

At the dawn of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency in 1953, Conant, now a seasoned educator and administrator, stepped into a third life as a high-profile political administrator. He became US high commissioner for Germany, helping the country to make the transition from occupation to autonomy. Conant had long thought of Germany as an exemplar of chemical work, education and cooperation between science, industry and governance, for good and ill. Adolf Hitler and other demagogues, he felt, had robbed it of its real potential. When West Germany became autonomous in 1955, Conant became its first US ambassador. In 1958, he returned to the United States, where he lobbied for educational reform through measures such as standardized testing, with some success. He continued to write on social issues, arguably straying outside his area of expertise, and ultimately authored 21 books on a range of topics. *The New York*

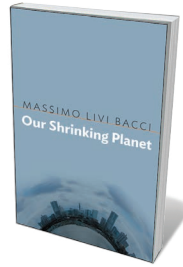
“Conant was one of a generation of US experts who began to put American science on the map.”

Times proclaimed that his death at 84 left a “vacancy”: there was no other educator as broad-minded in the country. Unsurprisingly, Jennet Conant tends to interpret her grandfather's behaviour more sympathetically than does Hershberg. Take Conant's marriage to Grace Richards, the daughter of his Harvard supervisor, Nobel laureate Theodore Richards. Hershberg suggests this might have been a calculated professional move; Jennet Conant sees it as motivated purely by love and intellectual compatibility. Both seem plausible. In fact, comparing the two biographies allows a complementary understanding of the man, despite inevitable overlap. If you want to know about Conant as a “cold warrior”, Hershberg's book contains much more of interest. *Man of the Hour* is stronger on the personal forces, talents and timing that propelled him into several positions of influence, perhaps in part because of the author's unfettered access to papers and personal sources.

Jennet Conant is a fine writer, and her biography emerges at a salutary moment. The story of James Conant's attempts to create a re-intellectualized US government and a better-educated public, and his vision of a shaping role for the United States in an ever-changing world, are important reminders in an age of devalued expertise, educational crises and turbulent governance. ■

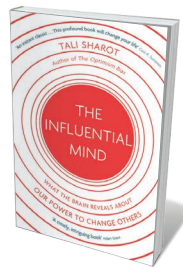
Alex Wellerstein is assistant professor of science and technology studies at the College of Arts and Letters of the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. e-mail: awellers@stevens.edu

Books in brief



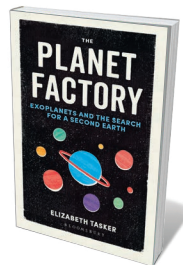
Our Shrinking Planet

Massimo Livi Bacci (Translated by David Broder) POLITY (2017)
In this authoritative, beautifully synthesized analysis of global population, demographer Massimo Livi Bacci pinpoints a planet-sized problem. When the “demographic timebomb” announced decades ago failed to detonate, complacency set in over creeping population growth. Now, 10 billion people are set to cram Earth by 2050, yet population is off most national agendas and has a secondary place in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Bacci traces population patterns over ten millennia to reveal a squeezed present in which per capita living space has shrunk by a factor of 1,000.



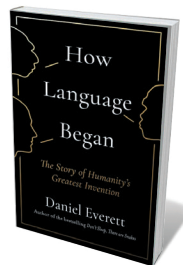
The Influential Mind

Tali Sharot LITTLE, BROWN (2017)
Advertising, politics, education — any juxtaposition of human and message involves influence. But why might a patently ill-informed demagogue sway more people than a scientist? In this perceptive study, cognitive neuroscientist Tali Sharot isolates seven factors central to influence. She shows how US President John F. Kennedy framed the space race emotionally as risk and opportunity, boosting neural synchronization and encouraging adherence to his view; and how “taming the amygdala” (the brain structure key to processing emotions) can reduce stress and susceptibility to fear-mongering.



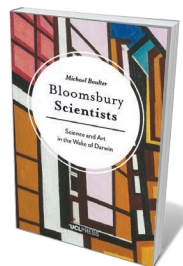
The Planet Factory: Exoplanets and the Search for a Second Earth

Elizabeth Tasker BLOOMSBURY SIGMA (2017)
Astrophysicist Elizabeth Tasker expertly lassoes the fast-moving field of extrasolar-planetary science for this crisp, witty primer-plus. After a dip into planet formation and habitability, she launches into a tour of the exoplanetary zoo. Here are uninhabitable monsters such as ‘lava world’ 55 Cancri e and the bloated gas giant WASP-17b (with a density not far off that of expanded polystyrene). And here, too, are promising ‘exo-Earths’ such as Proxima Centauri b, a mere 40 trillion kilometres away. Neatly woven through are tales of discovery by the likes of planet hunter Michel Mayor. Masterful.



How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention

Daniel Everett PROFILE (2017)
Did language begin with *Homo sapiens*? Daniel Everett theorizes an earlier progenitor: *Homo erectus*, the globe-trotting hominin that lived between 2 million and 143,000 years ago. Drawing on archaeology, anthropology and neuroscience, he asserts that language is not innate, but a cultural creation that emerged synergistically through a system of invented symbols, gestures, ordering and intonation. Everett, an expert on the Amazon basin's Pirahã people, delves energetically into biological adaptations for language, the evolution of grammar and puzzles such as cross-clan communication.



Bloomsbury Scientists

Michael Boulter UCL PRESS (2017)
Bloomsbury was famously the stomping ground of Virginia Woolf and her early-twentieth-century coterie. But that square mile centred on University College London was also a locus for science. Palaeobiologist Michael Boulter paints a group picture of biologists energized by Darwinism, including Ray Lankester and Marie Stopes, rubbing shoulders with cross-disciplinary intellects such as Roger Fry and H. G. Wells. Although marred by the intrusion of eugenics, this heady era saw the rise of fields from ecology to genetics. **Barbara Kiser**