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Planet Ocean: A Story Of Life, The Sea, And Dancing To The Fossil Record



Synopsis

This is the paperback edition of the great pop-paleontology book with the fabulous art that inspired a show that toured the nation's natural history museums. In its own way it has inspired many people to take a new look at the fossil record and imagine creatures and things as they might have been; a blend of word and image unlike any other. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An irreverent trip through four billion years of evolution, this freewheeling excursion combines swaths of paleontology, geology and natural history, travel notes and amateur fieldwork from Kansas to British Columbia, amplified by wacky cartoons and colorful, often fantastical mixed-media drawings. Matsen and Troll, who collaborated on *Shocking Fish Tales*, emphasize that we are descended from fish that came ashore some 375 million years ago, giving rise to land-dwelling vertebrates. Evolution emerges here as a series of mass extinctions, improbable survivals, false starts and unsolved enigmas. Although their jocularity often impedes the narrative, Matsen and Troll bring a sense of awe and excitement to an informative, magical tour that is a lot more fun to read than standard texts and responsibly covers current scientific controversies. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Offering a combination of evolution and paleontology with a large dose of extinction, the authors state that "650 million years ago, give or take a few million years, the sea was mother and father to

us all" and that we all have a vertebrate in common from the Pikaia, a walking fish. They thus poke some fun at both creationists and evolutionists. Their writing is clear and entertaining, and the illustrations are similar to their earlier *Shocking Fish Tales* (Ten Speed Pr., 1993), but *Planet Ocean* has more variety. Unfortunately, the layout of the illustrations sometimes interrupts the text. Interesting and appealing aesthetically, this book is nevertheless hard to place. The illustrations are art, while the text is closer to science. For larger collections with an interest in current evolutionary theory for the lay reader. Jean E. Crampon, Hancock Biology & Oceanography Lib., Univ. of Southern California, Los Angeles Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I just love Ray Troll's work. I have been wanting to buy this book since borrowing it from the library years ago! His illustrations are outstanding, bringing to life a world from the past that we will never know. Paleo-fish, dinosaurs and witty illustrations like "dancing to the fossil record". This is an intelligent, heavily illustrated story with lots of interesting facts about fossil hunting, but I could just look at the illustrations all day. While the reading level is way above that of a five year old, my son has loved the illustrations and explanations as well. I will be looking for more books by Ray Troll AND I want to pick up some of his art....creativity and science mixed.

When Brad Matsen was still a sport fisherman, he watched a marlin die on a Manzanillo dock. This episode forever changed him, and reflecting on this sad event he wrote: "Every living thing must kill to eat, and many animals even torture their prey. Human beings killing for sport, though, now leaves me unsettled." Here is a man who not only, like me, no longer fishes for sport (did I ever?) but has enough curiosity to raise the Titanic. Ditto for his partner Ray Troll, an accomplished artist living in the rainiest place in North America: Ketchikan, Alaska. In a nutshell, *Planet Ocean: A Story About Life, The Sea, and Dancing to The Fossil Record* is about the birth and evolution of life on this watery planet. It covers everything from the Big Bang--or shortly thereafter--to present day life in Kansas, Southeast Alaska, or the Canadian Rockies. Throughout the book Matsen and his artist friend Ray Troll drive around the great continent of North America, digging fossils, visiting museums, meeting interesting people, reading aloud to each other as they drive, thinking, analyzing, and writing and drawing about their experiences. Matsen, an accomplished waterman, at one time takes us on a watery journey deep into the Niobrara Sea, which covered parts of the area where the Great Plains now stand. Pure imagination, but what an imagination the man has. I read this book twice, and the second time I realized how much these two men love their planet, *Planet Ocean*, and the limitless depths of curiosity that each of them harbor. Matsen is not only consumed with a

passionate zeal for life and a wish to know the story behind all things, he is, above all, a very, very gifted writer. "Fossils tell the story of life's journey from its watery beginnings, but because the rocks that carry them are recycled through the tectonic engine, entire chapters are missing, consumed by fire and pressure." The other day, while rereading this book, I came across the part where Matsen acknowledges that we came out of the ocean, and therefore are descended from fish. When the religious wackos come calling, I hold this book up in the air as if it were a clove of garlic, and I say, "We are descended from fish, by golly. The ocean is our mother. Now please leave me alone." Five Stars. Rick says definitely check it out.

