How to turn scientific daydreams into reality

By Glenn C. Altschuler
Globe Correspondent

On July 3, 2006, the Explorer’s Club, joined by the American Museum of Natural History and several other organizations, conducted a “bioblitz” in New York City’s Central Park. On that day, 350 experts roamed the park, seeking to identify as many species as possible. They found 836 species, including 303 plants and 101 animals. The latter category included 78 moths, 9 dragonflies, 7 mammals, 3 turtles, 2 frogs, and 2 tiny caterpillar-like tardigrades, the first ever discovered in Central Park. Five days later, samples of soil and water were collected to be analyzed for bacteria and other micro-organisms. Marine biologist Sylvia Earle dived into a lake in the park, found a snail floating by, but couldn’t be sure “if it was a resident or if it was introduced by the nearby restaurant as an escargot.”

The bioblitz is Edward O. Wilson’s ideal “happening.” A professor emeritus of entomology at Harvard and two-time Pulitzer winner, shares insights on his love of science — and ants.

**BOOK REVIEW**

**LETTERS TO A YOUNG SCIENTIST**

By Edward O. Wilson
Liveright, 240 pp., illustrated, $21.95

Edward O. Wilson, professor emeritus of entomology at Harvard and twotime Pulitzer winner, shares insights on his love of science — and ants.

writes, his footsteps “turned huge meat ant nests into boiling masses of angry red-and-brown, viciously biting defenders. Was I afraid? Never. I loved every minute of it.”

In five sections that deal with science as a profession, the creative process, a life in science, theory, and ethics, Wilson offers provocative advice to young scientists. “Take a subject . . . that interests you and looks promising,” he suggests, “and where established experts are not yet consciously competing with one another.” Wilson, after all, chose taxonomy, which was (and still is) dismissed as a field akin to stamp collecting. If young scientists are weak in mathematics, Wilson indicates, they should avoid physics, chemistry, and microbiology, but can find happiness — and success — in a “vast array of scientific specialties.” Even if they need it, researchers should not fall in love with technology. And, most telling, scientists should work 60-hour weeks, “take weekends off for rest and diversion, but no vacations.”

Wilson insists that “there is only one way to understand the universe and all within it, and that is science.” He is dismissive of religion, thinks social scientists are conceding more and more to the “ultimately biological nature of our species,” acknowledges that moral reasoning, aesthetics, and the creative arts “are forged independently of the scientific worldview” only to claim that the humanities “limit thought to that which is human, and in this one important sense are trapped within a box.”

Most humanists, I suspect, won’t see this limitation as a trap. Some may question as well Wilson’s apparently absolute confidence in science and its methods. Nonetheless, along with intellectually curious people everywhere, they will enjoy and profit from “Letters to a Young Scientist.”

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**MOVIE STARS**

**New releases**

★★★★ The Angels’ Share Socially conscious British auteur Ken Loach divides his time between familiar hardscrabble territory and a breezier narrative landscape in a hybrid charming enough to satisfy even the trenchant-commentary crowd. Reforming hooligan Paul Brannigan leads a group of Glasgow have-nots who make an unlikely bid for “have” status by plotting a Scotch whiskey distillery heist. (101 min., unrated) (Tom Russo)

★★ Arthur Newman Weary of his nowhere job, failed marriage, boring girlfriend, and estranged teenage son, a middle-aged sad sack fakes his death, changes his identity, and hits the road, hooking up with a hot chick with secrets of her own. (101 min., R) (Peter Keough)

★★ The Big Wedding Long-divorced Robert De Niro and Diane Keaton decide to pretend they’re still married to facilitate their son’s wedding ceremony, an idea that doesn’t sit well with De Niro’s current mate, Susan Sarandon. With Katherine Heigl, Topher Grace, Amanda Seyfried, Ben Barnes, and Robin Williams. (90 min., R) (Tom Russo)

★★★★ Hava Nagila (The Movie) This short but lively documentary examines the “kitschy and profound” song’s cultural and historical origins. Director Roberta Grossman and writer Sophie Sartain approach their subject in a style that also balances the kitschy and the profound as they trace the historical roots of the music to the shtetls of the Ukraine, then to Palestine, and finally to the United States. (73 min., unrated) (Loren King)

★★½ Mud Matthew McConaughey stars in this haunting but over-ambitious and overlong drama from talented writer-director Jeff Nichols (“Take Shelter”). He plays a mysterious fugitive who changes the lives of two boys (Tye Sheridan and Jacob Lofland, both excellent) in rural Arkansas. Sam Shepard and Reese Witherspoon costar. (130 min., PG-13) (Tyl Burr)

★★½ My Brother the Devil Sally El Hossaini’s gangsta-in-the-hood melodrama about two Arab brothers at odds with society and each other subverts some stereotypes about Islam and has moments of authentic realism but fails victim to uninspired, conventional filmmaking. (111 min., unrated) (Peter Keough)

★★ Pain & Gain Three dimwitted Miami bodybuilders (Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson, Anthony Mackie) believe kidnap-negotiation, extortion, and murder will help them live the American dream. A tone-deaf, intensely unpleasant true-crime comedy that plays like “Fargo” for idiots. (120 min., R) (Tyl Burr)

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