

# antenna

## review

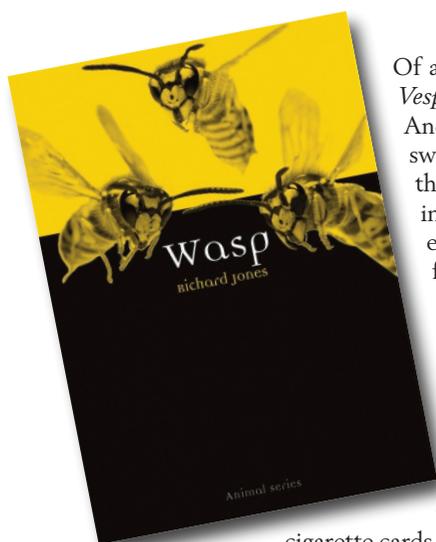
### *Wasp*

Richard Jones

Reaktion Books

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Of all the insects, it is the wasps, by which I mean the social wasps of the genera *Vespula* and *Vespa*, that get by far the worst press and have the most work to do to improve public relations. And whilst we entomologists might implore the public (as indeed I have many times) “not to swat them”, to “appreciate their beauty” and to “marvel at their social lives”, I am confident that many of us have lashed out in irritation as summer progresses and eating outside becomes increasingly annoying. This latest book by Richard Jones, simply entitled *Wasp*, is part of the excellent Reaktion series and, throughout its pages, Jones does his absolute best to stick up for these most vilified of insects.

A handy paperback-sized volume, the first thing that struck me about the book was just how lavishly it is illustrated. Few pages are without some kind of figure or photo and in many cases the illustrations are in colour. As a consequence, it is an enjoyable book just to leaf through, especially the many illustrations of wasps in popular culture, and more niche culture. The wasp-woman chimera, unimaginatively called Wasp Woman, from the 1959 film of the same name is particularly striking for those of us who know recently elected Fellow Dr Seirian Sumner (UCL), who tweets under the name WaspWoman. Elsewhere there are Egyptian wasp hieroglyphs (or is it a bee? – the jury is still out apparently),

cigarette cards, illustrations from *Gulliver's Travels* and even a Japanese sword hand guard featuring a wasp.

These cultural references sit alongside more realistic depictions of wasps and wasp biology, ranging from photos to figures from classic wasp-related texts.

When it comes to content and readability, the book is no less impressive. With a book like this you want a combination of comforting, familiar content, things you knew at one point but had forgotten, and plenty of material that is new and interesting. Each chapter is loaded with all of the above and the narrative flows along at a great pace without ever getting too technical or too simplified. A nice touch is the weaving of different types of content (for example the cultural and historical angles as well as the biology and ecology of wasps) throughout the book rather than isolating each to a specific chapter. A particularly interesting chapter is titled “Tabloid Mayhem”. For those of us who deal regularly with the hysteria that wasps provoke, this chapter has a familiar ring. However, with analyses of the children’s programme *Fifi and the Flowertots* woven in with the coming of *Dolichovespula media* and the Asian hornet, there is always a surprise or two in store.

Like all the Reaktion books, this book is written to be read, not to be dipped into occasionally as a reference work. It certainly fulfils that purpose but its shepherding together of so much “wasplore” may well mean it finds a place on the “wasp shelf” of many of us – it is certainly on mine.

Jones ends the book with the words “Now is the time to take a stand with the wasps. The truth is out there, but to deliver it the wasps need all the help they can get”. With this book, Jones not only stands by the wasps, he gives them a big dose of the help they need to become, if not loved, then at least less loathed.

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