



The Humanity of Science and Technology



Why Am I Reading This? Theme Information

These books explore the *what ifs*, the *whys* and *why nots* of science and technology from a humanities perspective. The authors, many of whom are renowned scientists, consider the personal, social, environmental, and ethical implications of their laboratory or field work. Spanning topics from proto-human remains to time machines to iPads, the readings are sure to spark interesting discussions of how science and technology affect our quality of life and our understanding of what it means to be human. (Chuck Guilford, Author, Ret. Lit. Prof., BSU)

Book List

1. A Briefer History of Time, by Stephen Hawking with Leonard Mlodinow
2. Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, by Sherry Turkle
3. Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior, by Temple Grandin
4. Born in Africa: The Quest for the Origins of Human Life, by Martin Meredith
5. My Year of Meats, by Ruth Ozeki
6. Physics of the Impossible, by Michio Kaku
7. The Botany of Desire, by Michael Pollan
8. The Control of Nature, by John McPhee
9. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, by Rebecca Skloot
10. The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher, by Lewis Thomas
11. The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains, by Nicholas G. Carr
12. The Unexpected Universe, by Loren Eiseley

Theme Essay

These books explore the *what ifs*, the *whys* and *why nots* of science and technology from a humanities perspective. Spanning topics from proto-human remains to time machines to e-books, the readings are sure to spark interesting discussions of how science and technology affect our quality of life and our understanding of what it means to be human.

In 1959, publication of C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* drew attention to a rift between science and the humanities, claiming that these two cultures had split apart and were developing along such different trajectories that communication and mutual understanding had become next to impossible. For students of literature, the laws of physics were often as opaque and unintelligible as *The Odyssey* was to many scientists. This lack of mutual appreciation and understanding has often been lamented in the more than fifty years since *The Two Cultures* appeared, and individuals from both the scientific and humanist communities have claimed that Snow exaggerated the problem.

Nevertheless, many humanists and scientists have taken heed, have paused to consider the implications of isolating the two traditions and have made conscious efforts to achieve a broadened perspective on their work. Nor is this an entirely new trend, with individuals as diverse as Sir Francis Bacon and Charles Darwin often discussing scientific ideas in a human context. More recently, the authors included here, many of whom are renowned scientists, consider the personal, social, environmental, and ethical implications of their laboratory or field work.

In *The Lives of a Cell*, for instance, Lewis Thomas compares the complex interactions of termites with those of humans in order to understand how the instinctive activities of individuals may contribute to an overriding social purpose. In *Born in Africa*, Martin Meredith discusses not just paleo-anthropology but the scientists who do the digging and classifying, their methods yes, and also their ambitions, frustrations, rivalries, and working conditions. In doing so, he reminds us that science is not just some abstract, mechanical process that happens on its own; it is a human activity, done by people with a deep love of learning, managing to set aside their egos in the quest for greater understanding. To take another example, the physicist, Michio Kaku, pays homage to several works of science fiction, showing how they have

presented ideas and concepts, from time travel to teleportation, that have become inspirational models for scientists who seek to stretch the bounds of the possible.

Ever feel that there may be a dark side to all this emphasis on science and technology, that perhaps it's taking on a life of its own and spinning out of control? Be sure to read *The Shallows* and consider again whether humans are as different from termites as we may wish to believe.