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## A Gouldian valediction, almost

### The Lying Stones of Marrakech: Penultimate Reflections in Natural History

by Stephen Jay Gould  
Jonathan Cape: 2000. 372 pp. £17.99, \$25.95

Henry Gee

Does the world really need another collection of Stephen Jay Gould's essays? *The Lying Stones of Marrakech* is the ninth, and its subtitle — *Penultimate Reflections in Natural History* — imply (nay, demand) a tenth. This will mark Gould's retirement (in 2001) from his 28-year stint as the unfailing monthly columnist for *Natural History* (the magazine of the American Museum of Natural History), even though *Lying Stones* contains miscellany such as sleeve notes to a CD of Mozart's music. (This gives Gould yet another opportunity to discuss contingency: what would have happened had Mozart lived to a ripe old age — what wonderful music would we have never heard? But what would the world have been like had he died even sooner?) But even Gould's barrel-scrapings are better than most other people's best efforts, so one mustn't grumble.

But when the *Ultimate Reflections* have coruscated into the empyrean welkin (I think I'm getting the hang of the polyglot agglutinative richness of the English language, don't

you?), will that be the end of Gould's contributions to literature? Contingency aside (any of us could be run over by a bus tomorrow), I can see a minor industry of Gouldian *recyclismus* looming. *Ultimate Reflections* will be followed by *Life's Wonderful Rich Grandeur*, a collection of the best of Gould's essays from his previously published cornucopia; further collections of essays they haven't squeezed into this collection; another collection of miscellany, and a collection of Gould's own introductions to these collections. By then, this small library will have appeared in paperback, giving the opportunity for another collection of this self-generating *oeuvre*. As T. S. Eliot never wrote: in the room the publishers come and go/ towards *absurdum, reductio*.

Amid this unending valediction, Gould will still produce the occasional straight book. There hasn't been an autobiography (*The Horologist in the Museum: Memoirs of a Mollusc-Hunting Man*), and a learned treatise on the obsessional statistics of baseball (*Say It Ain't So, Joe*) can't be far off. When Gould uses some extended anecdote about baseball as a prolegomenon (hah! I'm at it again!) to a homily on evolution, I put up with it. But in *Lying Stones* we have essays seemingly without number (well, only one, but it seems like more) on baseball, unalloyed. Now, I am a pronounced sportsphobe, and would have agreed with those patricians who damned such things as *panem et circenses* (kitchenware and circumcision, according to my own translation), fit only for those poor souls who must make do with sentimentality rather

than sentiment. And baseball is the basest of balls. Even duller than cricket, if that were possible, it has none of the spurious elegance of that dreary pastime: the *longueurs* of baseball consist of overweight men wearing silly uniforms, looking disagreeable, hugging their crotches and spitting a lot. It is a shame that Gould, a writer with such a deep intellectual life, feels the need to slum it in public. But *chacun à son gout*, as we Brits say. Again, mustn't grumble.

If I have one literary fault, it is digression, so I'll return to the rhetorical question I posed at the start and, in a spirit of paradox (because, hey, I'm that kinda guy) try to answer it. *Lying Stones* doesn't really say anything Gould hasn't said before, many times, and often more succinctly: the importance of contingency; the mysteries of the fossil record; man's inhumanity to man; celebrations of little-known (or misunderstood) figures from the pageant of science past, and so on. But each essay adds some tiny variation to the canon, and even if you know the ending, you can enjoy the minutely interesting detail along the way, not to mention Gould's commanding scholarship.

So, no, the world doesn't really need another collection of Gould's essays. But the world could also manage tolerably well without redbreasts whistling from garden crofts, or gathering swallows twittering in the skies: and (to be contingent) if Gould had become a tailor, or even a baseball player, and had never written a line, the world would be impoverished indeed. ■

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Covering all the bases: Joe DiMaggio, unwittingly a big hitter for evolutionary metaphor.

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## The many faces of science

### Defining Features: Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000

by Ludmilla Jordanova  
Reaktion Books & National Portrait Gallery:  
2000. 192 pp. £14.95, \$24.95 (pbk)

Lisa Jardine

The cover of Ludmilla Jordanova's new book carries an engraving of the nineteenth-century astronomer William Herschel. The great man is portrayed in three-quarters profile, hair swept back from a high forehead (which for verisimilitude sports a small pimple), his large-collared greatcoat buttoned across his broad chest, sharp shadows angling his face. He is the archetypal figure of the eighteenth-century Romantic hero. Behind him a crescent moon rises above leafless trees in a dramatic night sky spangled with stars.

Appearances, however, as Jordanova explains, can be deceptive. This is not a portrait of a romantic dreamer, but of an