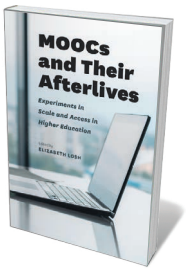
A geyser in Yellowstone National Park, much of which sits in the seismically active caldera of a volcano.

and the Cascadia coastline of Oregon and Washington state this century. Amid all this doom, a new elementary school on the coast near Westport, Washington, vulnerable to inbound tsunamis, is offered as a note of optimism. With foresight and much persuasion from its head teacher, it was engineered to become an elevated safe haven.

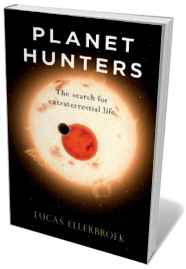
Miles briefly discusses earthquake prediction and the perils of getting it wrong (embarrassment in New Madrid, Missouri, where a quake was predicted but never materialized; prison in L'Aquila, Italy, where scientists failed to foresee a devastating seismic event) and the successes of early-warning systems, with which electronic alerts can be issued ahead of damaging seismic waves. Yes, it's a lot to digest, but most of the book obeys the laws of physics, and it is a engaging read. One just can't help wishing that Miles's road trips had taken her somewhere that wasn't a disaster waiting to happen.

In *The Great Quake*, journalist Henry Fountain provides us with a forthright and timely reminder of the startling historical consequences of North America's largest known earthquake, which more than half a century ago devastated southern Alaska. With its epicentre in Prince William Sound, the 1964 quake reached magnitude 9.2, the second largest in the global instrumental record. It released more energy than either the 2004 Sumatra–Andaman earthquake or the 2011 Tohoku earthquake off Japan; and it generated almost as many pages of ▶

Books in brief



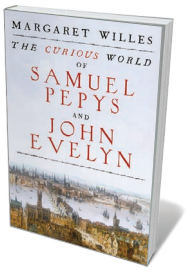
MOOCs and Their Afterlives
Edited by Elizabeth Losh UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS *(2017)*
Whither MOOCs — the massive open online courses that promised to vastly scale up access to higher education? This multi-author volume reveals a bumpy evolution, from wrangles over "educational monoculture" to the emergence of spin-offs such as POOCs (participatory open online courses). Media theorist Elizabeth Losh is typically insightful. She argues that if we forget the long US tradition of open learning through efforts such as the Chautauqua adult-education movement and the Tuskegee Institute Movable School, we are likely to "romanticize novelty" and cramp innovation.



Planet Hunters: The Search for Extraterrestrial Life
Lucas Ellerbroek (Translated by Andy Brown) REAKTION *(2017)*
In this delightful scientific chronicle of humanity's quest for "other worlds", astronomer Lucas Ellerbroek mixes memoir, history and meetings with remarkable planet hunters. The field's roots are speculative: mathematician Christiaan Huygens's 1698 best-seller *Cosmotheoros*, for instance, posited intelligent extraterrestrial life. Over the past century, with chemists and biologists joining in, emerging stars such as William Borucki and Sara Seager have contributed to an inspiring haul of more than 3,000 exoplanets so far.

Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present
Steven Lubar HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS *(2017)*
Far from being cases of 'stuff', museums are gestalts — complete entities that capture and contextualize the past. Here, former curator Steven Lubar examines the institutions through the lens of Brown University's Jenks Museum in Providence, Rhode Island: set up in 1871 by naturalist John Whipple Potter Jenks, its collections were summarily dumped in 1945. Lubar (who is involved in a project to reimagine the Jenks; https://jenksmuseum.org) elucidates what we lose through such erosion of material culture, from repositories of shared histories to 'object libraries' for generations of researchers.

Traces of Vermeer
Jane Jelley OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS *(2017)*
The exquisitely luminous paintings of Johannes Vermeer have long stirred debate over whether the seventeenth-century Dutch master used optical aids. Artist Jane Jelley probed the issue pragmatically. Before assessing any use of camera obscura, she investigates the tools, materials and studio Vermeer was known to have used, and his virtuosic layering of paint. She concludes that he probably embraced close-up and distance observation, perspective drawings and lenses. But artists, she notes, have always made use of technology — and that does not, in Vermeer's case, diminish genius.



The Curious World of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn
Margaret Willes YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS *(2017)*
Worldly civil servant Samuel Pepys and pious arboriculturalist John Evelyn were unlikely friends. Yet the diarists, as the "two great recorders of Restoration England", were both intensely curious about science, reminds Margaret Willes in this portrait of the era. Evelyn authored the pioneering 1664 forestry manual *Sylva* (see G. Hemery *Nature* **507,** 166–167; 2014); Pepys was a scientific-instrument fan. And as stalwarts of the Royal Society — Evelyn as co-founder, Pepys as president — they both helped to ensure its survival. **Barbara Kiser**