

ENTOMOLOGY

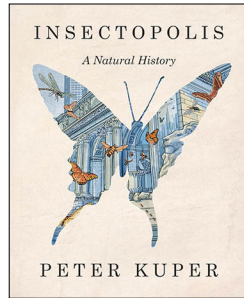
Insectopolis: a Natural History

By Peter Kuper. 2025. W.W. Norton. 256 pages and colour illustrations, 47.00 CAD, Hardcover, 35.99 CAD, E-book.

This work of graphic non-fiction by accomplished illustrator and cartoonist Peter Kuper delivers on the promise of its title. Clearly reflective of Kuper's passion for insects, *Insectopolis* weaves together insect natural histories with the social history of human-insect connections. It is peppered with entomological quotes and profiles of underappreciated and renowned entomologists, both historical and modern; even those well-versed in entomology are likely to find something new in this book.

The primary setting of *Insectopolis* is an imagined entomology exhibit at The New York Public Library, and the broad framing device is the extinction of humans and the subsequent rise of sapient arthropods, who are exploring the library exhibits. Kuper developed the book during his tenure as the Jean Strouse Fellow at The New York Public Library's Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers in 2020–2021. It is based on his insect history research there and his exploration of the uncharacteristically vacant space during the COVID-19 lockdowns (New York Public Library 2022). As a result, the setting is richly illustrated and conveys a vivid sense of place and scale. While centred mainly in the exhibit, the scope of the information covered is global, including, for example, the histories of silkworms, mosquito-borne illnesses, and cochineal insects.

There is meticulous attention to detail in this book; even when abstracted or in the background, insects are drawn with the correct anatomy (e.g., flies versus bees), and the QR codes included in some of the exhibit drawings do actually lead to short audio content



related to the 'exhibit'; for example, one QR code leads to Dr. Jessica Lee Ware talking about dragonflies (<https://www.peterkuper.com/dragonflies-jessica-lee-ware>).

The fantastical elements (e.g., talking insects, trees, and statues) used in support of the overarching story add character to the information presented—a kind of fiction in support of nonfiction. To his further credit, Kuper does not shy away from the darker elements of human history, including topics such as nuclear warfare, slavery, racism, sexism, and colonization as they relate to entomology.

Although I have children's books in my collection that use a graphic novel format to present natural science content, *Insectopolis* stands apart in a few ways, first among which is that it is targeted at adults. Simply put, this book is fascinating. It is at once hard-hitting and funny, melancholic and magnetic. The copy I have is a large, physical book, and although it is available as an E-book, I have trouble imagining it in a digital format—each page is a feast for the eyes, where hidden details and varying layouts and art styles create an immersive work. Absorbing natural and social history in graphical format may not be everyone's cup of tea, but I encourage you to give it a try—to my surprise, it was the perfect medium for the message. For those interested, the author has also created an accompanying adult colouring book called *Coloring Insectopolis* (W.W. Norton, 2025).

Literature Cited

New York Public Library. 2022. Peter Kuper's INTERSECTS: where arthropods and Homo Sapiens meet. Accessed 19 August 2025. <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/intersects>.

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