

CULTURELAB

The great and the (quite) good

The Royal Society shortlists some fab books, says **Amanda Gefter**, but omits some must-reads

EVERY year the Royal Society Prize for Science Books celebrates the best in popular science writing. The six shortlisted books announced this week represent a diverse array of subjects and styles, ranging from history to philosophy, from evolutionary biology to cosmology. With some, I believe the judges got it right, but others struck me as odd choices.

The two physics books to make the list are both fantastic. In *We Need to Talk About Kelvin*, Marcus Chown (a consultant for *New Scientist*) shows us how things we experience every day can reveal profound truths about the nature of reality. Did you know, for instance, that a small percentage of the static on a badly tuned television is radiation from the afterglow of the big bang, or that your reflection in a window results from the uncertainty of our quantum world? Chown's book is a lively read which serves not only to make strange physics appear more familiar but, even better, to make the familiar appear wonderfully strange.

In *Why Does $E=mc^2$?*, Brian Cox and Jeff Forshaw tackle the most famous equation of all time in a remarkably comprehensible way. Though irritatingly patronising in places (for example: "Conjecture is a fancy word for 'guess'"), the pair make some surprising points that I haven't seen expressed in quite the same way. They explain, for instance, that everything travels through space-time at the speed of light, it's just that light uses up its "speed quota" on motion through space while you and I split ours between speed through space and speed through time. Well worth a read.

In *God's Philosophers*, James Hannam dispels the myth that science burst onto the scene spontaneously during the Enlightenment, arguing instead

that medieval natural philosophy paved the way. It's well-researched and hugely enjoyable, populated by compelling characters such as the 14th-century French philosopher John Buridan, who suggested that the Earth might be turning, and English scholar Thomas Bradwardine, who realised that mathematics and natural philosophy ought to be combined in order to understand the physical world. These developments arose from a world steeped in magic, astrology and religion – all of which inspired medieval thinkers to seek out nature's hidden forces.

To my mind, two of the books don't quite make the grade. *Everyday Practice of Science* by Frederick Grinnell argues the well-worn and obvious point that science is a human activity. With its dry, academic style and aimless structure, I was surprised to see it on the list. *A World Without Ice* by Henry Pollack is a better read and addresses an important matter: "Ice is a sleeping giant that has been awakened, and if we fail to recognise what has been unleashed, it will be at our peril." But it lacks any real storytelling and the book's pace can be a bit, forgive me, glacial.

These two slots might have been better filled by others, such as Jerry Coyne's *Why Evolution is True*, a fabulous book that made *New Scientist* puts *Life Ascending* at the top of the pile (not literally)

the Society's longlist. *Reading in the Brain* by Stanislas Dehaene didn't make even that cut, though it was probably my favourite science read of 2009. *The Vision Revolution* by Mark Changizi, another fascinating book, was also overlooked, as were *Wetware* by Dennis Bray and *Catching Fire* by Richard Wrangham.

For the combined quality of

the writing and subject matter, my vote for overall winner goes to *Life Ascending* by *New Scientist* regular Nick Lane. As he delves into what he considers to be the 10 greatest inventions of evolution, including DNA, sex, consciousness and death, Lane brings the science alive with the kind of beautiful prose that turns a book full of interesting information into a book you simply cannot put down. ■

We Need to Talk About Kelvin: What everyday things tell us about the universe by Marcus Chown, Faber & Faber, £14.99

Why Does $E=mc^2$? by Brian Cox and Jeff Forshaw, Da Capo Press, £8.99

God's Philosophers: How the Medieval world laid the foundations of modern science by James Hannam, Icon Books, £9.99

Everyday Practice of Science: Where intuition and passion meet objectivity and logic by Frederick Grinnell, Oxford University Press, £17.99

A World Without Ice by Henry Pollack, Avery, \$26

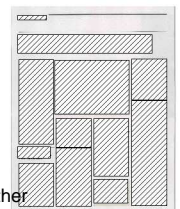
Life Ascending: The ten great inventions of evolution by Nick Lane, Profile Books, £9.99

Amanda Gefter is *New Scientist's* CultureLab editor

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COMPETITION

What is the most underrated science book of the last 50 years? Tell us your hidden gem and enter to win one of five full sets of the books on the Royal Society's shortlist. For details and to enter visit newscientist.com/blogs/culturelab



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