



## Robert N. Wiedenmann and J. Ray Fisher: The silken thread: five insects and their impacts on human history

Oxford University Press, New York, NY, USA, 2021, xxi + 268 pp, £25.99 (hardback), ISBN-13: 9780197555583

Ezequiel González<sup>1,2</sup>

Published online: 8 April 2022  
© Akadémiai Kiadó Zrt. 2022

As an entomologist, I always knew the many different ways insects are relevant for humans, though not from a historical point of view. In their book *The Silken Thread: Five Insects and Their Impacts on Human History*, Wiedenmann and Fisher narrate the relationship between humans and five insect species to highlight how these small animals connected the whole world for thousands of years. The selected species include two that had mostly positive impacts on humans through their products and services (the silkworm *Bombyx mori* and the western honey bee *Apis mellifera*), and three that caused millions of deaths due to the transmission of zoonotic diseases (the oriental rat flea *Xenopsylla cheopis*, the human body louse *Pediculus humanus*, and the yellow fever mosquito *Aedes aegypti*). The book is organized into six sections, one for each insect and a final one to connect them and reason on their importance. The authors combine many historical and geographical facts with entomological details to take us across several trips, many of them along the different branches of the Silk Roads, where these insects were key passengers. I found the section on the oriental rat

flea, an attempt to unravel the mystery of who was the actual vector of the bubonic plague, to be the most interesting one. Starting from the third and last plague pandemic and going back in time, Wiedenmann and Fisher describe how several researchers contributed to discovering how vectors, reservoir species, and humans interacted to allow the spread of a disease that killed millions and played a role in the decline of empires. This section includes very recent scientific articles on how body lice were the main vector within Europe in the third pandemic or how the plague bacteria, *Yersinia pestis*, can survive in the desert inside amoebae. Fascinating. The book is suitable for a broad readership, and I believe non-academics can follow these stories without problems. The black and white photographs in the electronic edition are a bit disappointing, but the main value of the book lies in the richness of its stories.

---

✉ Ezequiel González  
ezenofx@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Instituto Multidisciplinario de Biología Vegetal, CONICET - Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Av. Vélez Sarsfield 1611, X5016GCA Córdoba, Argentina

<sup>2</sup> Department of Ecology, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Kamýcká 129, 165 00, Suchbát, Prague, Czech Republic