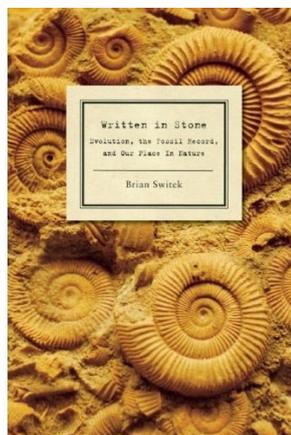




## BOOK REVIEWS

**Brian Switek. 2010.** *Written in Stone. Evolution, The Fossil Record, and Our Place in Nature.* New York, Bellevue Literary Press.

*Ilja Nieuwland*



The history of vertebrate paleontology has simultaneously been very well and very poorly served in the past. Certain periods have seen tens or hundreds of publications devoted to them, and there's little new to be found out about London in the 1830s and 1840s, or the 'Bone Wars' of the 1870s and 1880s. But there's still a whole world to be discovered. One of the - many - admirable qualities of Brian Switek's first book, *Written in Stone*, is that Switek generally steers clear from re-hashing the historical warhorses of vertebrate paleontology and so offers something that holds interest for both the lay reader and the paleontological veteran.

Switek has so far mainly made a name for himself as a blogger. His blog, *Laelaps*, (first on ScienceBlogs and now on Wired Science\*) is an example of what can make science writing attractive to a general readership without resorting to oversimplification or arrogance. Like

*Written in Stone*, it often explores the unsung heroes and untold tales of vertebrate paleontology, and cushions modern developments in a historicizing context.

*Written in Stone* is set up as a series of discussions of evolutionary questions, including the 'march' (really, more of a waddle) of vertebrates onto land, the first birds, our own history, and the difficult question of time and chance. Switek's general approach is to start with historical examples and then move up to the present-day situation. As a narrative instrument, his historical-biographical approach works well; it produces something that both enlightens the way in which we arrived at what we know about fossil vertebrates, but also points out some of the amazing things that are being investigated today (dinosaur pigmentation, for instance) and that are still in store for us.

In his introduction, Switek argues against Richard Dawkin's supposition that fossils aren't really necessary to view and understand evolution and if there's one really important point this book makes, it is this: we do need paleontology, both to see the mechanisms of evolution at work and to make sense of the dazzling array of diversity it produces.

Sure, there are some detractors, albeit minor ones. Every so often one gets the feeling that this is a collection of blog posts, and its arc of concentration is rather short. For instance, Switek's tendency of inserting a historical narrative with the present state of research can, while instructive, also be interruptive. Likewise, the application of jargon is not always consistent: most of the time professional language is explained adequately, but I'm not sure a general audience knows what a 'process', in the anatomical sense of the word, is. And finally, type editing might have been a tad more conscientious. The text isn't riddled with mistakes, but there are just enough to make them stand out.

But, as I said, these are minor nitpicks in a book that is a joy to read from cover to cover. And if you're for looking to a comprehensive review of the present and past state and importance of vertebrate paleontology, you need look no further.

*Second version published: 25 April 2011*

**Brian Switek. 2010.** Written in Stone. Evolution, The Fossil Record, and Our Place in Nature. New York, Bellevue Literary Press. ISBN 978-1-934137-29-1; Price: EUR 14 (paperback). <http://www.blpbooks.org/books/writteninstone.html>

\* Brian Switek's blog is on <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/laelaps>.

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