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Reflections on Eusociality from Sci-Fi Author Bernard Werber: How Empire of the Ants Redefined the Science Thriller

Biology * Animals * Literature

Introduction: The Architect of "Philosophy-Fiction"

In contemporary French literature, former Le Nouvel Observateur science journalist Bernard Werber occupies a distinctive niche. Transitioning to fiction in the early 1990s, Werber coined the term "philosophy-fiction" to describe a hybrid genre blending the scientific thriller, the philosophical treatise, and the adventure novel.[1] Having sold over 35 million copies worldwide, Werber grounds his speculative narratives not in hard-tech fetishism, but in the extrapolation of biological systems -- most notably the eusocial architecture of ants shaped by kin selection -- and the systematic cartography of metaphysical realms.[1] This report examines the entomological foundations and narrative mechanics of his seminal work Empire of the Ants (Les Fourmis), traces his broader bibliography, and evaluates both his polarized international reception and the cross-media adaptation of his myrmecological universe.

The Myrmecological Masterpiece: Empire of the Ants

Dual Narrative Architecture

Published in 1991 after twelve years of drafting, Empire of the Ants alternates between two radically different scales of existence.[3] The human thread follows Jonathan Wells, who inherits a Paris basement apartment from his late uncle, the myrmecologist Edmond Wells, along with a posthumous warning never to enter the cellar. As family members and rescue teams vanish into the depths, the human plot becomes a claustrophobic mystery.[3] The parallel thread immerses the reader in the civilization of russet wood ants (Formica rufa) through Male 327, a forager whose scouting party is eradicated by an odorless, instantaneous weapon. When 327 tries to warn the federation of Bel-o-kan, he confronts suppression by a secretive faction within the colony.[3] The two narratives converge when the cellar is revealed to house an inter-species communication device, advancing the thesis that Earth's true planetary empire belongs to social insects whose ecology and population dynamics rival human civilization.[3]

Myrmecological Fact vs. Narrative License

Rejecting the giant-monster tropes of mid-century cinema, Werber practices "species relativism," inviting readers to inhabit an arthropod sensory world while blending rigorous entomology with narrative invention:[3]

* Chemical Syntax (Pheromones): In myrmecology, ants communicate via volatile pheromones secreted from exocrine structures such as Dufour's and poison glands, triggering trail recruitment, alarm, or nestmate recognition.[3][4] Werber elevates

these multicomponent blends into a full syntactic language ("antennal speech"), allowing Male 327 to debate philosophy and political conspiracy.[6][7]

* Trophallaxis and the Superorganism: Trophallaxis -- the mouth-to-mouth regurgitation of liquid nutrients from the crop ("social stomach") -- distributes food, hormones, small RNA molecules, and regulatory proteins across the colony.[4][5] Werber frames this physiological mechanism as a spiritual communion uniting transient individual workers into a single enduring "superorganism."[3][6]

* Relativity of Scale: A pivotal conflict involves a rival colony's "secret weapon" that incinerates Russet Ants from above -- eventually revealed to be a human magnifying glass focusing solar radiation.[3] What appears to the ants as a supernatural "finger of fire" is a mundane human artifact, illustrating how comprehension depends on an observer's scale.[3]

| Feature | | Werber's Empire of the Ants | | Scientific Consensus (Myrmecology) |

| Communication | | Pheromones function as a syntactic language enabling abstract debate.[6] | | Chemical blends trigger behavioral responses (alarm, trail, recruitment) without linguistic syntax.[4] |

| Social Structure | | Anthropomorphized political factions, secret police, and rebel movements.[7] | | Colonies operate via decentralized self-organization and emergent behavior.[3] |

| Trophallaxis | | A spiritual communion transferring memory and collective "soul" alongside food.[6] | | Physiological transfer of nutrients, juvenile hormones, and regulatory proteins.[8] |

| Sensory World | | Navigation dominated by olfaction and tactile antennae ("olfactory wands").[3] | | Highly accurate; ants rely primarily on chemoreception and mechanoreception.[9] |

The Werberian Cycles and the Encyclopedia Device

Beyond Les Fourmis, Werber constructed an interconnected bibliography unified by Edmond Wells's fictional Encyclopedia of Relative and Absolute Knowledge, whose interstitial entries weave scientific facts, historical paradoxes, and lateral-thinking puzzles directly into the plot:[2][1]

* The Thanatonauts and Gods Cycles: In The Thanatonauts (1994) and Empire of the Angels (2000), protagonists Michael Pinson and Raoul Razorbak use medically induced comas to map the afterlife as a structured territory of reincarnation and karmic resource management.[3] The subsequent Gods trilogy escalates Pinson to a deity-in-training managing evolving civilizations on a replica Earth -- a meta-commentary on authorship.[3][2]

* Origins and the Third Humanity: In The Father of Our Fathers (1998), investigative duo Isidore Katzenberg and Lucr ce Nemrod explore speculative paleoanthropological hypotheses to challenge human vanity.[3] Later, the Third Humanity trilogy (2012-2014) confronts climate change and directed evolution through the bioengineering of Homo metamorphosis -- a miniaturized human species ten times smaller than modern humans, returning to the survival advantages of small scale first championed in Empire of the Ants.[3]

Geopolitics of Reception and Interactive Adaptation

Werber's critical fortunes diverge sharply across borders. In France, despite massive commercial sales, literary critics frequently categorize his work as "paraliterature," critiquing his journalistic prose and accessible pop-philosophy -- a label Werber counters by claiming the popular storytelling mantle of Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas.[1][2] Conversely, in South Korea, Werber has sold over 12 million copies in a nation of 50 million.[1] Korean publisher Open Books positioned his novels as prestigious intellectual works, capitalizing on the pedagogical appeal of the Encyclopedia excerpts and a cultural affinity for future-oriented scientific and spiritual synthesis.[1] Similarly, in post-Soviet Russia, his systemic world-building and Verne-style scientific romanticism earned a devoted following during the ideological vacuum of the 1990s.[1]

This systemic vision culminated in the 2024 video game adaptation Empire of the Ants, developed by Tower Five and Microids on Unreal Engine 5.[10] Using photogrammetry to render the forest floor at microscopic fidelity, the game places the player in control of Ant #103,683 at eye level rather than a top-down "god view." Players direct legions through chemical pheromone signals and 3D vertical traversal, translating Werber's literary species relativism into interactive strategy.[11]

Conclusion: Dismantling Anthropocentrism

Bernard Werber's enduring contribution to science fiction lies in dismantling anthropocentric narrative boundaries. By translating the chemical communication, trophallactic networks, and emergent collective intelligence of eusocial insects into thriller architecture, Empire of the Ants popularized myrmecology for millions of readers and demonstrated that complex civilizations thrive just beneath our feet.

Updates... (Nov 23, 2026): Corrected the misattributed author name and page range in Reference 3 from G. Poteat (pp. 208-211) to M. Shelomi (pp. 208-213) per CrossRef metadata for doi:10.1093/ae/59.4.208, and updated Reference 9 to its canonical URL.

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