

a most desirable and natural progression. As the translation has it, however, Chinese academics regard scholarship and officialdom as incompatible — the exact opposite of Mai's meaning.

Another lapse undermines a central tenet of the novel: the supposed accepted wisdom in cryptography that one person can only design, or crack, one good cipher at most. This is because cryptographers can be made vulnerable both by subconscious similarities in their own ciphers, and by the exposure of their specific code-breaking strengths when they crack other people's ciphers. Yet the English version translates this as it being impossible for one person to be both a cipher designer and a code-breaker. As a result, readers might not fully understand the tragedy of the story — that a man who successfully broke the enemy's sophisticated Code Purple goes mad at failing to break its successor.

With this and subsequent novels such as the 2003 *An Suan* (*In the Dark*, forthcoming from Penguin) selling in their millions and being adapted into high-profile television series, Mai has firmly established himself as the father of modern Chinese espionage thrillers. Critical acclaim for his work has included China's most prestigious book award, the Mao Dun Literature Prize.

So is Mai — the supreme storyteller of psychological warfare, intrigue and the

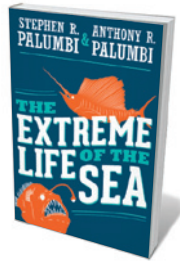
**“Decoded is dressed up with references to mathematics, yet its main theme is human psychology.”**

human sufferings of alienation — a brave writer who unveils national security programmes and pinpoints untold human sacrifices in a secretive state? Or is he a commercial master who plays on the public's desire to peer into a covered-up world in a country where media is officially controlled and pumps out content-free content every day? Is he exploiting the public's wish to believe that an outrageous, even over-dramatized story is the best vehicle through which to tell an untellable truth?

Even publishers had difficulty answering this question. As Mai relates in an appendix to a 2011 Chinese edition, he first submitted the manuscript of *Decoded* to two friendly publishing houses. Both editors quickly rejected his work. One thought the story too fake to attract interest; the other felt it was too real and sensitive, and could cause trouble for the publisher. Decoding Mai Jia's real intentions is perhaps the book's most perplexing challenge. ■

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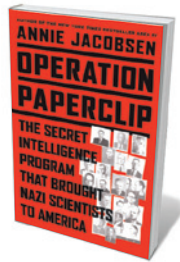
## Books in brief



### The Extreme Life of the Sea

Stephen R. Palumbi and Anthony R. Palumbi PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS (2014)

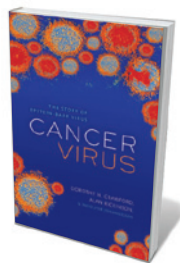
Marine biologist Stephen R. Palumbi and writer Anthony R. Palumbi survey an impressive catch of extreme oceanic species, from the oldest to the deepest-dwelling. They are inspired guides, weaving evolutionary and geological backstories into accounts of wonders such as the exquisite architecture of sharks' teeth. And they pull no punches in depicting potential futures with devastated oceans dominated by “bacteria, jellyfish and tar-like algae”. A brilliant use of the rich store of research into Earth's largest habitat.



### Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America

Annie Jacobsen LITTLE, BROWN (2014)

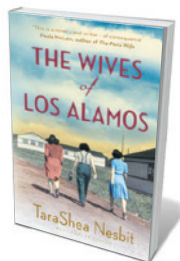
An ethical murk can hang over science in service to the state, as Annie Jacobsen reveals in this chilling history. Operation Paperclip united Nazi science and US cold-war interests, bringing 1,600 German technologists to the United States after the Second World War to work on intelligence and weapons research, despite protests from the likes of Einstein. Jacobsen focuses on 21 scientists, including rocket pioneer and Third Reich insider Wernher von Braun, and reveals disturbing evidence of Paperclip's legacy in US science and medicine.



### Cancer Virus: The story of Epstein-Barr Virus

Dorothy H. Crawford, Alan Rickinson and Ingólfur Johannessen OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (2014)

Fifty years ago, the discovery of a virus that triggers cancer in humans rocked the medical world. In this pithy, pacy study, the Epstein-Barr virus is biographized by three scientists who work on it — Dorothy H. Crawford, Alan Rickinson and Ingólfur Johannessen. Starting with the discovery of Burkitt's lymphoma in the 1950s and the isolation of the virus by Michael Anthony Epstein and Yvonne Barr in 1964, they follow its trail to effects in China and the labs where it has proven research gold for molecular biologists and geneticists.



### The Wives of Los Alamos: A Novel

TaraShea Nesbit BLOOMSBURY (2014)

Behind the men behind the Los Alamos nuclear-research programme were women whose story has been waiting to be told. TaraShea Nesbit has done it lyrically in this novel. Written in the collective voice of “the wives” — international, often highly educated women — this chronicle of the Manhattan Project's secret wartime base in New Mexico unfurls as they lived it, distorted by necessary lies. Their strange existence as housewives, “calculators” or lab technicians forms a vivid foreground to the building of the bombs that finished the Second World War, with Nesbit deftly capturing the claustrophobic surreality of it all.



### Ha!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why

Scott Weems BASIC BOOKS (2014)

Mirth, points out cognitive neuroscientist Scott Weems, is still something of a conundrum — but one well worth cracking. His journey through the jovial looks in turn at what it is, what it is for and why we should cultivate it. We encounter British psychologist Richard Wiseman's LaughLab and its findings (Americans laugh at insults; Europeans savour the absurd), the power of conflict and messy thinking, the speculation that atheists are funnier, the beneficial impact of laughter on pain tolerance, and more.