



SMITHSONIAN'S PREHISTORIC PALS SERIES

Reviewed by Elisabeth Marcot, Jonathan Marcot, and Karen Sears

A BUSY DAY FOR STEGOSAUR by Dawn Bentley (Author) and Karen Carr
Soundprints, 2004
ISBN-13: 978-1592491551

PTERANODON SOARS by Dawn Bentley (Author) and Karen Carr
Soundprints, 2009
ISBN-13: 978-1592495429

SPINOSAURUS IN THE STORM by Ben Nussbaum and G.B. McIntosh (Authors) and Chris Scalf (Illustrator)
Soundprints, 2005
ISBN-13: 978-1592494613

SABER-TOOTH TRAP by Dawn Bentley (Author) and Trevor Reaveley (Illustrator)
Soundprints, 2005
ISBN-13: 978-1592494538

We were pleased to review four book/stuffed toy combinations from the Smithsonian's Prehistoric Pals series with our daughter Elisabeth, age 3½. Overall, we found the short stories and cuddly friends engaging to our beginning reader. As parents, we don't push Elisabeth to like dinosaurs. No, honestly, we don't. Sure, I've hoodwinked her into the dinosaur-shaped vitamins instead of the princesses once or twice. But Elisabeth has (for as long each of us can remember) had a genuine interest in animals and dinosaurs. Heck, she's the one that chooses *Walking with Dinosaurs* DVD over the most recent Barbie™ movie. So it might not be surprising that Elisabeth regularly picks these books for her nightly bedtime stories. What did surprise us is that she picked them night, after night, after night. And arranged the toys on her bed before night-night. And took the toys to daycare to sleep on her cot during naptime. And became dis-

traught when she learned we were writing this "story" about the books, thinking we'd have to return the books when we finished.

The most prominent feature of each package is a soft and cuddly stuffed companion, and these initially caught her attention and excitement, and she initially played with these for several minutes. She was even more excited when she (finally) discovered that a small (11 x 14cm) book accompanied each. Each book has a glossy paperback containing a story detailing a day in the life of the stuffed companion in 27 pages of "text" and artwork. Each story is then followed by a page summarizing scientific information about the protagonist, and a pictorial glossary that identifies all the other animals that appeared in the artwork of the book (including other dinosaurs, but also turtles, sturgeons and perch).

We reviewed four books, *A Busy Day for Stegosaurus* (Dawn Bentley, illustrated by Karen Carr), *Pteranodon Soars* (Dawn Bentley, illustrated by Karen Carr), *Spinosaurus in the Storm* (Ben Nussbaum, illustrated by Chris Scalf with Gabe McIntosh), and *Saber-Tooth Trap* (Dawn Bentley, illustrated by Trevor Reaveley). Now, Elisabeth knows her stuff. She was quick to point out that among the four packages, there were two dinosaurs (*Stegosaurus* and *Spinosaurus*), and two "not-a-dinosaurs" (Pteranodon and "Sabre-toothed



Tiger"). While far from unprecedented, we appreciate the inclusion of non-dinosaurian protagonists, which emphasizes the diversity of life (beyond dinosaurs) that once existed. This is also reinforced throughout these books, as there are also numerous off-hand references to "other" organisms that lived at the same time as the protagonists including invertebrates (e.g., scorpions) and vertebrates (e.g., frogs).

The narrative style of these stories is somewhat refreshing, if not completely original. The stories follow individual protagonists through their daily lives and encounters with other organisms. The active third person perspective of these books (e.g., "The Allosaurus dodges the long spikes on Stegosaurus's tail.") contrasts the typical passive, didactic tone of other books in the genre (e.g., "Stegosaurus had bony plates on its back and spikes on its tail."). As in the *Walking with Dinosaurs* and other recent TV programs, the narrative description of even mundane events in their daily life does a good job portraying the protagonists as real animals, and not abstract scientific facts or blood-thirsty monsters. For the most part, the stories are as scientifically accurate as you would expect in a young reader's book. The unobtrusive manner in which the science is interwoven into a plausible narrative is a real strength of these books.

The artwork is generally good, although somewhat heterogeneous among books. The (apparently computer-generated) artwork of Karen Carr (*A Busy Day for Stegosaurus Pterandoon Soars*) stands out from the others, with her use of sharp detail on the subjects (e.g., depicting individual scales on the integument of dinosaurs) and out-of-focus backgrounds to convey a photo-realism. Particularly notable are her use of unique perspectives. For example, p. 14-15 in *Pterandoon Soars* depict a *Pteranodon* escaping a close encounter with a mosasaur. Rather than the predictable image of a mosasaur splashing out of the water with teeth bared (to be fair this image appears on p. 12-13), the perspective is a unique and captivating head-on view of the *Pteranodon*, beak full of fish, as it ascends from the sea surface, with the mosasaur left behind in soft-focus in the distance below. Trevor Reaveley's artwork in *Saber-Tooth Trap* is similar, but is somehow neither as realistic nor innovative. The illustrations by Chris Scalf and Gabe McIntosh in *Spinosaurus in the Storm* are quite different from the others, being neither com-

puter-generated, nor attempting the same level of detail. The latter point is actually quite an advantage for this story, conveying a sense of humidity and dampness throughout the storm-soaked story. The use of lighting is exceptional catching rays of sun in the haze and alternating overcast skies with sunshine pouring through breaks in the clouds. Another positive point for the younger audience is that while numerous predation attempts (both successful and failed) are depicted, we are spared graphic images of entrails hanging from gaping jaws and talons dripping with blood.

One potential drawback of these books is their brevity – each is only 27 pages, with only two or three sentences per page. While quite appropriate for a beginning reader, this might mean they wouldn't hold the interest of more advanced readers for very long. The artwork of these books clearly is featured above the story and scientific content, which make them very appropriate for children more captivated by pictures than text.

As mentioned, the packaging prominently features the stuffed version of the book's protagonist, and this is certainly the first thing a child will notice. Each is small, soft and snuggly - the perfect size for a small child to have in bed. Notably, the toys lack the scientific accuracy emphasized in the books, going with "lovable" over "realistic". For example, Elisabeth was initially concerned that the stuffed *Stegosaurus* toy didn't have "spikes", but soon realized that the little felt squares on the toy's tail were the spikes. The cuddly nature of the toys is perhaps a good decision as Elisabeth clearly loves them. However, this does seem to contradict the lifelike representation of the animals in the book. More realistic toys might encourage children to continue and build upon the written stories in scientifically accurate ways. But, perhaps, introducing children into the world of dinosaurs and prehistoric life in an inviting and harmless way outweighs the benefits of a scientifically robust reconstruction of biotic interactions in Mesozoic terrestrial ecosystems.

The pairing of the books with the toys is quite effective, as the stories give young children a foundational knowledge of the organism, and the toy allows them to imagine what the next day would be like for that organism. With their light-handed scientific content, engaging artwork and invitation for imaginative play, we agree that these would be an ideal gift for the younger dino-enthusiast.