Scientists and students of many kinds of English users: readers, writers, editors, visitors to the US or the UK and others, editors, visitors to the US or the UK and students of language, are relevant to the sciences. The book is organized from the specific to the general. All the examples I give here are from British English; I assume that most readers are familiar with the American equivalents. Chapter 1 focuses on spelling (for example, *colour, analyse*, *per cent*), and *anaesthesia* and punctuation. Although the book follows the American convention of placing commas and periods inside closing quotation marks, we are reminded that British usage calls for commas and periods (full stops) to be placed outside the quotation marks unless the quoted material is a full sentence.

Chapter 2, “A Choice of Words”, has sections on nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, articles, and pronouns. Subsections consider such matters as “Variability of Number and Countability in Nouns” (for example, “a dish with carrot” and “a scales for weighing”), “Group Nouns” (“the FDA have issued” and “a committee are”), “Preference for Variable Forms” (orientate and syllabicate), and “Verbal Nouns from Infinitives”. Under “Verbs”, we find “Modal and Other Auxiliary Verbs” (mustn’t and needn’t), “Alternatives to the Subjunctive”, “Variable Ellipsis of Verbs”, “Differences in the Use of Tenses” (heavy use of the present perfect), “Gerundive Constructions” (“looks like being” and “needs doing”), “Transitivity Matters” (“approximates to”, “notified to”, and “provide with”), “Double Imperatives”, and “Variable Conjugations” (“got” and “never gotten”). The “Adverbs” section contains a discussion of the “Terminal -s” (towards and upwards), “All Right and Alright”, and “Supplementary Conjunctions” (momentarily means “for a moment” in BrE but “in a moment” in AmE).

The section on “Prepositions” (still in Chapter 2) abounds with helpful hints for avoiding pitfalls that are “clear marker[s] for the origins of speech and writing, and [that] need to be scrutinized carefully when text is being edited for presentation in the other dialect”. A table and several paragraphs are devoted to the topic and give illuminating examples. Under “Articles”, variant usage of *the* is the primary focus; in BrE, it is sometimes omitted (“in hospital” and “in future”) and sometimes added (“to the boil”). In the “Pronouns” section, Hargraves informs us that British writers typically prefer which for both restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, whereas Americans use *that* for restrictive clauses. British writers are also more comfortable in using *one* when referring to a person; an American writer is likely to use you rather than the politically correct but grammatically awkward *he or she*.

Chapters 3 through 11 are devoted to British and American language conventions in particular disciplines or broad subjects: “Money, Business, and Work”; “The Government and the Law”; “Education”; “Sickness and Health”; “Food, Clothing, and Shelter”; “Transportation”; “Sport(s) and Leisure”; “What You Don’t Say”, and “The Stuff of Life”. These chapters are extensive treatises on cultural differences between the two countries as reflected in language. The section on “Healthcare” in Chapter 6, for example, discusses the National Health Service in the UK and compares it with Medicare, Medicaid, and HMOs in the United States. Along the way, we learn that the British (and the rest of the world) write dates as day-month-
year, that metric units of measure are far more common across the pond, and that through in the UK is usually followed by to and means “having progressed to the next level”—rather the opposite of its meaning of “finished” in the United States.

Despite its often-tedious word lists, Mighty Fine Words is charmingly written and liberally salted with wry humor and pithy comments on British and American societies. Devoted linguists and confirmed anglophiles will treasure it; the rest of you can easily give it a miss.

Grace Darling

Appending “The Best” to any title is in any situation a brave move, and to do so in such a competitive field as science writing is bolder still.

Editors Natalie Angier and Tim Folger each have a keen eye, however, and although there may be some quibbling about whether they’ve actually picked “the best”, there are few disappointments in The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2002.

One highlight of this collection is H Bruce Franklin’s ode to the menhaden, “The Most Important Fish in the Sea”. Well written and thoughtful, the piece gives us a clear picture of the regrettable results that decades of overfishing this “oily and foul” (p 81) species has had—and will continue to have—on the ecosystems of the Chesapeake Bay and the rest of the Eastern Seaboard. Franklin has managed to present many facets of the problem, interviewing the first “spotter pilot” for the fishing industry, scientists studying the situation, and the president of a fishing-industry trade association. Franklin took his time with the piece, and the reward is ours—a tightly knit yet fluid piece giving a 360-degree view of a tricky situation.

Another high point of the book is the essay by Anne Matthews, “Wall Street Losses, Wall Street Gains”, on the growing and changing ecosystem of Manhattan. Starting with a dismaying report on the dozens of songbirds that die each night in the skyscraper caverns—circling the brightly lit buildings, “mesmerized, until exhaustion claims them” (p 188)—the article helps us to discover the wilderness coming back to the city, reclaiming small parts of what it once owned in toto—foxes and deer, bears and herons, all being spotted within the city boroughs, all five of which “retain places where you can walk for hours and see no human near” (p 192). Although more a story of personal discovery than a “hard” scientific piece, Matthews’s writing is enjoyable and fluid, and her detailed discovery of a whole new kind of urban renewal both educates and entertains.

The first article in the collection, Roy F Baumeister’s, “Violent Pride”, poses a fascinating challenge to the “common knowledge” that “aggression stems from low self-esteem” (p 1). Baumeister and his colleagues studied the aggression levels of narcissists who have had their egos challenged and of nonnarcissists and narcissists who have been praised. The result was clear: the most aggressive participants were narcissists who were told that they had done poorly, and their aggression was aimed squarely at those who had challenged their self-esteem. Baumeister has conducted and documented an intriguing investigation in which he has challenged the accepted truth that “feel-good exercises” (p 8) lower aggression by raising self-esteem and has shown that these exercises may harm those they are intended to help by blinding them to reality. His writing is clear and compelling, and his dismissal of unwarranted and indiscriminate praise encourages the cynic in us all.

Other standouts in this collection include Eric Schlosser’s entertaining and vaguely disturbing article on modern flavors, “Why McDonald’s Fries Taste So Good”; Burkhard Bilger’s “Braised Shank of Free-Range Possum?”, a very detailed exploration of low-country cooking, via the author’s “Strange Southern Foods tour” (p 17); and Judith Newman’s heartfelt biography of oncologist Steven A Rosenberg, “I Have Seen Cancers Disappear”.

A L Wenzel