

Book Review

THE LINK: UNCOVERING OUR EARLIEST ANCESTORS. By Colin Tudge with Josh Young. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2009. 262 pp. ISBN 978-0-316-07008-9. \$25.99 (cloth).

Google Search tells me there are 542,000 results for “Ida fossil” as I write. “*Darwinius*” generates 129,000; “Lucy fossil,” 576,000. I am not sure what this means. That the publicity worked? That the wired world has, in a few short weeks, made a monster hit of a fossil that would normally have been destined for obscurity outside the scientific community but now rivals the iconic specimen that put paleoanthropology on the map 35 years ago?

Anyone who spent the third week of May 2009 inside a soundproof vault might have missed the media circus that accompanied the announcement of a new Eocene primate from the Messel site near Frankfurt, Germany, long treasured for its astonishingly complete specimens. “Any pop band is doing the same thing,” said Jørn Hurum to the *New York Times* (Tim Arango, “Seeking a Missing Link, And a Mass Audience,” May 18, 2009), explaining the media hype, which culminated in a ceremonious unveiling at the American Museum of Natural History, and, incidentally, the fossil’s formal scientific description. *The Link* is the literary flank of this shock-and-awe blitzkrieg. It tells the story yet again—and probably more of the backstory than we should know—to that point. But if time travel were possible, no doubt *The Link* would also recount the episode’s aftermath in an effort to control the spin, for never has our field been treated to such theatrics.

The Players: Jørn Hurum, exuberant forty-something vertebrate paleontologist little known, perhaps, in the Western Hemisphere but much beloved, one expects, by the Norwegian kids who watch his weekly television show; Jens Franzen, recently retired paleomammalogist, Grube Messel’s leading authority and patron protector; Philip D. Gingerich, brilliant paleomammalogist with unparalleled knowledge of the Eocene; B. Holly Smith, a leading expert on growth and development of primate teeth; Wighart von Koenigswald, paleomammalogist versed in dental functional morphology; Anthony Geffen, television producer with dozens of documentaries to his credit, including “The Search for Atlantis,” “Jack the Ripper: Case Unsolved,” and “Predator-X,” the last about a pliosaur recently excavated by none other than Jørn Hurum; and authors Colin Tudge and Josh Young, about whom more below.

Act 1. Hurum learns a spectacular fossil skeleton is up for ransom after being held hostage from science for 25 years by a secretive German digger who once plundered Messel. Realizing it was “like finding the lost ark” (p. 14), “one of the holy grails of science—the missing link” (p. 13) (Watch out, Indy: that’s two!), he acquires it for less than a million dollars to benefit science and the Natural History Museum of the University of Oslo, where it shall become their “Mona Lisa” (p. 19). To Franzen, it is “the eighth wonder of the world” (p. 21). Knowing little about the specimen other than it is

primate, female (no baculum), and juvenile—and inspired by memories of Pippi Longstocking’s pet monkey—Hurum searches for a handle, rejects common Swedish names, such as Nelson, and, after consulting his wife, decides the crush of world publicity would do their child no harm and dubs the fossil Ida, after their equally beautiful daughter of approximately the same dental age. One could not make this up.

Act 2. Hurum assembles the above “Dream Team” and pledges them to do the science in utmost secrecy, even as Geffen’s Atlantic Productions publicity machine plans a media roll-out synched to the History Channel’s Memorial Day program schedule and perfectly coordinated with a publication in PLoS One (Franzen JL, et al. 2009. PLoS One 4(5): e5723. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0005723).

Act 3. *D*(for *Darwinius*)-Day arrives, marking the beginning of the end of message control and setting off a mushroom cloud in the untamable blogosphere. But as quickly as the wired world giveth, it taketh away, and one realizes that only two characters separate “famous” from “infamous.” Considered opinion (my own humbly included) is that the PLoS article provides nothing to support the claim that Ida is a 47-million-year-old human ancestor, which is how the story was scripted, and the rise and fall of *Darwinius masillae*, the fossil that would “be the image of our early evolution for generations to come” (p. 229), are almost simultaneous. The paper proposes that *Darwinius*, lemurish in every way but lacking the toothcomb and grooming claw, is an adapiform with a twist: it’s also a haplorhine. (At this point, I consult Dictionary.com for a technical definition of “schizophrenia.”) Interviewed for the History Channel’s documentary, “The Link,” Gingerich playfully calls Ida a “lemur monkey.” Authors and readers of respected science blogs, such as Pharyngula, rail against the PLoS review process and the paper’s lack of phylogenetic rigor. A heavy bevy of experts weigh in on Ida’s bottom line: it is a lovely fossil strepsirrhine. Hurum’s ark was not lost but on its way to Madagascar. Jens Franzen promised that the paper would be like “an asteroid hitting the earth” (p. 35); true, the fireball was bright, but its impact was less bolide than cosmic dust.

Act 4. *The Link* is released on Amazon, giving rise to more cognitive dissonance and subliminal (a perfect word, courtesy of George W. Bush) imagery. The book jacket transmogrifies Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Man*, depicting a rigor-mortified, hand-of-God-like image of Ida’s manus. It headlines Colin Tudge, a respected, accomplished science writer. But the title page introduces a co-writer, Josh Young, who, Tudge admits in his acknowledgments, wrote the two introductory chapters and the epilogue, 36 pages in all. He, Tudge, did the rest. Five of these six chapters are good. They discuss the Eocene world, how Grube Messel was formed, its fossils and what they tell us, primates, and primate evolution. Here Ida, pre-publication thus taxonomically nameless and scientifically amorphous, tends to appear in little more than cameos tying Tudge’s text to the cause. His sixth chapter, “Who and What is Ida?,” is focused but weak, as Tudge must square science with the Dream Team’s hyperbole. The work by coauthor Young, in contrast, is sensationalistic, overwritten hype that will be

read with joy by creationists for its portrayal of this whole endeavor as publicity obsessed. Every jacked-up, gushing pronouncement by the Dream Team's leader(s) finds its way into his writing. But to be fair, I must note that the comments elicited from Gingerich and Smith are always reserved, professional, and in perspective.

Act 5. Not yet written. The junior-varsity team awaits its chance. Let's hope Ida is not a *Caenopithecus*, as Franzen thought when he first described the fossil's pancaked skull and dentition (Franzen J.L. 1994. In: Fleagle, JG, Kay, RF, editors. *Anthropoid Origins*. New York: Plenum. pp. 99–122.). Then, it was only known as a partially complete slab of a specimen with a few intentional alterations. Yes, the fossil had a prior paleontological life before Ida became Ida!

My advice is to buy this book when it is remaindered for three bucks, because you will be tempted to rip out the Young chapters in lieu of tearing out your own hair. The color pictures of *Darwinius* and other extraordinary Messel fossils are certainly worth that much, and all but one of the Tudge chapters are smart. The computerized

skull reconstruction is quite nice, too, even if it does depict an adult cleverly fashioned with a fused mandibular symphysis for anthropoidal appeal. But I did not much care for the reaching bipedal stance of the full-skeleton rendering. This baby belongs in lemur land. It will not be climbing up that old Scale of Nature or across the strepsirrhine–haplorhine divide, no matter how hard it is pushed, pulled, or kicked . . . or by whom.

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