Viruses are all around us, in the water we drink, in the oceans we swim in, and in many unlikely places. Carl Zimmer starts his book of essays, A Planet of Viruses, by taking us deep into the Cave of Crystals in a remote province of Mexico. In a place in which there are enormous crystals but little apparent life, he shows that samples of the water taken in 2009 revealed the presence of millions of viruses. The story is typical of this charming little book, which is full of interesting anecdotes and contains many facts uncovered in just the last few years. This book is an easy read for the lay person, broken into small chapters, each featuring its own virus. Yet it was also fun and informative for me, for, while I knew much of this before, Zimmer was able to surprise me with a few fascinating nuggets I had not previously known. In the introduction, we emerge from the Cave of Crystals to travel back in time to the classic discovery of tobacco mosaic virus by Beijerinck at end of the 19th century. Zimmer seamlessly introduces the idea of filtering of the virus to distinguish it from a bacterial cell, a concept you would find in any college course in virology. Following this introduction to what a […]

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The Viral Future

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