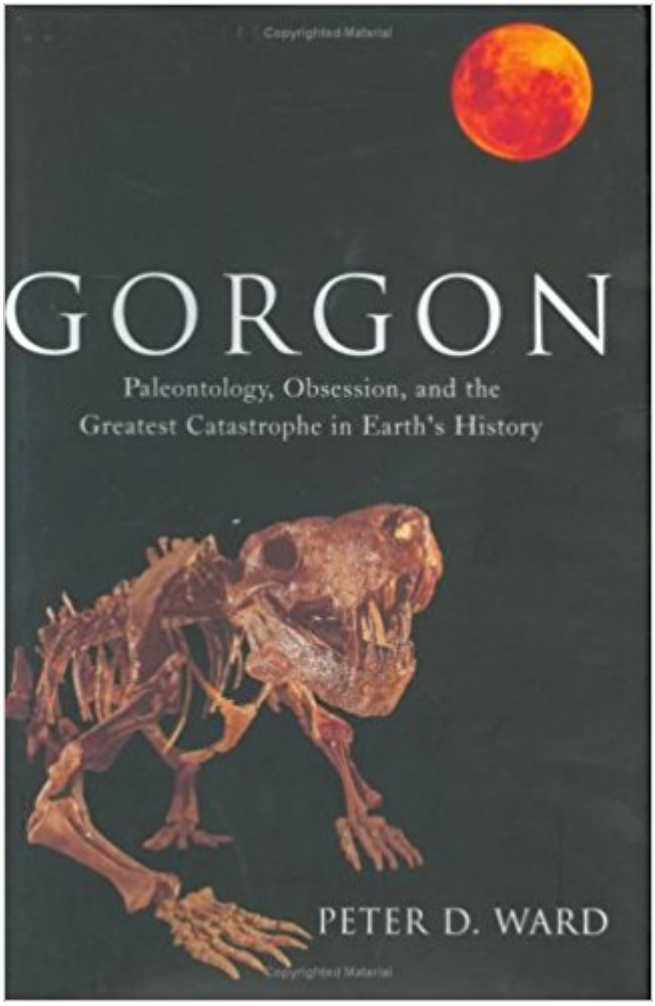
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Gorgon: Paleontology, Obsession, And The Greatest Catastrophe In Earth's History



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Synopsis

The gorgons ruled the world of animals long before there was any age of dinosaurs. They were the T. Rex of their day until an environmental cataclysm 250 million years ago annihilated them—along with 90 percent of all plant and animal species on the planet—in an event so terrible even the extinction of the dinosaurs pales in comparison. For more than a decade, Peter Ward and his colleagues have been searching in South Africa’s Karoo Desert for clues to this world: What were these animals like? How did they live and, more important, how did they die? In Gorgon, Ward examines the strange fate of this little known prehistoric animal and its contemporaries, the ancestors of the turtle, the crocodile, the lizard, and eventually dinosaurs. He offers provocative theories on these mass extinctions and confronts the startling implications they hold for us. Are we vulnerable to a similar catastrophe? Are we nearing the end of human domination in the earth’s cycle of destruction and rebirth? Gorgon is also a thrilling travelogue of Ward’s long, remarkable journey of discovery and a real-life adventure deep into Earth’s history.

Book Information

Hardcover: 288 pages

Publisher: Viking Adult; 1st edition (January 19, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0670030945

ISBN-13: 978-0670030941

Product Dimensions: 6.3 x 1 x 9.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 30 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,535,453 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #16 inÃ Â Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Paleontology > Paleozoology #1424 inÃ Â Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Rivers #1656 inÃ Â Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Climatology

Customer Reviews

In Gorgon, geologist Peter Ward turns his attention reluctantly away from the asteroid collision that killed all the dinosaurs and instead focuses on a much older extinction event. As it turns out, the Permian extinction of 250 million years ago dwarfs the dino’s 65-million-year-old Cretaceous-Tertiary armageddon. Ward’s book is not a dry accounting of the fossil discoveries leading to this conclusion, but rather an intimate, first-person account of some of his triumphs and

disappointments as a scientist. He draws a nice parallel between the Permian extinction and his own rather abrupt in research focus, revealing the agonizing steps he had to take to educate himself about a set of prehistoric creatures about which he knew almost nothing. These were the Gorgons, carnivorous reptiles whose ecological dominance preceded that of the more pop-culture-ready dinosaurs. They would have had huge heads with very large, saberlike teeth, large lizard eyes, no visible ears, and perhaps a mixture of reptilian scales and tufts of mammalian hair.... The Gorgons ruled a world of animals that were but one short evolutionary step away from being mammals. With characteristic enthusiasm, Ward transports readers with him to South Africa's Karoo desert, where he participated in field expeditions seeking fossils of these fearsome creatures. He suffers routine tick patrols, puff-adder avoidance lessons, stultifying thirst, and the everyday humiliations of being the new guy on a field team. Besides telling a fascinating paleological story, Gorgon lets readers feel a bone-hunter's passion and pain. --Therese Littleton

