

## BOOK REVIEW

UNEARTHING THE DRAGON: THE GREAT FEATHERED DINOSAUR DISCOVERY by Mark Norell. PI Press, New York 2005. 250 pp. \$30 hardcover. ISBN: 0-13-186266-9

Mineralogist you may be, but if you have been willing to address the public you have likely found yourself in front of a grade school class, discussing any other topic, and discovered the astonishing capability of your young audience to bring the discussion around to dinosaurs. Some of us face these digressions with more grace than others. If you want to be better armed next time, get this book, read it (it goes fast), and take it with you for the pictures (by Norell's collaborator, Mick Ellison) if nothing else. The next statement may seem odd, but let me suggest that if you enjoy reading Hunter S. Thompson you'll probably enjoy this book. This is as much a travelogue in other dimensions as it is a book of popular science. There are very personal episodes involving both author and photographer, some fueled by baijui (sorghum liquor) or plain exhaustion, that warp into situations where the reader wouldn't be surprised if Norell described an attack by giant bats.

Norell, curator of paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History, focuses his book on the feathered theropods of early Cretaceous deposits in Liaoning, northeastern China. He does a good job of bringing the nonspecialist reader up to speed on the preservation of fossil feathers in the "paper shales" that host dinosaurs and birds from this region in northeastern China (minor quibble: his one map is a finger pointing to a globe).

The current dilemma of classifying feathered creatures, birds vs. dinosaurs, is well presented in this book. Classification problems bedevil paleontology far more than mineralogy, but anyone who has treated students to systematic mineralogy will recognize the same problem that Norell discusses, the need for practical categorization that doesn't kill an understanding of broader relationships. The text is entertaining but the pictures – almost all in color and virtually one on every page – are so stunning that they can distract. For example, most readers will know of the cruel past practice of binding women's feet, and some have seen pictures of such deformed feet or the miniscule shoes they were forced into, but consider Ellison's juxtaposition of the skeletal remains of a woman's deformed foot, followed seventy pages later by a very attractive modern, unbound foot poised above the skull of a troodontid. These visual double takes and cross-references match the writing style well. There are a few problems. Not all typos were caught but the remaining few are not a problem. Women's feet notwithstanding, I would have appreciated some sense of scale for the photographs of fossils. But these are minor distractions from a book that was meant to be provocative yet entertaining and succeeds admirably.

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