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Main content

Article Preview :

As a child, I spent hours engrossed in R. B. Horsfall's reconstructions of long-extinct mammals and wished that it were possible to bring to life the saber-toothed cats of his paintings and see these fearsome animals in the flesh. In their marvelous new book, Alan Turner and Mauricio Anton have come close to granting my wish. Focusing on the seven largest extant cats, they trace their ancestry back 30 million years, examining some of the remarkable forms that preceded the lions, tigers, and their relatives, which are so well known today. This volume is the first to assemble the difficult-to-find information on fossil cats and to synthesize this material into an accessible, beautifully presented work that is absorbing to read.

An introductory chapter sets the scene for the wealth of information to follow. The clear and concise explanations of scientific terminology, as well as of the processes by which fossils form and are excavated, will immediately capture the general reader. The second chapter discusses the origin of the cats and other carnivores and explains the key points of evolution. This chapter includes a graphic illustration of convergence: the occurrence of the extraordinary "saber" tooth specialization in four different groups of mammals, including, surprisingly, a marsupial form. Each of these groups is discussed briefly and is accompanied by Anton's accurate illustrations.

However, it is in chapter 3, which profiles individual species of extinct cats, that the skill of the illustrator really shines. An abundance of figures showing the skulls, skeletons, musculature, and life appearance of fossil cats breathes life into what Turner calls "the dry bones in the laboratory" (p. xiv). Turner's informative, readable text describes the morphology, appearance, and distribution of fossil cats, and his extensive figure captions...

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