



NON-FICTION Fiona Capp

PICK OF THE WEEK

THE WONDERBOX: CURIOUS HISTORIES OF HOW TO LIVE

Roman Krznaric
 Profile, \$29.95



WHILE historians try to learn from the mistakes of the past, practical philosopher Roman Krznaric suggests we treat history as a kind of self-help manual. Krznaric takes the approach of a dilettante indulging his particular interests and preoccupations. Hence his focus on the history of the house husband and how the evolution of “separate spheres” for men and women is a relatively new phenomenon. This leads him

to reflect on how men might reskill themselves in the home by learning from male domestic duties in pre-industrial times. Krznaric’s discussion of the ancient Greeks’ understanding of the many varieties of love — from eros and ludus to philia and agape — is an example of shades of emotion that we’ve lost and could rediscover. As philosophy, it’s an intriguing, if idiosyncratic, approach. Krznaric encourages us to fossick around in his curiosity cabinet for whatever life lessons we find useful or appealing.

VEGETABLES: A BIOGRAPHY

Evelyne Bloch-Dano
 University of Chicago Press, \$18.95



WE MIGHT say someone has “skin like a peach” or is as “beautiful as a rose” but who wants to be compared to a cabbage or a potato? Although the vegetable is a humble plant, historically associated with poverty (the rich eat meat), it’s the food we associate most with health. This is why parents urge children to eat their greens. At a symbolic level, vegetables are reminders of our connection with Mother

Earth and the seasons. This slim collection of playful, erudite, passionate essays begins with Evelyne Bloch-Dano’s memories of her grandparents’ abandoned vegetable garden, where she felt “out of reach, alone, happy in the parsley”. She goes on to reflect on the role artichokes, cabbages, carrots, parsnips, peas, pumpkins and chillies play in our lives and in the history of Western civilisation. Spice is added with extracts from novels, poems and recipes, including “an ancient recipe for beans” and “herb pie for May”.

EL NARCO: THE BLOODY RISE OF MEXICAN DRUG CARTELS

Ioan Grillo
 Bloomsbury, \$29.95



IN 2000, Mexicans were looking forward to a golden age of democracy after 70 years of one-party rule. A decade later, British journalist Ioan Grillo says, the country is fighting a drug-inspired insurgency driven by El Narco — drug traffickers led by “shadowy billionaires from ramshackle mountain villages”. This is not a book for the faint-hearted. Gruesome stories abound of heads being

hacked off living victims, people being shot one by one and men dragged away from weeping mothers and wives. As Colombian police finally achieved the upper hand with their country’s drug cartels in the 1990s, Mexican traffickers took over as the dominant “capitalist Mafia” in the Americas. While Grillo uses the horror stories to grab the reader’s attention, there’s nothing sensational about his exploration of how these cartels have become a law unto themselves and what might be done to stop the bloodshed.



MUSEUMS MATTER: IN PRAISE OF THE ENCYCLOPEDIA MUSEUM

James Cuno

University of Chicago Press, \$31.95



SINCE the Enlightenment, we have come to think of visiting museums as being “good for us”. But this notion has come under attack from post-colonial critics, who claim these institutions are instruments of the state that

enforce the economic and political status quo or function as a kind of freak show that appropriates the cultural “other”. In

this series of lectures, writer and museum director James Cuno repels these attacks. As liberal, cosmopolitan institutions, he says, museums encourage us not only to learn about but identify with people from different cultures, fostering a sense of common heritage. To visit a museum is to go on a journey, Cuno suggests, to experience wonder and loss, the familiar and unfamiliar. Crucially, it is up to us to digest what we see, rather than take snapshots simply to prove we were there.