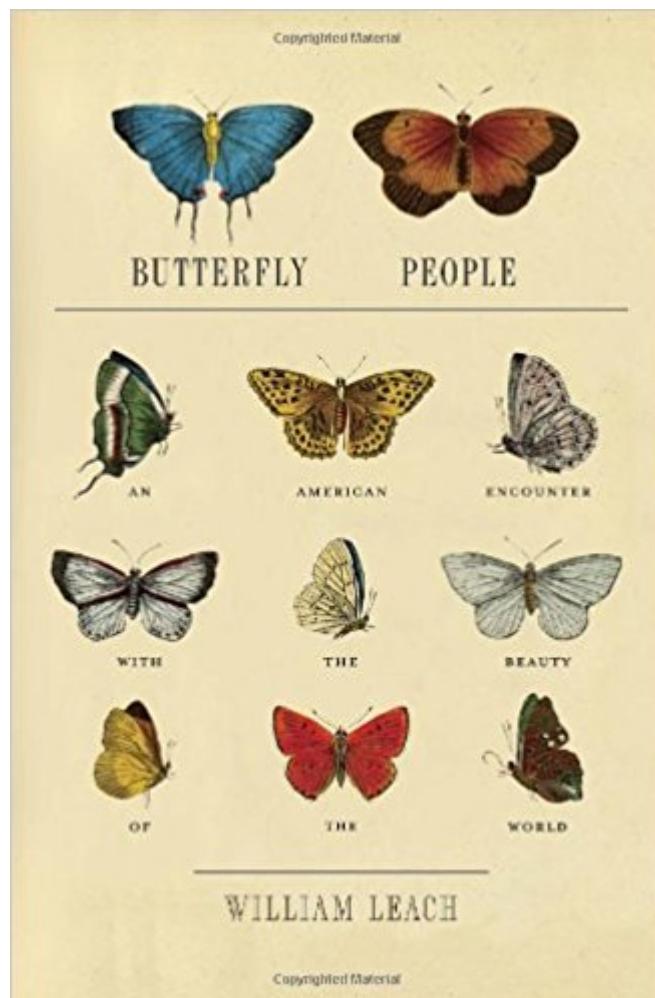


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Butterfly People: An American Encounter With The Beauty Of The World



Synopsis

With 32 pages of full-color inserts and black-and-white illustrations throughout. From one of our most highly regarded historians, here is an original and engrossing chronicle of nineteenth-century America's infatuation with butterflies, and the story of the naturalists who unveiled the mysteries of their existence. A product of William Leach's lifelong love of butterflies, this engaging and elegantly illustrated history shows how Americans from all walks of life passionately pursued butterflies, and how through their discoveries and observations they transformed the character of natural history. Leach focuses on the correspondence and scientific writings of half a dozen pioneering lepidopterists who traveled across the country and throughout the world, collecting and studying unknown and exotic species. In a book as full of life as the subjects themselves and foregrounding a collecting culture now on the brink of vanishing, Leach reveals how the beauty of butterflies led Americans into a deeper understanding of the natural world. He shows, too, that the country's enthusiasm for butterflies occurred at the very moment that another form of beauty—the technological and industrial objects being displayed at world's fairs and commercial shows—was emerging, and that Americans' attraction to this new beauty would eventually, and at great cost, take precedence over nature in general and butterflies in particular.

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Customer Reviews

While browsing in a bookstore in Edmonds, Washington, I came across this very specialized history of butterfly and moth study in the United States during the Nineteenth Century. Certainly in "Butterfly

People: An American Encounter with the Beauty of the World" William Leach has created a most attractive tome. The book is worth the cost just for the beautiful reproductions of Nineteenth Century plates of butterflies and moths. However the casual reader might be tempted to think that this is a book full of dull facts about a very narrow field in a rather uninteresting historical period. In this they would be in error, as the study of the Lepidoptera gave exciting insights into evolution, genetics (eventually), distribution and ecology, as well as behavior. Not only that, but the lives of the lepidopterists makes fascinating reading. Most of the people involved, such as William Henry Edwards, Theodore Mead, Henry Edwards, Samuel Scudder, Augustus Grote, Holland, and others, led lives that were not isolated from the events of the day and in very human fashion they had their disagreements, which could become quite bitter. Leach has well captured the excitement of natural history as practiced by the best in the field, some of whom studied not only the adults, but the immature stages, from egg to pupa, as well. These were for the most part experts in their areas and they contributed to numerous areas of biology, not just limited to butterflies and moths. Among other contributions they were early pioneers in the study of the entire life cycles of their organisms, and these researches led to a much deeper understanding of the butterfly and moth fauna than just collecting (although important in its own right) did. I have two, very minor quibbles. On pp.

Who is not cheered by the sight of a butterfly? Other insects pain, impoverish, or sicken us, but butterflies are "flying flowers" or "winged jewels," or at least those are a couple of the ways eighteenth-century butterfly enthusiasts referred to them. Alfred Russel Wallace was the co-discoverer of evolution, and he appreciated butterflies as examples of descent with modification, but he also said that the use of the butterfly's colorful wings was "to add the final touches to a world-picture, calculated at once to please and refine mankind." Indeed, he found collecting one specimen so thrilling that he wrote, "On taking it out of my net and opening the glorious wings my heart began to beat violently, the blood rushed to my head, and I felt more like fainting than I have done when in apprehension of death. I had a headache the rest of the day." That's the sort of passion that inspired many others, and in *Butterfly People: An American Encounter with the Beauty of the World* (Pantheon), historian William Leach tells how Americans were afflicted with the butterfly madness during the nineteenth century. Leach is a butterfly enthusiast, and that is one reason he wrote the book. If you don't share that passion, don't worry; there are enough odd characters and backbiting here to keep things interesting, plus plenty of insights into insect science, ecology, and the mindset of American entrepreneurs of the time. Though many families had butterfly nets, Leach of course concentrates on those collectors who made the biggest of collections, or had

the biggest business in selling or trading specimens, or did scientific research or published guides to butterfly identification. One was Herman Strecker, a memorial stone carver with a collection of 200,000 specimens.

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