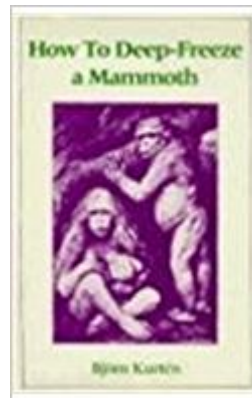




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How To Deep Freeze A Mammoth



Synopsis

How does bison meat taste after being frozen for 30,000 years? Were Ice Age cave painters trying to create "art" or just record history? How did ancient oil spills occur, before there were oil companies to create them? Those are just some of the questions renowned paleontologist Bjorn Kurten answers in this collection of lighthearted essays on fossils, ancient life, and related topics. Written for the general reader, these lively pieces range from a look at how scientific theories are created to some new views of old myths. Among the topics Kurten examines are the history of the Mediterranean Sea, the origin of birds, the theory of plate tectonics (continental drift), and the discovery of Piltdown Man, the "missing link" fossil forgery that fooled scientists for more than 40 years. And, true to its title, the book offers a humorous "recipe" for freezing a mammoth that is tundra-tested, if not totally foolproof. "You may have to expend a few hundred mammoths before everything works out," the reader is cautioned, "But there are plenty of them." (Although the author hasn't tasted the fruits of his mammoth recipe, he did feast on some ancient bison meat that dated from 30,000 years ago. Kurten described the taste as "agreeable.") Throughout these essays Kurten brings the prehistoric world alive with enthusiasm and humor, emphasizing that paleontology is the study of those that lived long ago instead of those who are long dead. As he says, "Isn't it more fun to see a dinosaur as something that used to live, rather than as the monstrous heap of bones which it happens to be at present?"

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Customer Reviews

This book is a selection of essays by the well-known European paleontologist and author whose

works include the novel *Dance of the Tiger* (LJ 1/1/81). The essays range from a retelling of the familiar story of the Piltdown hoax and a recounting of the development of the theory of plate tectonics to discussions of lesser known topics such as prehistoric oil seeps and the story of a bison, frozen 36,000 years ago in Alaska, that was discovered, still frozen, in 1979. These well-written essays should provide fascinating reading for those interested in prehistoric life. Recommended for public library audiences. Joseph Hannibal, Cleveland Museum of Natural History Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I find it a pleasure to read Bjorn Kurten, a world authority on Ice Age mammals, ranging widely through the earth sciences in the series of essays. It seems likely that we will have to clone DNA to get slices of edible deep-frozen mammoth tissue, but Kurten has dined on an extinct bison. Man is greater than a star, but a bacterium is also greater than a star-after all, bacteria evolved into man. The immense Mediterranean Flood is a million years too old for the Flood legend, leaving the ten-thousand-year-old melting of ice sheets as the source of aboriginal fireside tales of an endless invasion by the sea. In a cliff of basalt in Washington state is a mold of a twenty-million-year-old rhino, into which one can walk to become a modern-day Jonah (if you would settle for a rhino, and enter from the other end). It is Stephen Jay Gould vs. Teilhard in the Piltdown fraud. And you can forget the simple-minded ancient theory that Cro-Magnon cave art was magic for good hunting-it was for instruction and enjoyment."

How To Deep-Freeze a Mammoth by Bjorn Kurten is a collection of fourteen essays of about four to ten pages each. Most of the essays in the book were originally published in a Swedish version, which were then translated by Erik H. Friis, and then rewritten, updated, and expanded for this book by the author (the Swedish version is copyright 1981, while this work is copyright 1986). A number of black and white drawings by Hubert Pepper accompany the book. The book is 117 pages long and was a quick read; I read it in a day. A rather enjoyable, for the most part easy to read book, the first four essays dealt with the author's opinions about the world of science as a whole, contrasting it with the world of pseudoscience. Along the way Kurten attacked some of the more egregious examples of pseudoscience, such as several Nazi "scientists", the Soviet "geneticist" Trofim Lysenko, Creationism (which he dealt with only very briefly), and the Swedish writer Ivan Troeng, who wrote a book claiming that the moon originated in the Pacific Ocean 11,800 years ago as a result of collision between the Earth and a smaller celestial body. Kurten disliked the fact that pseudoscientists point to individuals who truly revolutionized their fields, like Darwin, Mendel, and

