

Book Reviews

Science spotting

|By Joseph Wilson

WHAT'S SCIENCE EVER DONE FOR US?: WHAT THE SIMPSONS CAN TEACH US ABOUT PHYSICS, ROBOTS, LIFE AND THE UNIVERSE by Paul Halpern (Wiley), 262 pages, \$17.99 paper.

Rating: NN

The title of this book comes from words spoken by everybody's favourite caustic bartender, Moe Szyslak. They're part of a classic Simpsons episode that perfectly satirizes the contemporary battle between religion and science.

Author Paul Halpern is a physics professor at the University of the Sciences (which itself sounds like a Springfieldian parody of a real university) in Philadelphia. He has a razor-sharp eye for the science tidbits that have popped up in 19 years of The Simpsons.

His writing, however, is too clunky and boring to do justice to the delicate ways the show comments on the state of contemporary science. The book enumerates the examples of science in The Simpsons but fails to dig deeper. Chapters rarely run more than eight pages.

Halpern is at his strongest when he discusses his own fields of physics and mathematics, complete with references to Bart's comet, Kang and Kodos, Stephen Hawking cameos and the robots in Itchy And Scratchy land.

One of the more famous scientific episodes – Homer's hybridization of tomacco from tomatoes and tobacco – is used here as a springboard to talk about modern genetics. I use this clip in my own science classroom to show the relevance of this topic to everyday life.

Halpern's analysis of it is a little thin. The question is not whether tomatoes and tobacco can be grafted together to create tomacco (they can), but whether such a laboratory hybrid should be unleashed on consumers.

That's a leap Halpern fails to make. Good index, though.

