14.99
Vichy, 295
Chemistry books for the general public should provide the pleasure of looking at everyday things with a deeper knowledge. Scent is a very important sense and it’s wonderful to relate the scents of all the familiar things around us – flowers, spices, meat – to a number of quite simple molecules. Whereas some books open your eyes, this book opens your nose. It’s an expensive book but ideal for your coffee table.

In Defence Of Dogs
Why Dogs Need Our Understanding
John Bradshaw
Allen Lane, £20
(305pp, hbk)
Both dog and wolf are descended from a common ancestor that lived about 15,000 years ago when domestication began. Since then, dogs have been bred for ever better socialisation with humans, while the wolves that have survived are those least fruitful of us. Despite this, many scientists still use the modern wolf as a template for understanding dogs. Renowned British television dog owner John Bradshaw shows dogs in a new light that is both an interesting armchair read and an important primer for any dog owner.

Luis Villazon is a zoologist and Focus Q&A expert.

Being intended as a popular book can’t excuse the errors in The Puzzle Of Left-handedness. Why some people are left-handed raises interesting questions but this book doesn’t answer them convincingly. To the usual mix of myths and half-truths about handedness are added suggestions of “malice and misunderstanding” on the part of most handed researchers. Perhaps Smith’s most bizarre claim is that all lefties are one in twins, the co-twin dying in the womb in 90 per cent of cases. For that, there is no evidence.

Prof Chris McManus is an author of Right Hand, Left Hand

Ever since the Polynesians began exploring the Pacific 3,000 years ago, humans have left a trail of ecological destruction on the islands they’ve visited. The bad guys are cats, weasels, goats, rabbits and (worst of all) rats – a motley crew of mainland mammals that have travelled with us, with terrible consequences for defenceless island wildlife. Stolzenburg takes us on a fascinating tour of far-flung locations, introducing a colourful cast of passionate conservationists fighting last-ditch battles to exterminate the ‘alien invaders’.

Ben Hoare is features editor of BBC Wildlife magazine.

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