The late Carl Sagan thought that science should be "user-friendly," presented not in jargon but in regular English. He believed that the general public could -- and should -- have access to the latest scientific discoveries. Sagan would be proud of *Planet Ocean*. The central theme of the book is stated clearly on page 1: "Nature is a workshop, not a temple." Matsen spends the rest of the book supporting this concept, explaining that life is not a stately, well-executed design where species climb a ladder of progress; rather, evolution is an inescapable and completely random condition. Animals and plants breed, have offspring that are slightly different, and continue to become slightly more different with each successive generation until the distant grandkids look nothing like the original parent. In addition, through totally weird, sometimes avoidable and sometimes unavoidable circumstances, the species as a whole will either do very well, or get pushed out of the scene. The environment works like the stock market -- fortunes are made, and fortunes are lost. (The metaphor of "rolling the dice" comes up more than once.) Matsen's prose is engaging, entertaining, and extremely informative. In one of my favorite sections, he describes the success of the trilobites (who survived for 300 million years in Earth's oceans): "They would eat anything and breed anywhere, and they made themselves as unattractive to predators as possible. We all have relatives like them. From [trilobites] and their success and longevity, an evolutionary rule of thumb has emerged: 'The more specialized a species, the less able to cope with change it will be once the inevitable happens and old habitats change beyond the point of recognition' [...]. In other words, generalists usually outlast specialists, and evolutionary progress is not necessarily a matter of refinement. [...] Ninety percent of success is just showing up. Ask an arthropod, like a trilobite or a cockroach. [...] Generalism won't get you to Carnegie Hall with your cello, but a cockroach doesn't need a cello." (p. 14). This conversational tone is used throughout the book, and it really works. Matsen's prose reminds one of an after-class discussion with a very generous, patient biology teacher -- the kind you always wished you had, and didn't. Matsen takes otherwise very difficult subject matter and

explains it in understandable terms that don't insult the intelligence of the reader. He even suggests amusing mnemonics to remember the order of epochs in the Palaeozoic and Mesozoic eras ("Crying over sleeping dragons may puzzle people, terrify, (or) joyfully convert") as well as for the Cenozoic era ("Palaeontologists eat only murky plankton porridge hot"). Interwoven with the education that Matsen offers is the story of his and artist Ray Troll's voyage of discovery. Brad and Ray actually travelled to many of the sites discussed in the book, and the little personal touches -- Brad's vision of the Cretaceous sea as they drove across Kansas, Ray's discovery and naming of a totally new species of pterosaur, and the fishing trips enjoyed by both -- really draw in the reader. One becomes intimate with the friendly voice, the casual, personal stories, and history of life on Earth. Not to be missed, of course, is the wonderful art. Ray Troll is a meticulous artist, and his offbeat sense of humor is perfectly in place with the spirit of the book. For example, his illustration of a lungfish's hesitant voyage out of water is captioned, "Out of the ooze and born to cruise." Not to be missed are his "ads" for a wrist watch that measures geologic time; Burgess Brand Primordial Soup; and that great French wine, Chateau Mosasaur. Doodles, sketches, and highly detailed pastel paintings are strewn throughout, and they are worth the price of the book by themselves. (Interested readers can preview some of Ray's art at his homepage, [...]) This book is an excellent introduction to evolution, palaeontology, marine biology, and/or marine science. Alternately light and serious, one is sorry to finish the book. It -- like the 650 million year history it encapsulates -- is such a joy to experience. Highly recommended.

Brad Matsen and Ray Troll's "Planet Ocean" is a lively swim through the fossil record, beginning at the beginning 650 million years ago in the watery depths. Troll's whimsical illustrations accompany Matsen's humorously accessible explanations of what we've learned - and think we've learned - from the earliest fossils. Matsen traces evolution from the primordial soup to the first colonies of multicellular organisms to the ubiquitous trilobites - "the most diverse and successful animals on Planet Ocean until the Permian extinction claimed the last of them." He discusses the engineering that went into chambers (the nautilus) and hard shells and the arrival of backbones and speculates (with the experts) on the role of extinctions in evolution, including our own. Although he sometimes demolishes or supports theories without sufficient scientific explanation, Matsen's watery perspective is well-organized and refreshing and Troll's drawings and paintings are as likely to be detailed and informative as they are fanciful and quirky.

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