Millions of years before dinosaurs, gorgons roamed the earth. Like a creature out of Greek mythology, the gorgon was a lizard the size of a lion, with a huge head, razor-sharp teeth, reptilian eyes, a long, slashing tail and, perhaps, mammalian hair along with its reptilian scales. Then, almost in an instant, at the end of the Permian period 250 million years ago, the gorgons were gone, along with most other major land and maritime species, both plants and animals. The Permian extinction was greater than the catastrophe that killed off the dinosaurs. Paleontologist Ward (Rare Earth; The End of Evolution; etc.) recounts in this memoir his decade-long search in South Africa's Karoo Desert for clues to the cause of this extinction. By studying the fossil record in the Karoo, Ward concluded, contrary to accepted belief, that the extinction took place simultaneously on land and in the sea, rather than in two stages, and that the gorgon was in essence asphyxiated by a decrease of oxygen in the atmosphere, caused by a series of catastrophes that began with the dropping of sea levels. Some readers may wish Ward had cut to the chase and arrived at his conclusions a chapter or two sooner and focused less on elements of personal memoir, but young people aspiring to be the next Indiana Jones will learn from this realistic account of the quotidian details and battles of fieldwork. 16 pages of b&w photos not seen by PW.Copyright Ã Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

I bought this book hoping to learn more about the gorgonopsians and other mammal-like reptiles. No such luck. This book contains very little about the mammal-like reptiles. In fact, it is almost entirely free of scientific facts.It is about Peter Ward's experiences working in the Karoo desert of

South Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s. During the 1980s, he had worked on the KT boundary, and the conclusion that the KT mass extinction was caused by an asteroid hit caused him to wonder whether the Permian/Triassic mass extinction also result from some sort of catastrophe. That was the ostensible purpose of the fieldwork. But this book is really about paleontological fieldwork, and the thoughts and emotions that go through a paleontologists mind as he struggles to find fossils in a very harsh and forbidding environment. Ward is a good writer, and the book is very readable, it's just that I would not have bought it if I'd known it was just a journal or diary written during the author's Karoo field work.The last few chapters have a rushed discussion of the current opinions about the P/T mass extinction, but that problem has apparently never been solved. The author notes that most of the hypotheses have been falsified, and engages in some unconvincing speculation that lower oxygen levels caused the extinction. But the real point of the book is just to give the reader a feel for the day-to-day emotions of paleontological fieldwork, and on that level it succeeds.

I had to buy three copies of this book, nobody would believe me, so I gave it as presents. There were a lot of crazy critters out there in the last 4.567 billion years. Good luck if we can match the past chaos and live to tell about it.Schnozz

I've only just started reading this book, but even in the first few chapters, the author repeatedly uses an term that is completely wrong - "mammal-like reptile." The "gorgons" in this book, Dimetrodon, Edaphosaurus, gorgonopsids, dicynodonts, etc. are not reptiles! They are non-mammalian synapsids. Animals that share basal characteristics with mammals. Some led to true mammals, though others were not direct relatives. I work with these fossils every day, along side one of the leading experts on non-mammalian synapsids, and the outdated term "mammal-like reptile" is as cringe-worthy as hearing people call Dimetrodon a dinosaur. This book was published in 2004, yet this glaring mistake slipped through, long after the true lineage of these animals has been sorted out. I'm hoping the author will mention the misuse of the term, and use it as a way to explain how our understanding of extinct fauna as evolved - but it doesn't look that way. Aside from that, the book is written in an entertaining, descriptive style - a good read for the train ride into Chicago each day, but if you want to learn more about these lesser known but remarkable animals, look elsewhere.

I found this book tucked away in my eldest's library. Intrigued by the picture of a seeming cross

between a reptile and a saber-toothed tiger on the cover (also that catchy title), I decided to give it a go.My, my, life is full of surprises. First, I was unaware (or forgot) except in the most rudimentary way that there were actual large-ish animals before the dinosaurs. Ward describes his life-long effort to discover more about them through studying fossils and rock strata in a place called the Karoo Desert in South Africa. He is concerned with figuring out how the animals became extinct. Over time, he and his colleagues find that the extinction was rapid (in geological terms--probably less than100,000 years or so)and eventually concluding that the die-out was caused by global warming. The warming was caused, he posits, by an excess of methane gas, which somehow or other--I'm no chemist--leeches the oxygen out of the air.Okay, so far so good. But the real story here is how obsessed the scientists become: never giving up, living under the harshest conditions one can imagine, eternally picking at the rocks to find fossils. Family and health are given short shrift; these are dedicated people. The story of their lives is more interesting than the story of the Gorgon.Another fascinating aspect of the book is the coverage of the internal feuds among scientists, who become heavily invested in their own theories.The book is interesting and compelling, but the technical terms make it difficult for the layperson to keep track of what's going on in the science end of things. If you're interested in paleontology or global warming and can read Stephen Jay Gould's work, this would be a great choice for you. It will require strict attention if your level of interest in science is limited to the kind of book written by Simon Winchester.1.1 *s knocked off for difficulty level and a slight lack of closure

A quarter of a billion years ago, the mass extinctions observed in the sediments studies by the author of this book could have been the result of a series of cosmic pulses of energy from an isolated star event. The discovery of gas-laden buckminsterfullerenes at the Permian-Triassic boundary might have been produced on earth by a radioactive event strong enough to reset the carbon-dating half-life clock in living organisms with carbon atoms. Just because Luann Becker thought "their concentration at the Permian-Triassic boundary could mean only they were delivered by a comet or an asteroid" (p. 206), makes me think earth once had more in common with distant stars than is generally supposed.Aspects of Gorgon (2004) by Peter D. Ward seemed creepy to me. I try to accept catastrophes that have a reasonable explanation. Mount St. Helens is just the tip of the iceberg in this book.

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