Lens to the Natural World: Reflections on Dinosaurs, Galaxies, and God

by Kenneth H Olson
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reviewed by Joel W Martin

The last decade or so played witness to a small explosion of books aimed at the public on the topics of evolution and on the boundaries and limits of science and faith. This sudden increase was brought on in part by the 2009 celebration of the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and in part by the increasing volume and intensity of attacks against science coming from outspoken evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, resulting in such memorable incidents as the 2005 Dover, Pennsylvania, trial over “intelligent design.” The range of approaches in these books is quite remarkable, including large compendia of basic facts and texts in support of evolutionary theory and the fossil record written at various levels (such as those by Donald Prothero, Neil Shubin, Richard Dawkins, Jerry Coyne, and Carl Zimmer), exposés of the blatant dishonesty of the “intelligent design” movement (such as Monkey Girl by Edward Humes, The Devil in Dover by Lauri Lebo, and other books recounting the 2005 trial), and attempts by theologians (and others) to convince people of faith to be reasonable and stop denying the evidence in the world around them (such as those by John F Haught, Francisco Ayala, myself, and others).

Adding to the voices imploring people of faith to be more reasonable when confronting or speaking about the natural world is Kenneth H Olson's very enjoyable book Lens to the Natural World: Reflections on Dinosaurs, Galaxies, and God. Olson, an amateur but passionate and skilled fossil hunter, is a Research Associate in Paleontology at the Museum of the Rockies. Additionally, and giving him more credibility among readers who might view evolution skeptically, he is a retired Lutheran pastor who served several congregations over a period of 37 years. Olson never really says specifically who the book is written for, but the tone and approach suggest that it is written primarily for people of faith in order to explain to them why science (especially paleontology) is a good thing. In this short book, Olson has approached the subject of compatibility of science and faith by drawing on his personal experiences as a dinosaur hunter in the Badlands of the western United States and on his experience as a pastor. In my opinion, there can never be too many books supporting evolutionary biology from an informed theological perspective, or at least from a perspective that eschews aggression and arrogance in favor of kindness, compassion, and understanding. In no other way will we succeed in slowly turning the minds of faith communities toward accepting and dealing with modern science. More hard-nosed approaches (such as the excellent but often acerbic writings of Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, PZ Myers, Jerry Coyne, and others) are not only ineffective, but also tend to reinforce the stereotype of scientists as arrogant atheists and thereby inadvertently buttress the arguments...
of the creationists. For that reason alone, Olson's book is a nice addition, a collection of thoughtful and personal essays drawing on his own experiences and convictions as a fossil hunter and pastor. His genuine sense of wonder and love of nature, especially of paleontology, shines through, and his writing style, although sometimes convoluted, is readily accessible.

The book is divided into two major parts, “Our context in nature” (containing seven essays) and “Issues and implications” (containing only four). I found the first part to be the more interesting and entertaining of the two, as it contains the author's personal stories and experiences, mostly related to fossil hunting. Included here are essays about the American Badlands, fossils, time, the nature of perception itself, and how our perceptions and preconceptions color what we see and what we find. These essays are entitled “Into the badlands,” “Stories in stone: Fossils,” “Deep time,” “If these bones could speak,” “To be a naturalist: On seeing,” “Things change,” and “The big picture.” But the titles really only hint at the subject matter within, as each essay encompasses a relatively wide range of topics, and some of them tend to ramble. The second part of the book is actually the more important of the two, since it addresses areas of friction between science and faith and so it is more likely to be a “game changer” for readers who are on the fence. It also, for the same reason, draws more heavily on Olson's theological background and experience, allowing him to comment on the role that Christianity and other world religions have had on our acceptance of evolutionary biology and how to incorporate evolution into a life of faith. The second part includes essays on various worldviews and how they shape our appreciation of nature, on science and religion, and on creation and creationism, with the following titles: “Nature is ...,” “The two books: Science and religion,” “Creation, evolution, and creationism,” and “Take care.”

