

# Maybugs and Mortality

A different perspective on living and ageing



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# Chapter 1: Tandem

*Maybugs and Mortality* is about an accidental encounter and subsequent relationship; a lopsided alignment, since at the time my maybug/cockchafer was staggering on its last six legs. But even though clearly on its way out, our meeting was – and is – important to me, as it made me see myself (in the person of Everyman/Everywoman) from a different angle. For the last two years, my maybug has lived on as my companion, and this book is a personal, intimate and in places autobiographical yet hopefully light-hearted exploration of the latter half of our life cycles, with forays into our respective youths.

Together we have visited such comparative landscapes as what it feels like to walk round corseted by an external cuirass rather than supported by an internal ramrod: the alternatives, say, between ice cream in a tub and an ice-lolly with a stick up its middle. Are there psychological consequences as well as physical differences? Rather surprisingly, we shall attend a 14th century Ecclesiastic Court in Avignon and listen to Kafka's disquieting sci-fi story of a man who wakes up one morning to discover he has turned into a beetle. We shall touch on life in a grey world, watch emotions bob up and down and lap the far shores of Consciousness and Self-Awareness. Drawing on my experience of autism we shall examine what we mean when we talk about boundaries, the difference between 'me' and 'not me', and the need to reach out beyond ourselves in order to find confirmation and understanding – before returning to earth via a tea-break at the uncomfortably named 'Death Café'.

Such diversity has tour-guide problems: it is highly selective. Topics inflate, take the bit between their teeth, which, however fascinating, need to be reined in. And there is a question of style. Reared among academics (mathematicians, engineers and doctors), empiricism papered the walls of my bedroom. Everything requires proof; the fact that such certainty is inevitably outgrown has failed to shake my belief in the veracity of the scientific method.

But somewhere along the line I acquired a familiar – a comedian who sits on my shoulder and whispers irreverent interpretations into my ear. I call him 'Till' (after Till Eulenspiegel, a practical joker of dubious probity and historicity<sup>1</sup>).

The dichotomy between earnest enquiry and fun is difficult to resolve. Psychological research does its best to stifle light-heartedness when we are told that humor stems from 'a benign violation of the way the world ought to be'<sup>2</sup>, a definition that falls flat on its face. More to the point, while science is indifferent to the nature of our surroundings, humor wants to snuggle up and tweak the facts; it's looking for a response – and in this sense it is manipulative. Here is a fundamental difference in temperament: attempting to coax the two into bed with each other lapses into a wrestling match between

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1 Subject of an opera by Richard Strauss, Till could not resist a final despairing one-liner even as he waited on the scaffold with the rope round his neck.

2 Hutchison P (2010) Scientists discover the secret of humor. *The Telegraph* 12 August.

the sublime and the ridiculous. But before going further, the science in *Maybugs* is as accurate as I can ascertain. Journals have been perused, papers trawled and – although there has been an exponential explosion in research since I graduated more than 60 years ago – at least partially understood. My reason for embracing such a dubious binary strategy is that, although I fell in with the wandering insect by accident, it has led me to new perspectives, to speculate in a different way on what it means to be alive.

*Maybugs and Mortality* is so bizarre that I feel the need to excuse myself. Told slightly tongue in cheek, it contains little empirical evidence and is more in the nature of a string of ideas. While it flirts with frivolity and is a story that embraces surface textures, it also explores the inner comings and goings of an unlikely relationship. It is like a string of beads. Each bead may have its own colour, shape, weight and luminosity – its own character. The temptation to dally is occasionally irresistible. What is important is the thread that joins them together, which resolves into an enquiry: how does so much of what we understand as ‘being alive’ get packed into such an unlikely container?

To begin with, why ‘a monograph for two’? I hope it will become evident that, while trying to side-step the pot-hole of anthropomorphism, I am using my maybug encounter to explore certain aspects of our shared life-cycles. In this respect we are riding in tandem; journeying together, even if only one of us is doing the pedalling most of the time.

Journeys of any length have a backup team: mine is a lifetime spent working with people on the autistic spectrum. It is from them that I have learned to look at what we mean by ‘relationship’. If I have been able to help them engage with a world that is sensorily confusing, they have changed my life. Occasionally I shall borrow their words to throw light on some aspect of my psychological globe-trot.

As I wrote this book I found myself abandoning the formality of ‘Cockchafer’, in favour of ‘the maybug’ – and as we became more intimately acquainted, just ‘Maybugs’, as in, ‘Hi there, Maybugs’, the nickname of a familiar friend. (When it comes to classification, there will be occasional reference to *Melolontha Melolontha*.) And while being aware of the immense diversity of insect forms – and since *Maybugs and Mortality* is in no sense an academic treatise – where it is available I shall borrow freely from other insects (some sufficiently distant as to be categorised as ‘remote kith’ rather than ‘kin’), provided they meet the criteria of possessing external support as opposed to a soft boundary with world outside them. My excuse for taking such outrageous liberties with taxonomy is to look at the physical and psychological schism existing between the corseted existence of the insect and the more flexible possibilities of life supported by an internal skeleton – and if possible to clear out some of my own dustier corners along the way.

The cockchafer/maybug, whose ungainly adult form resembles a sarcophagus on wheels, is squat, brown, hairy and tessellated, with a row of what appear to be triangular white tiles down each side. It emerges in May and has attracted many names. In alphabetical order we have: ‘Bracken Clock’,

‘Boomerbug’, ‘Bummler’, ‘Chovy’, ‘Cob-worm’, ‘Dorrs’, ‘Dumbledarey’, ‘Humbuz’, ‘June Bug’ (shifting a month, and mainly in America), ‘Kittywitch’, ‘Billywitch’, ‘May-bittle’, ‘Midsummer Dor’, ‘Mitchamador’, ‘Oak-wib’, ‘Rookworm’, ‘Snartlegog’, ‘Spang beetle’, ‘Tom beedel’ and ‘Chwilen y bwm’ (to the Welsh). Perhaps my favourite is ‘Doodlebug’, since the insect’s slow and noisy flight conflates with the bogeyman of my childhood – Hitler’s penultimate weapon, the V1, that chugged its way across the English Channel and was designed to bring Britain to her knees. Until recently I had a light-weight metal fragment of the air intake of a doodlebug on my desk which I had swapped with my cousin for a couple of sweets. Last year I gave it to my grandson who, at the time, was working on the mathematics of the nose cone of a rocket to Mars, and whether or not it would burn up.

It is difficult to pass by a maybug; they are large and not immediately attractive. They bang on windows and pursue their flight-paths irrespective of interruption. And while I can marvel at their jointed construction (a combination of rigidity and flexibility and the ingenuity of their wing hinges), it is not easy to engage emotionally with an armour-plated ‘other’ that cannot reciprocate. There is no affective orifice in that chitinous wall: I cannot find my way into an insectile heart.

While I do not think I actually like insects, maybugs come with a wealth of stories – if the flight path is erratic, the destination is fascinating. And if I have not entirely set aside distaste, I have learned respect and, at times, felt an odd affection for my fellow traveller.