

An early typewriter in the collections at National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh.

know which brand of glue conservators prefer?

He touches on how some museums are coming to terms with, and attempting to make up for, the harm they have done in the past. Having come of age in the “payday of empire”, many served the colonial mindset, uncritically making a case for Western technological and moral superiority. They appropriated objects from colonized regions and, through their displays, “were complicit in the construction of physical and cultural hierarchies that underpinned racist thought” until well into the twentieth century at least.

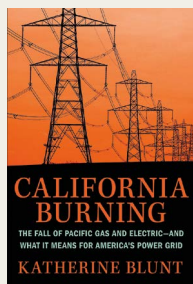
Some are now seeking to shed light on this past. The Science and Industry Museum in Manchester, UK, for example, explored the links between slavery and the city’s historical cotton trade in its 2018 project *Textiles Respun*. The Science Museum of Minnesota in St Paul’s ongoing exhibition *RACE: Are We So Different?* invites conversations about the biological and social realities – and unrealities – of human variation. But Alberti’s discussion of attempts to improve diversity and inclusion in displays, collections and staffing is frustratingly brief.

He does note that museums “are trusted more than most other media” – their expertise is generally respected and considered credible. This allows them to campaign for specific causes, from anticolonialism to climate-change mitigation and dispelling misinformation. In Alberti’s view, strident activism risks threatening or alienating those in rival camps. He argues instead for advocacy: boosting scientific literacy and inviting debate.

Museums, he writes, can help people to make better decisions by “sparking curiosity, and offering tools of discernment”. Never neutral, they should not pretend to be. Instead, they should use their power to build bridges.

**Anna Novitzky** is a subeditor at *Nature* in London.

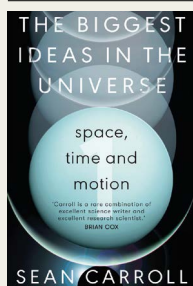
## Books in brief



### California Burning

Katherine Blunt *Portfolio/Penguin* (2022)

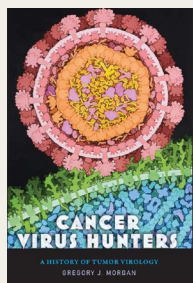
California is having more and more wildfires because of climate change, poor tree management creating fire hazards, and antiquated power lines. In 2018, the failure of a 100-year-old rusted electrical hook sparked the Camp Fire, the world’s most expensive natural disaster that year. The blaze forced Pacific Gas and Electric into temporary bankruptcy. Journalist Katherine Blunt’s disturbing history of California’s environmental calamity ends in 2021, with the company’s new chief executive announcing costly underground power lines.



### The Biggest Ideas in the Universe

Sean Carroll *Oneworld* (2022)

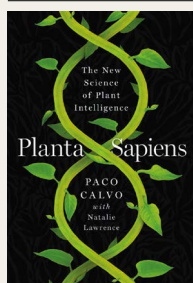
Theoretical physicist and philosopher Sean Carroll specializes in quantum mechanics, gravity and cosmology. He aims to create a world in which “most people have informed views and passionate opinions” about modern physics. His skilful book, the first of a planned trilogy, covers space, time and motion. Unlike most introductory physics books for the interested amateur, it includes mathematical equations, cogently explained but not solved, as well as the expected metaphorical language.



### Cancer Virus Hunters

Gregory J. Morgan *Johns Hopkins Univ. Press* (2022)

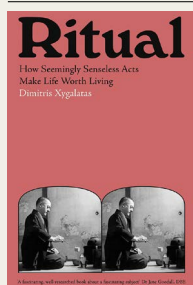
One-fifth of cancers in people worldwide are caused by tumour viruses such as hepatitis B. Work stemming from these pathogens won seven Nobel prizes between 1966 and 2020, notes historian Gregory Morgan in his authoritative but accessible chronicle. Yet tumour virology is rarely mentioned in discussions of how molecular biology opened our understanding of cancer. As Morgan observes in his path-breaking history, this inhibits a complete understanding of this field as a technoscientific force.



### Planta Sapiens

Paco Calvo with Natalie Lawrence *Bridge Street* (2022)

Humans are so focused on “brain-centric consciousness”, says philosopher of science Paco Calvo, “that we find it difficult to imagine other kinds of internal experience”. Might plants be intelligent (‘sapiens’)? His challenging book is aimed at both believers in this possibility and non-believers. His experiments, such as putting the touch-sensitive plant *Mimosa pudica* to ‘sleep’ with anaesthetic, provoke thought, as does his note that Charles Darwin requested burial under an ancient village yew, rather than in Westminster Abbey.



### Ritual

Dimitris Xygalatas *Profile* (2022)

Just before anthropologist Dimitris Xygalatas’s university went into COVID-19 lockdown, his students had one main concern: would there be a graduation ceremony? We care deeply about rituals, he notes in his wide-ranging and well-written survey, because they help us to “cope with many of life’s challenges”, even if we do not understand how – the “ritual paradox”. Scientific investigation has been tricky, because rituals do not flourish in a laboratory, but wearable sensors and brain-imaging technology help. **Andrew Robinson**