Olson's writing is for the most part easy to read, and he livens up the text with a liberal sprinkling of quotes from a wide variety of writers. Among the quoted are some of my (and perhaps everyone's) favorite writers, including WH Auden, EE Cummings, William Shakespeare, Carl Sandburg, Herman Melville, George Schaller, John Steinbeck, Loren Eiseley, TS Eliot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jonathan Swift, CS Lewis, HG Wells, and many others. Assorted anecdotes from the lives of such notables as Albert Schweitzer, Charles Lindbergh, Friedrich Nietzsche, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Adolf Hitler, GK Chesterton, Pablo Picasso, Jacques Cousteau, and others are also included. These scattered quotes and anecdotes are fun, make the book more enjoyable, and give the impression that Olson himself is a very well-read author. However, they also tend to be somewhat overwhelming, with two to three authors quoted or at least mentioned on nearly every page of the book, leaving me with the impression that at times the author is attempting to impress by name dropping, and serving to dilute his own voice, which I found unfortunate. After several essays packed with quotes from other writers, I began to feel bludgeoned by them. As might be expected from the pen of a pastor, there is also a heavy dose of scripture quoted throughout the book (the title “If these bones could speak” is derived from Ezekiel 37: 1–14, in which the prophet has a vision of dry bones rising up and assembling before him), and these verses will help convince religious readers that the author is on their side, a surprisingly important quality for a book of this nature.

Despite the obvious depth and breadth of the author's reading, the book is strangely silent as concerns other books and efforts along the same lines. Even in the Foreword, written
by Jack Horner, we read that there is “... a near vacuum in terms of books dealing with the implications of science for religion and for the rest of humanities in a manner that is both faithful to central truths and, at the same time, directed to a wide audience.” This is not true, of course, and some of these books (such as Ken Miller’s *Finding Darwin’s God*) are even cited elsewhere in *Lens to the Natural World*. We can always use more such books, but this “near vacuum” is imaginary, and it leaves the reader wondering how a book of this nature could be written without any reference to any of the works of, for example Jack Haught, John Polkinghorne, Francisco Ayala, Michael Ruse, and others who have written much along these lines and are similarly never mentioned. I am less surprised that Olson does not mention them than I am of Horner being apparently unaware of them in his endorsement. Horner’s foreword, while generally on target and correctly lamenting the anti-intellectual climate of today’s society, is also a bit naive, and he comes off as being knowledgeable only about attempts by paleontologists to bridge the gap. This is more excusable in Olson, who states in the preface that the book is mostly about dinosaurs and his interest in them. Both Horner and the author come off as living in some sort of parallel universe, where dinosaur fossils exist only in the Badlands, and where no other authors have dealt with bringing modern science to the masses. Their close working relationship and admiration for one another (Olson states on p 36 that “a case could be made for saying that he [Horner] is one of the most famous or recognizable living scientists of any sort in the world today”) might have played a role in causing the book to appear to have been written with limited input from anyone else.

This is particularly true in the essay on “Creation, evolution, and creationism” (chapter 10). Although Olson is correct in his arguments against fundamentalism and literalism, and convincing in his reasoning that Biblical accounts of creation should not be seen as competing with modern science, most of his arguments, at this point, sound dated. There is no mention of, for example, the Discovery Institute, the think tank behind the “intelligent design” movement. No mention is made of the Clergy Letter Project (a project devoted specifically to the reconciliation of people of faith with modern science). Nor is there any mention of Ken Ham’s Answers in Genesis organization (though Ham is mentioned with regard to the Institute for Creation Research). Most of the topics, and even the examples and case studies that Olson chooses to illustrate the problems associated with creationism, have been dealt with elsewhere, with the result that this important section will be somewhat repetitive to readers with a general interest and background in this field. On the other hand, if someone is completely new to this discussion, as could easily be the case, Olson provides a good starting point.

The writing, although for the most part enjoyable, is not particularly strong. This matters mostly because so much of the creationist literature is poorly written; in defending science, I think it is important for us to set ourselves apart not only in the evidence we are presenting but in the quality of our writing. To some extent this is an editorial, rather than the author’s, responsibility. But either way, a grammatical mistake is a grammatical mistake, and it detracts from how seriously the volume is viewed. Those mistakes, coupled with attempts to make the writing sound somewhat grandiose or overly flowery, make parts of the book sound a bit pretentious. A more careful approach to editing could have improved the book here.
In summary, it's worth reading, particularly so for people who might be looking for a more inviting introduction into the arguments about the compatibility of science and faith compared to some of the more polemic writing currently available. The personal stories and anecdotes, the abundance of (largely) appropriate and interesting quotes, and the insight that a combined knowledge of theology and paleontology offer when thoughtfully applied all combine to make the book more interesting than most, and occasionally even delightful. Although some chapters can be glossed over (the same material having been covered previously by other writers), there are enough unusual examples, metaphors, anecdotes, and quotes offered here to help anyone attempting to convince the faith community of the validity of, and the sheer beauty of, the natural world, especially as viewed through a paleontological lens.

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