Galileo, and when the pseudoscientists offer their revolutionary ideas and are rejected by mainstream science, claim that they are being persecuted just as these individuals were (Kurten asserted that simply so much more is known that a true and utter revolution is just not possible anymore). Additionally, Kurten pointed out that the pseudoscientist sets out to prove something; he or she has a preconceived notion of what really exists, and unlike a real scientist his or her mind is closed to alternative possibilities. By way of contrast Kurten provided an example of a successful revolution, of a theory that was met with a lot of skepticism at first but was later accepted, that of plate tectonics. The remaining chapters dealt more specifically with issues and ideas in paleontology, with essays on the geological and paleontological history of the Mediterranean Sea (which I thought was a bit too brief), ancient natural oil spills, the science and politics of _Archaeopteryx_, the process whereby mammoths and other Pleistocene mammals were preserved more or less intact, and the first Europeans (I found that chapter a bit technical). One of my favorite chapters dealt with an unusual 20 million year old fossil, that of a Miocene rhinoceros of the genus _Diceratherium_, discovered in 1935 in Grant County, Washington state. The fossil was found by hikers, who thought at first that they had found a very odd cave with some bone fragments. Upon investigation it was discovered that the cave was a mold of an extinct rhinoceros, one apparently formed when flowing lava engulfed the (apparently bloated) carcass of the animal, a mold not unlike those found at Pompeii. Kurten discussed how the lava was able to preserve this form without igniting the body and what was learned from the fossil (the wrinkles and folds of the skin were even preserved). Another chapter I enjoyed was one on Piltdown Man, without a doubt the most famous forgery in the history of paleontology (if not science as a whole). Not particularly familiar with this history of this controversy, it was interesting to learn that even when the fossil was first produced it was not immediately accepted. "Dualists" believed that the braincase belong to a man and the lower jaw to that of an ape, while "monists," who believed it, pointed out that no anthropoid ape was known from Pleistocene Europe and that teeth were worn down in the same way as found in humans. Even after the famous second Piltdown "discovery" ("Piltdown II") and before the specimen was dated using fluorine content, there were problems accepting the Piltdown Man as real; originally it was thought in hominids that the brain evolved first, then the teeth and jaws, but instead _Australopithecus_ proved that this was just the opposite, that it had human-like teeth but a brain closer to that of an ape. Piltdown Man just didn't fit in. Kurten in the end debunked every find associated with Piltdown Man, even the idea that the fossils could have been found there in the first place; it was later shown that the chemical properties of the Piltdown gravel were not conducive to fossil formation and preservation. Another interesting chapter dealt with Neandertals.

Kurten speculated that the prominent eyebrow ridges had evolved to give the Neandertals an intimidating glare, a threatening glance to frighten other organisms, a feature not unlike the false eyes developed by some defenseless animals such as several butterfly species. The chapter on cave art was excellent and was accompanied by a number of illustrations. Kurten mentioned in passing that the larva of a gadfly is one of the animals found represented in a particular cave; a small figurine made from jet of a larvae was discovered. This may have represented one of the animals eaten by man at the time, as these larvae, which are found inside the skin of reindeer, are a delicacy among modern Inuit. Kurten discussed the role cave art played and discussed their possible religious and magical purposes (briefly mentioning that the term cave art may be a misnomer, that likely the late Pleistocene landscape was "studded with pictures" not unlike highway billboards, with art placed on rock walls, tree trunks, and boulders). Kurten favored the notion that it may have been used for instructional purpose for children, noting that the animals were often rendered with very precise detail, so precise that it took zoologists to notice it (for instance animals clearly in heat were depicted), and that it was produced for its own enjoyment (noting the many very erotic depictions of women, something generally passed over in popular surveys, a few of which were produced here and are not for kids).

This is a very good read, outdated but it hardly shows. The writing style is reminiscent of Carl Sagan: good science for a general audience. The essays in this book vary somewhat, with topics including scientific method and history, cave art, and more. The essay on Venus figurines and other, similar art is interesting and a little controversial. Most theories on the figurines focus on their possible religious use and symbolism, yet the author argues for something much more mundane and (to me) believable: people carved these figurines because they found the feminine forms appealing. Also he argues that the forms carved were realistic, not fantastical, something some anthropologists find hard to accept.

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