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Unearthing The Dragon



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Customer Reviews

Unearthing the Dragon is the first book to establish the dramatic change in our understanding of dinosaur origins, based on the new fossil discoveries in China reported by the leading US researcher in a personal account of his adventures there. Mark Norell establishes this revolution in our understanding of dinosaurs that has occurred in the last decade. Dinosaurs are no longer thought of as lizards so much as birds. The transformation can be seen by comparing the first Jurassic Park movie with its leathery dinosaurs to the recent reconstructions in the BBC series "Walking with Dinosaurs in America" where they appear as warm-blooded feathered animals, attending their young and brooding their nests. This transformation in popular culture is based on fossil discoveries in one profoundly important region in China: Liaoning Province. Mark Norell, the Chair and Curator, Division of Paleontology, American Museum of Natural History, is the leading US researcher on these fossils, and he has traveled to the region repeatedly over the last decade. Here he tells the story of these discoveries and his work with an extraordinarily talented group of Chinese scientists. Unearthing the Dragon is a very personal account of being in a foreign land with a radically different culture, history of science, and code of social behaviors. In the hinterland of China, farmers, not trained researchers, often collect fossils. Local officials' trust is garnered over banquet meals and vigorous drinking sessions. Photographer and artist Mick Ellison shares in the adventures as the pair navigates forward through the world of modern China--and leads readers back to a magical prehistoric land of feathered dinosaurs revealed in the Liaoning fossils. "Reads like Redmond O'Hanlon goes fossil-hunting in China. But that is where the resemblance stops,

for Mark Norell is a master paleontologist and the fossils are some of the most wonderful and important ever found." --Alan Walker, FRS, Professor of Biological Anthropology and Biology, Pennsylvania State University, author of *The Wisdom of Bones* "Captures the sights, the sounds--even the smells--of a hard-working, hard-playing surf-dude paleontologist on the fossil trail. Rex and drugs and rock'n'roll!" --Henry Gee, Senior Editor, Biological Sciences, *Nature* "Enlightening and entertaining. Norell's knowledge of fossils and his passion for Chinese culture merge in this eminently readable account of one of the most important paleontological breakthroughs of the last century." --Neil H. Shubin, Professor and Chair, Department of Organismal Biology and Anatomy, University of Chicago "A gritty, fast-paced pursuit in search of feathered dinosaurs. Norell's writing gives you the feeling that you are right there, next to him following the fossil trail." --Donald C. Johanson, Virginia M. Ullman Chair in Human Origins; Professor, Department of Anthropology; Director, Institute of Human Origins, Arizona State University; and author of *From Lucy to Language*

Mark Norell is the Chair and Curator, Division of Paleontology, American Museum of Natural History. In the fall of 2004 he published two major research papers in *Nature* on feathered dinosaurs, and has previously published over 100 papers in academic journals. His research has been frequently reported in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Scientific American*. He lives in New York City. Mick Ellison is currently Principal Artist in the Division of Paleontology, American Museum of Natural History. His photographs and drawings have appeared on the covers of *Nature*, *Science*, and on the front pages of *The New York Times*. His other clients include *National Geographic*, *Natural History Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Discover*, *Nova*, *BBC* and *CNN*. He lives in New York City.

This is a short but entertaining book about the Jehol dinosaur finds in Linangong China. Norell was one of the main researchers involved in the effort and has clearly developed a passion for his work and for China. The book moves between funny anecdotes about China, skeptics who refuse to believe birds evolved from dinosaurs (known as BAND - Birds Are Not Dinosaurs), to karaoke with other paleontologists (I'll never view Chiappe the same way). The book doesn't get too bogged down in anecdotes though, and provides compelling insights on the fossils found at the site. An added advantage of this book is that it is littered with beautiful photos of the fossils. This is very useful as Norell often refers to the feathers on a particular fossil, and seeing them right on the same page enhances the reading experience immeasurably. My one frustration with the book is that

sometimes it seemed to meander too quickly in between talking about China and dinosaurs. For Norell, the two are obviously intermingled. However, for the reader, the switch might seem abrupt. Nonetheless, what he does mention does tend to be interesting, and the book is short enough that readers won't ever feel too bogged down. Overall, a good addition to anyone interested in later Cretaceous dinosaurs.

Dr. Norell has created an incredible work of non-fiction in this book. His thesis is that birds are in fact the evolutionary descendants of 'Feathered Dinosaurs.' This concept was controversial although generally accepted for the past 50 years; yet there was no good paleontological evidence to support the theory. However, Dr. Norell and his colleagues both in America and in China and in several other places around the world have now shown that there is paleontological evidence for feathered dinosaurs. Dr. Norell, "Curator, Division of Paleontology, American Museum of Natural History" has found with his colleagues a paleontological site in NorthEast China known as the "Liaoning" region, specifically the "Jehol Biota." This particular area has incredible fossil records of the Jurassic Period (between about 110 million and 145 million years old). These fossil records clearly show, in beautifully reproduced photographs by Mick Ellison, that clearly both feathered and hairy dinosaurs existed in that period. And additionally, his research indicates that it is almost incontrovertible that feathers and hair were an evolutionary advantage which helped the organism contain body heat. This starts to lead into the topic of actual transition from cold to warm blooded animals. In addition to the science, the book is a wonderful and close up cultural study of China. While China is the next pre-eminent modern society to emerge in our days, their ways and patterns of thought in many ways differ widely from Western thought. In addition, even within China itself, there are differences in behavior and world perspective that are hot issues all over China. The book beautifully describes these cultural aspects in both words and pictures and starts to introduce a very interesting potential humanitarian benefit. As China develops, competition and friction will inevitably evolve between the political components of the United States and China. However, the collegiality of the scientific community, may be one of the most important connections that the United States can maintain with China for mutual benefit. In this manner, perhaps there will be some level of harmony and understanding transmitted on both sides of the ocean. This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in the development of dinosaurs, specifically as it relates to them being the ancestors of birds. The author's style is highly inviting, and it reads like a very personal story, rather than as a scientific tome. It is a truly excellent piece of work.

I ordered this book with great anticipation, after having just read "Dragon Hunter," about Roy Chapman Andrews, and "Dinosaurs of the Flaming Cliffs," by Michael Novacek. "Unearthing the Dragon" is a beautiful book, with gorgeous design and dozens of color photographs. And it does contain a fair amount of information. However, on the whole I found it to be more anecdotal than informative, and Norell's anecdotes kept falling flat. Time after time he would describe an event which he obviously found humorous, outrageous, or whatever, and all I could think was, "I guess you had to be there." I will be keeping my copy, mostly for the photographs and illustrations, but I doubt it will ever get another full read.

It is otherwise a 3. I agree with a lot of Linden's comments about this book, but it really could have used a strong editor to cut out some of the extraneous info (some of it reads like college guys bragging about how much they drank at last weekend's party) and use that space for more info on the discoveries in China. This would be a great gift for people who have an interest in other cultures and some interest in natural history but who don't like typical science books.

The photography and art are incomparable, as are the stories. "Unearthing the Dragon" is an instant classic and an easy and enjoyable read. The authors show their humanity, share their adventures and make science exciting and accessible for everyone. It's this year's gift!

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