

Reviews

Supreme Discomfort: The Divided Soul of Clarence Thomas

KEVIN MERIDA AND MICHAEL
FLETCHER. Doubleday, \$26.95 (320p)
ISBN 978-0-385-51080-6

The conservatism of the nation's second African-American Supreme Court justice has made him a pariah in the black community, an irony that centers this probing biography, expanded from the authors' *Washington Post Magazine* profile. Thomas's rise from disadvantaged circumstances to Yale Law School, a meteoric government career and appointment to Thurgood Marshall's Court seat, Merida and Fletcher note, seems an affirmative action success story. Yet Thomas has opposed affirmative action, prisoners' rights, abortion and other planks of the liberal agenda, leading to ubiquitous complaints—the authors cite black leaders, prison inmates, even Thomas's relatives—that he's forgotten his roots. Merida and Fletcher present a lucid, well-researched account of Thomas's controversial life and jurisprudence, including evidence supporting Anita Hill's sexual harassment allegations, and a nuanced discussion of the politics of black authenticity. They portray Thomas as a conflicted man: a committed conservative with an ethos of self-reliance, who took advantage of affirmative action only to have his achievements tarnished by his own insecurities and others' suspicions of incompetence or hypocrisy. The authors' attempts to link his convictions to his psyche—they make much of his alleged resentment of light-skinned black professional elites—don't always click, but Thomas still emerges as a fascinating and emblematic figure. (Mar. 20)

Divided America: The Ferocious Power Struggle in American Politics

EARL BLACK AND MERLE BLACK. Simon & Schuster, \$26 (304p) ISBN 978-0-7432-6206-4

Politics by the numbers is the modus operandi of the Black brothers, twins who teach political science

(Earl at Rice University, Merle at Emory University). Having focused on politics in the Southern states in three previous academic collaborations, the Blacks now divide the United States into five regions (South, Northeast, Pacific Coast, Midwest, Mountains/Plains), and explain how and why national electoral politics have become a close contest between two parties, Democrats and Republicans, that cannot claim permanent majority status. Most of the election data they examine comes from presidential elections; their analysis of races for the House of Representatives and the Senate come toward the end and are out of kilter with the results of the November 2006 House and Senate elections. Still, the Blacks' generalizations deserve consideration. They believe the Democrats are quite likely to retain advantages in the Northeast and Pacific Coast regions, while the Republicans are quite likely to win the South and Mountains/Plains regions in the 2008 election. That leaves the Midwest as the swing region. (The Blacks define the Midwest as 10 states, including Kentucky and West Virginia.) Though the book will probably fascinate politics junkies, the emphasis on statistics rather than lively anecdotes means rough going for qualitative rather than quantitative minds. 34 charts and tables. (Mar.)

The Grid: A Journey Through the Heart of Our Electrified World

PHILLIP F. SCHEWE. Joseph Henry, \$27.95 (320p) ISBN 978-0-309-10296-4

With an appreciation of the technical ingenuity, human drama and cultural impact of the electrical grid, physicist and playwright Schewe illuminates how electricity has catalyzed both the best and worst of modernity since Thomas Edison devised the first electrical network in 1882. Even as the grid delivered light and mechanization, foremost minds like Westinghouse, Tesla and Insull continued to refine it, creating a society totally dependent on its invisible wonders. In the 1965 North-

east blackout, for example, New York shut down for lack of a product that barely existed half a century before. The grid's complexity demands predictability, Schewe shows, but even a minor short circuit can trigger a systemwide avalanche. Peppering his narrative with quotations from cultural critics Lewis Mumford and Henry David Thoreau, he argues that, economically, "we can't afford to throw away two-thirds" of energy as waste, and explains how nuclear and renewable resources can reduce pollution. Schewe also explores how Africa and Asia's dearth of electricity affects the participation of impoverished people in society. Though the final chapter on how astronauts took energy with them to the moon seems unnecessary, overall Schewe crafts an entertaining narrative with enlightening scientific and historical detail. (Mar. 15)

Planet Earth: As You've Never Seen It Before

ALASTAIR FOTHERGILL. Univ. of California, \$39.95 (309p) ISBN 978-0-520-25054-3

In this gorgeous coffee-table book, an offshoot of the Discovery Channel/BBC series of the same name, zoologist and BBC producer Fothergill takes readers on a kaleidoscopic tour of the flora, fauna and natural history of the Earth's poles, forests, plains, deserts, mountains and oceans. The series of jaw-dropping photographs starts with a view of Earth from the moon (and pointing out the obvious but shocking fact that no one has been able to see it live since the 1972 *Apollo 17* mission). Other images reveal the astonishing variety of geology and life around the globe, including an emperor penguin eyeing an enormous jade-green iceberg; a grove of ancient monkey puzzle trees on the slopes of the Andes; a wild (and endangered) two-humped Bactrian camel strolling with her calf across the Gobi Desert; a long-furred, red-eyed gelada (a kind of primate) perched on a cliff in the Ethiopian highlands; a cave explorer parachuting into Mexico's 1,100-foot-deep Cave of Swallows; a blimplike nerpa (the