

Peculiar Paleontologists<sup>1</sup>

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"Dinosaurologists" are a peculiar breed of paleontologists. Some are noted for their pedantic style, others for their inflated egos, still others for sheer pomposity. Many dinosaur paleontologists are poor systematists, and others are just way out in left field, or farther still, beyond the third star to the right, somewhere in deep space. Few dinosaur paleontologists consistently produce sound paleontological research. Most seem to be media hounds who claim they have found the oldest, or biggest, dinosaur, bird, etc. Many make for great tabloid material and so it is appropriate that they find their way into this latest of dinosaurian tomes. The author, Don Lessem, is a journalist, writer of children's books, and a past NOVA dino host, so it is fitting that this book is written by the Geraldo Rivera of the dinosaur set.

This book is a superficial look at some of the well-known dinosaur paleontologists of today. It is clearly intended for the layperson, or dinosaur groupie, who is into hero worship. It offers little beyond the newspaper headlines and hearsay and gossip picked up at one of our annual meetings of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology.

The book reads well and fast (I was able to read the entire volume in one sitting while flying from San Diego to Pittsburgh). After an introduction commenting on the current flurry of dinosaur research and a short glossary of terms for the non-scientist, the volume proceeds in stratigraphic sequence (Triassic to Cretaceous). The first chapter introduces a few paleontologists (most notably Phil Currie, Jack Horner and Peter Dodson), the (putative) smartest dinosaur (Troodon- no umlaut please!), and the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology in Drumheller, Alberta, Canada. Chapter 2 is devoted to Paul Sereno, his work in the Triassic of Argentina, and his discovery of a nearly complete Herrerasaurus. From South America, Lessem takes us to the Triassic of North America (Chapter 3) and the controversial case of Sankar Chatterjee's Protoavis. In Chapter 4 the scene changes to Nova Scotia, where the search for dinosaurs and Paul Olsen's far-fetched theories of asteroid impact and mass extinction at the Triassic-Jurassic boundary are presented. Chapter 5 focuses on the middle Jurassic of Szechuan

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<sup>1</sup>KINGS OF CREATION.

**Don Lessem.** 1992. Simon and Schuster, New York. 367 pp. ISBN 0-671-73491-1 hardbound, \$25.00: softbound version titled: **DINOSAURS REDISCOVERED -New findings which are revolutionizing dinosaur science.** (due April 1993, 368 pp., \$12.00 tentative)

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(Sichuan) Province, China, where the reader meets Chinese paleontologist Dong Zhiming and the spectacular dinosaurs of Dashanpu. Chapter 6 profiles Robert Bakker and recaps his notable contributions to dinosaur endothermy. The "Land of Giants" (Chapter 7) should have been dubbed "When Good Taxonomy Goes Awry" or "Sauropod Soup" to underscore the embarrassing state of our understanding of sauropod systematics, brought about largely by workers who cannot adequately diagnose these beasts using "hard" characters rather than ambiguous comparisons of size and/or proportions. The side bar on "Selling Fossils" (pages 195-197) seems out of place, added as an afterthought. Chapter 8, on Alaskan and Australian dinosaurs, highlights the works of Bill Clemens and Tom Rich, respectively. The side bar on DNA from fossils (pages 222-223) seems to capitalize on the hype generated by the novel, soon-to-be movie, "Jurassic Park." Spare me. Chapter 9 recaps previous field expeditions to the Gobi Desert and draws attention to recent finds by the joint Canadian-Chinese (Ex Terra Foundation) project. Another side bar (pages 248-251) provides the reader a deeper understanding of how geologists piece together paleoenvironments from sediments. Jack Horner's spectacular finds of the late 1970's and 1980's of Maiasaura, Orodromeus, and Troodon (and their eggs and nestlings) form the focus of Chapter 10. It's a story well known to the public, owing to Horner and Gorman's book "Digging Dinosaurs." Finally, Chapter 11 discusses the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction problem very superficially.

The "Author's Note" is a plug for The Dinosaur Society, an obscure non-profit organization that supposedly promotes the study of dinosaurs and helps paleontologists to defray the cost of collecting dinosaurs. Lessem, the self-appointed president, appeals for money while consoling the reader that he/she has already helped paleontologists by buying this book.

The appendices Dinosaur Fossils and Footprints, Where to see and Dig Dinosaurs, and Recommended Reading, and Sources conclude this book.

A few glaring mistakes include: on page 139, a photo of a Chinese theropod, probably the megalosaur Yangchuanosaurus, labeled a "sauropod"; on page 181, George "Jurassic" for George Jiracek, and he's from SDSU not UCSD; on page 218, "Rip" Reppenning for Charles A. Reppenning (he goes by "Rep" not "Rip"); and on pages 218 and 221, "Hutchinson" for J. Howard Hutchison.

The print is faint on some pages of my copy. The drawings are generally good, but the photos vary in quality (many of those taken by the author are poor, virtually every one out of focus). The maps at the beginning of each chapter are highly stylized but instructive. The accompanying geological scale for each map provides the reader with proper place in time. The caricature of the reflective anthropomorphized ceratosaur holding a human skull (page 308) is too cutesy for my taste.

Throughout this book there are many statements and observations that I doubt are embraced by many paleontologists. For example, I am sure that most of my colleagues would strongly disagree with the author's statement that the rules of zoological

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nomenclature are "arcane" (page 172). These rules were established in part to instill stability in taxonomy. Furthermore, those who assign popular names to dinosaur specimens, prematurely vis-a-vis the news media, before the dinosaur is even out of the ground (and properly diagnosed, as in the case of "Ultrasaurus," "Supersaurus" and "Seismosaurus") only exacerbate the problem further. It is especially sad to see follow-up "scientific" papers that try but fail to validate the newness of their find.

"Kings of Creation" lacks the cohesiveness and depth of E. H. Colbert's "Men and Dinosaurs- The search in Field and Laboratory" first published in 1968 by E. P. Dutton. The story of dinosaur paleontology between 1960 and 1980 is largely missing. Contributions by noted dinosaur paleontologists like John Ostrom, Edwin H. Colbert, and Alan Charig are hardly noticed, if at all. In its attempts to be current, for example by citing recent happenings at the annual meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in 1991, this book will soon become dated.

If your head has been in the ground for the last fifteen years, or if you are a dinosaur junky who just can't get enough, then you might want to buy this book. On the other hand, if you have been keeping up with tabloid accounts in the papers, or by chance are a practicing paleontologist, you might want to pass this one by.