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Beyond Jurassic Park

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George Hunt reports on a school visit by **Ted Dewan**.

George Hunt reports on the work of **Ted Dewan** at Brindishe Primary School, London ... an author visit with a difference.

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Ted Dewan came into the classroom in a professorial white coat, a palaeontologist's fossil brush in his breast pocket and two watches strapped to his wrist - one for GMT and one for geological time, perhaps. He carried spare copies of **Inside the Whale and Other Animals**, a bundle of proof illustrations from the forthcoming **Inside Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Creatures**, and a plastic carrier bag which he claimed contained a stegosaurus, a couple of triceratops and maybe a pterodactyl or two. The Year 5 children found this rather perplexing. They began to doubt their visitor's credentials when he took from the carrier bag a bottle of common engine oil and decanted it into a jar, reciting a litany of the names of the dinosaurs he claimed he could see billowing about amongst the emulsified forests of the Jurassic Era.

The children had been looking forward to the visit. They'd been intrigued by the panoramic cross-sections of **inside the Whale**, and the witty little inset drawings accompanying the double-spreads, which relate each creature's anatomy to the mechanics of an analogous machine. They'd wanted to meet the artist who'd given them glimpses into such gutsy arcana as the reversible stomach of the starfish, the inside of the camel's hump, and what the male blue whale does with his three metre penis when he isn't using it. Now here he was talking nonsense about invisible dinosaurs in Sainsbury bags and Esso bottles.

The explanation that followed related palaeontology to the children's experiences of seeing food putrefy in neglected corners of the larder or refrigerator.

'Dinosaurs have been at the back of the refrigerator for about 70 million years, so most of them have turned into this gloopy gunk we use to stop our engines from melting down into dollops of molten steel. We also use it for making plastic and driving power stations, so every time you switch on a light you're using dino-power. However, some of them got lucky and turned into these precious things we call fossils. But fossils are all we have to go on. These pictures of diplodocus and tyrannosaurus rex and so on are just reconstructions, educated guess-work.'

Then came the challenge. Four fossilised dinosaur skeletons had recently been discovered, and it was the job of the children to apply their imaginations to this evidence. They had to visualise the creatures moving, feeding, excreting, socialising and mating in a fanciful habitat, then invent an anatomy and external appearance to suit these visions. Ted encouraged the children to be as whimsical as they liked; since nobody actually *knows* what was available in the Jurassic period, robotics and electronics were not ruled out.

Working with felt pens onto photocopies of the skeletons, the children set about cultivating their gardens of glistening viscera.

'Looks like a chicken skeleton. You always think of them as huge but mine's as small as a sparrow so it can run fast. How fast can yours go, Si?'

'Don't know. It's imaginary.'

'Mine can go a million light years an hour.'

'That's no good. By the time it took one step it would have gone past where it was meant to be going.'

'Mine's going to be a rollersaurus. When it curls up all these armour plates lock together and it turns into a ball like a gigantic woodlouse. Then it rolls through the jungle flattening a pathway.'

At another table, a group were considering the functions of the tail.

'First time I saw a picture of a brontosaurus I thought it was an elephant with no head but a trunk at each end, so that's what this dinosaur's got. It can suck up food through both trunks at once.'

Carrie had equipped her dinosaur's tail with sharpened scales for felling trees. Two oesophagi spiralled down its cervical vertebrae like serpents on a caduceus.

'I made a mistake on my drawing so I turned it into something interesting. One throat for eating and one for drinking. And it's got separate stomachs for solid and liquid.'

'My dinosaur keeps its brains in its tail,' Cherice said. 'That way it can go on living if another dinosaur bites its head off.'

'But it'd get brain damage every time it whacked something. I think we'd all be better off if we had our brains in our stomachs where they could be all padded with guts. Why do you think people have brains in their heads where they can get all banged about?'

'Some people don't?'

Liam and Benjamin were comparing defence systems in the two magnificent creatures that were emerging from their pages like images in an acid bath.

'Mine's going to have a huge ball and chain of solid bone at the end of its tail so that it can swing it round like a mace.'

'How could it manage all that weight, though?'

'See this tube leading from the gullet to that bag on the tail? It swallows air and inflates the bag like a hot air balloon to carry the weight.'

Benjamin's defence system was even more ingenious. A laocoon of bowel coils connected a nest of stomachs to the horny armour plates along the creature's spine.

'The muck that comes out of the bowels-faeces, is that the proper word? - it comes out like bullets along the dinosaur's back, and the plates fire it like artillery at its enemies.'

Later that day, Ted conducted the same activity with a group of Year 2 children and again the lively talk that surrounded the creation of the cross-sectional drawings was as intriguing as the swampy imagery accumulating on the bare bones of the photocopies.

Sandhya had consulted the picture of the egg factory that accompanies the anatomy of the chicken in **Inside the Whale**.

She drew a dinosaur dropping eggs from a very robust uterus.

'These eggs've got stone shells so other things can't gobble them up. So this dinosaur has to eat lots of pebbles and things and there's like a cement mixer in the stomach to make the eggshell stuff.'

'Don't be shy with colours,' Ted told the children. 'We've no idea what these guys looked like on the outside. They could've been flaming bronze for all we know.'

Jade declined the invitation to flamboyance. She had tucked her creature's twin hearts away behind its shoulder blades for protection, and she wanted the exterior to be equally practical.

'I'm not making mine silly. The skin's going to be sort of a greeny-brown so it's camouflaged.'

'Why would it have to be camouflaged? They were so big they wouldn't have to hide from anything?'

'Perhaps they wanted to hide from each other.'

'And we don't know there weren't other monsters that were even bigger than them. Things like giant slugs and jelly fish wouldn't leave any fossils. They could've wiped the dinosaurs out.'

'I'm giving mine green and purple stripes like a snake. Different colours for male and female. It's like a warning signal: "Keep out of my swamp or I'll kill you."'

'Maybe they could talk. When my dog says woof, I think it's saying "Give me something to eat."'

'If dinosaurs could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand them.'

This fascination with language was also evident when Ted asked the children to name their dinosaurs. He provided a list of Latin morphemes for inspiration.

'Mine's got little tiny feet so it won't leave any tracks to follow. How do you say little foot dinosaur? Micro ... micropodo ... micropodosaurus!'

Jack scanned the list to permute a name for the narwhal headed reptile he had created.

'One is uni like in unicorn and unicycle, so this would be called uni . tops? Uni . . . cera . . . tops? Uniceratops...'

A group of children consulted the adults in the room for advice on the Latin equivalents of 'my dinosaur' and 'toothless dinosaur'. After scrunting around in the collective linguistic archives, we came - up with Measaurus and Zerodontosaurus, with which the children were well pleased.

At the end of the day the creatures were herded together into a class book, and Ted said goodbye to two grateful classes.

Ted Dewan used to be a high school physics teacher in Massachusetts before taking up illustration full time. Once, he trained a group of students in Aristotelian concepts before throwing them into a state of creative perplexity by getting them to compare notes with students trained in a Newtonian model. The basic idea of science as an uncertain process of interpretation and re-interpretation, involving conjecture, play and serendipity, was conveyed to these infant and junior children in a manner which inspired their curiosity and inventiveness. An inspiring task, a stimulating teacher, and an exciting information text had come together and reated some highly entertaining education.

Our thanks to the teachers and children of Brindishe Primary School in Lewisham, South London for allowing us to spend the day in their school.

Inside the Whale and Other Animals, 0 86318 813 3, £7.99

Inside Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Creatures, 0 7513 5055 9, £8.99

Both books are illustrated by Ted Dewan, written by Steve Parker and published by Dorling Kindersley.

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