

## Book review: Who knew the world of paleoanthropology could be so cutthroat?

[T]he scientists looking for ever older bones of our ancestors always seem to be squabbling. At least that's their reputation. Stay away from paleoanthropology, I was told as a young student smitten with fossils, and study less controversial stuff instead, like dinosaurs.

A few pages into "Fossil Men: The Quest for the Oldest Skeleton and the Origins of Humankind," the journalist Kermit Pattison concurs. "Something about the pursuit of our own origins arouses great passions not seen in other disciplines."

...

In places, "Fossil Men" seems more reality television show than a work of popular science, as we follow an outrageous cast of White's supporting characters. There's Berhane Asfaw, who was hung upside down and tortured by communists, and then went on to lead the fossil lab at the National Museum of Ethiopia. We meet Owen Lovejoy, once a creationist, now an authority on human locomotion. And there's Elema and Gadi, gun-toting Ethiopian tribesmen whom White trained as ace fossil finders. The story lines border on the insane: There are civil wars, gunfights, at least one grenade rolling around the feet of the scientists as they drive into the desert and, sadly, a violent death.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other 'disruptive' innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

More than anything, human prehistory is not a tidy narrative.

**[Editor's note: Find "Fossil Men: The Quest for the Oldest Skeleton and the Origins of Humankind" [here](#).]**

[Read the original post](#)