



How Many Friends Does One Person Need?, by Robin Dunbar (Faber, £9.99)

According to Dunbar there is “a cognitive limit on the size of human groups”. The so-called “Dunbar’s number” shows that, however many friends we have on Facebook, 150 is about the maximum number of people we can feel an emotional affinity with: “It has been 150 for as long as we have been a species.” This excellent collection of short essays stems from the author’s popular science writing from 1994 to 2008 and reveals many fascinating examples of how modern life is rooted in our distant past. Laughter, for example, is older than language. It emerged as “a form of chorusing, a kind of communal singing without the words” that helped groups to bond. Language itself may have evolved from “motherese”, a mother’s singing to her baby: “Next time you overhear a mother talking to her baby, listen closely. You’ll be listening to distant echoes of the past.” From why women can see more colours than men to how your height determines your payscale, these are elegantly crafted essays that range far and wide across nearly the entire savannah of human experience. **PDS**