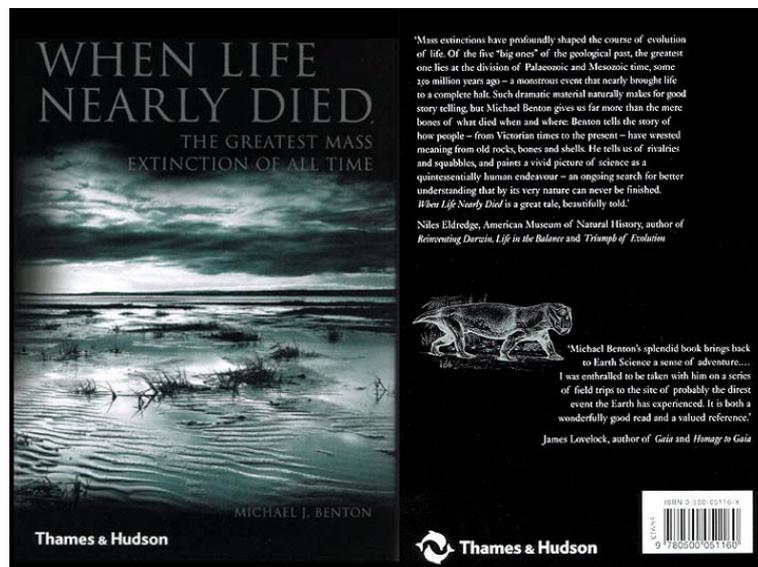


Benton, M. J. 2003. When life nearly died. The greatest mass extinction of all time. – London, Thames & Hudson

Book review by A.J. Veldmeijer



At last a book on ‘the other’ mass extinction! Benton’s book on the greatest mass extinction so far, the one at the end of the Permian period, is certainly a refreshing contribution in the fast flow of publications on mass extinction, which mainly deals with the far more widely known mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period, wiping out amongst others the dinosaurs and pterosaurs.

Roughly, the book can be divided in three sections. The first section deals with the beginning of modern geology and vertebrate palaeontology and the attitude towards mass extinction. Ample attention is given to the pioneering geologists and palaeontologists who are responsible for establishing various systems, such as Sedgwick and Murchison (Cambrium, Silurian and Devonian and Murchison himself the Permian). Of course, history of science, and especially these sciences involving evolution, can not go without relating the scientific (and often personal) disputes of evolutionists, Darwinists and the like, influencing the acceptance of the mass extinction theory and its causes (such as catastrophes) seriously. But also attention is given to the different scientific traditions and views between the English and continental scientists, which seriously influenced scientific objectivity and competition. Although this part relates the history of the scientific attitude towards mass extinction in general, necessary in order to understand all commotion surrounding mass extinction, the Permian mass extinction is never kept out of sight. Fortunately, Benton mentions at some point all theories explaining mass extinction, but does not discuss them in detail.

The second part is only small and might be regarded as intermediate. Here, impacts and catastrophes as cause or instigator of mass extinction and mass extinctions, in the grand pattern of the evolution of life are discussed. One chapter deals with the Permian extinction in particular, exploring three topics: a review of the different groups of animals in the sea, an estimation of the magnitude of the event and visualizing which plants and animals survived.

The third part focuses on research of the last century, after the general acceptance of topics as mass extinction and catastrophes, in which scientists search for the Permian-Triassic boundary and trying to link these worldwide. More and more evidence is obtained on the devastating events, their consequences and the recovery of life, leading to the exciting conclusion in the end of the book. Finally, Benton turns back to our time and explores the question whether we, at this very moment, are going through a mass extinction...

Michael Benton, one of the leading palaeontologists in the world, succeeded in writing an excellent book, thoroughly annotated, on ‘the other’ mass extinction. The book is eloquently written despite some repetition, especially in the beginning. The illustrations by John Sibbick, one of the greatest palaeoartists of our time, are few, in black and white and simple but of great quality and fit the book like a glove fits a hand. More elaborate and/or colour drawings would really do the book no good and decrease its status. The choice of cover needs a special remark: fantastic!

One major drawback of the book has nothing to do with the book itself, but rather with the way publishers think books should be designed. In certain sciences, it is quit common to use a system of notes which are put at the back of a book. Consequently, as obvious in this book, authors often see reason to shape the note in a full

sentence, which is often repetitive relative to the text proper. Furthermore, the back and forth swapping of the pages has become inevitable, which is very annoying and disturbing. Notes have the purpose of giving references and information which does not fit in the text proper and should be limited in number and should be short as well. To my opinion, a book gains readability if a system is employed in which the references are placed in the text and using notes, preferably notes at the bottom of the page, for information of lesser, but necessary, information that does not fit the text.

Nevertheless, the book with its imposing title, is a valuable acquisition for anyone who wishes to know more on mass extinction and the greatest mass extinction so far in particular.

Benton, M. J. 2003. *When life nearly died. The greatest mass extinction of all time.* – London, Thames & Hudson. 336 pp. ISBN 0-500-05116-X. Price € 32.85. Imported by Nilsson & Lamm (www.nilsson-lamm.nl).